

Review:

Edward H. Peebles. *Scalawag: A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism*. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2014.

Candace Epps-
Robertson,
*Michigan State
University*

In *Scalawag: A White Southerners Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism*, Dr. Edward Peebles traces his personal journey from being compliant with the status quo of racial codes to becoming a fighter for social justice. His journey was never an easy one, but his experiences remind us of two important principles: we must remember to examine our positions, biases, and ideologies, and to understand the toll that justice seeking takes on the body and soul. Peebles blends narrative with critical social commentary and reflection to present us with a memoir that demonstrates the necessity of cultivating self-reflexivity and self-care in the midst of the struggle.

Born in Richmond, Virginia during the Depression, Peebles begins his book by recounting his first lessons in “white education:”

I can recall sensing as early as about age five how much race mattered to adults.

They impressed upon me that there were two kinds of God's creatures that mattered most in life: 'white people' and 'the coloreds.' (12)

Despite moments as a child where he saw the complicated dichotomy between blacks and whites, Peeples did little during that time to disrupt the status quo. His tipping point would come during his college years at Richmond Professional Institute, now Virginia Commonwealth University. Courses in sociology and basketball games with African American students challenged the principles he once blindly accepted:

By the end of my sophomore year at RPI, I was struggling with a torrent of questions about my upbringing. New ideas and experiences and reading were showing me that much of our precious 'southern way of life was a preposterous and cruel fabrication. I felt betrayed by my family my preacher, my teachers and all the other adults in my community.' (51)

His college years serve as a reminder that for many students, time spent in our classrooms are still periods of intense growth, development and change. His time at RPI was only the beginning, as Peeples began a journey that would take him up and down the East Coast, the armed forces, and back home to Richmond, all the while working for racial equality.

What Peeples recounts over a series of twenty emotionally rewarding chapters is a career in social justice that was not bound by the walls of the workplace or academia. Following his time in the Navy, Peeples returned home to Richmond where he worked as a social worker for the city's welfare department. In his chapter "Sit-ins Come to the Old Capital of the Confederacy," he describes his desire to "meet other committed people and get into the justice struggle" (71). This coincided with Peeples becoming more militant and less tolerant of the racial codes and infrastructures: "I felt an obligation to challenge even the smallest racist remark or stunt. I hated feeling complicit in that honor-among-thieves culture in which whites assumed that because you were white you must be racist like them" (74). Peeples

would soon find himself a participant in some of Richmond's largest sit-ins as efforts spread throughout the city to desegregate. His ability to allow himself to be open and *changed* by community members engaged in the struggle speaks to the importance of remembering that it is all right for your work to change you. Invariably, when we work with communities we should hope that we would learn from them.

As his commitment to the civil rights movement grew, so to did the atrocities caused by racism. Peeples describes his participation in one of the largest civil rights battles in Virginia in the chapter, "They Closed Our Schools." While Prince Edward County closed public schools for five-years to resist integration, Peeples worked to subvert this on two fronts. First, he and other allies formed the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward to bring recreational activities to children in the county. Second, his Masters Thesis would be the first scholarly examination of the school closures that was not sympathetic to segregationists. Peeples also photographed school conditions in Prince Edward and conducted interviews with both blacks and whites, documenting the real effects of separate but equal. This work wasn't easy, as he walked a delicate line between the constant threat of violence and intellectual work that required he maintain an objective position:

But it was not just the fear of violence that made me uncomfortable. It was also the gnawing incongruity between what was necessary to get the job done and the kind of person I really was. Here I was in Prince Edward to dig out from the victims, the oppressors, and the indifferent the most volatile story in their community since the Civil War. At the same time, as an interviewer, I had to suppress my own passionate convictions so the respondents would speak freely. (100)

What Peeples learned during this process was a lesson that has stayed with him: "The stress of packing down emotions like this, compounded by my loss of anonymity about the pro-school closing whites, cause constant anxiety...I learned that year about the need to pay attention to what the body was saying if one wanted to last in the struggle" (100). This lesson seems to be the kind of reminder we all

need about understanding the gravity of social justice and the need to nurture and sustain our bodies while doing it.

Peeples would spend his academic career at the Medical College of Virginia and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) where he encouraged his students to understand and explore the connection between race and class. As a faculty member, he spearheaded efforts to integrate both the classrooms and offices by recruiting African American students and faculty (113). Further, he worked tirelessly to assist with the creation of VCU's African-American studies program to "make the university more responsive to African American students and the black communities of central Virginia" (149).

Peeples' memoir tells a story that we need to hear. For those of us committed to confronting issues of race, gender, and class oppression, we need to listen to stories of survival in these struggles. We need to hear that change is possible in the most unlikely scenarios. Peeples' memoir equips us with a narrative that paints a full trajectory: we see him struggle as student, we watch his effort to find his place in the movement, and we listen as he describes his ability to take a position as faculty member, a position inherently one with power, and keep his commitment to the eradication of systemic oppressions. This is a memoir, a warning, and a call. If we believe that we have a responsibility to issues of social justice, this book serves as a story of one such journey, warns us of the obstacles and need for self-care, and calls us to blend commitments to social justice in our classrooms and the communities that exists outside of the academies. We need to know the stories of justice seekers who have walked before us and who continue to be our guides.

Candace Epps-Robertson is an Assistant Professor at Michigan State University's Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. Her research examines the rhetorical practices and strategies of marginalized and oppressed groups.