

Civil Rights and Equality: A Pulitzer Prize Centennial Series

Often when the term “civil rights” comes into conversations in the U.S., a specific, momentous movement comes to mind. Our collective imagination calls forth the black-and-white photojournalistic images of brave marchers under attack and the resonating voices of the leaders who led court cases and civil actions throughout the 1950s and ‘60s. But the fundamental notion of civil rights has been built into the value systems of our culture from the beginning. Even the Tory-sympathizing early American writer Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur celebrated the culture that was evolving in the original colonies, one that provided for individuals to claim their own work and wages; practice their religions without state-sanctioned discrimination; be treated objectively under the law; and define themselves outside of a traditional class system. Of course, there were many groups he left out of his idealistic views in the 1780s, and there were institutions and events he could not have foreseen in the decades that would follow.

The current moment in our culture requires that we look hard at our ideals and history and the extent to which we have—and have not—ensured the enactment and protection of civil rights within our society. In a twenty-first century, civilized society, can we be living up to our ideals of guaranteed equality if unarmed African Americans are killed in law enforcement actions on a regular basis—at a much higher rate than any other group? And if whole communities of African Americans are immobilized in neighborhoods without opportunity or resources and with a near-certain chance of incarceration in their futures? What historic systems and attitudes are we refusing to acknowledge when we excuse away such undeniable patterns? Are we living up to our ideals when the most victimized group on the Continent—Native American women—has the least recourse to consistent criminal justice systems that could bring rapists and murderers to account for their actions? Can we claim civil rights are well protected when racial minorities who speak up about injustice are met with death threats? When American Muslims can be shoved and shouted out of political events with publicly sanctioned hate speech? And how might the books and newspapers we read, the news and films we watch, contribute to or work against such persistent patterns of inequality in our culture?

Many American writers who have dwelled on systematic injustice and engaged in social critique have been criticized as being “unpatriotic,” pointing out America’s flaws as they do. However, most of them would counter that in pointing out such flaws they are engaging in the very guarantee of democracy toward self-critique, that they are working

toward helping the nation live up to its own ideals—in Langston Hughes’ words, to “Let America be America again.”

As an immigrant himself, Pulitzer Prize founder Joseph Pulitzer seemed well aware of the possibilities available in the American system, but also of the shortcomings that would have been exposed through the kinds of journalism that were the center of his career. That the prizes all reward distinguished work on American subjects or by American writers is not incidental. One of the foundation’s goals is to “broaden audiences for high-caliber writing, journalism, or music composition such as that exemplified by Pulitzer winners,” but that the prizes also reward public service and investigative journalism imply that award-winning writing is not just aesthetically pleasing, but also conscientious, meaningful, and helps us better understand our own American context.

The five Pulitzer Prize-nominated or -winning books in this series all work toward that same goal: trying to better help us understand our American context and our own unrealized ideals by immersing us in specific historic or contemporary moments, with fully realized individuals experiencing inequality. As author Katherine Boo explains, “When I settle into a place, listening and watching, I don’t try to fool myself that the stories of individuals are themselves arguments. I just believe that better arguments, maybe even better policies, get formulated when we know more about ordinary lives.” This quote captures what the books in this series might do: allow readers to settle in to a place, listen, watch, humanize, and, ideally, help us live in ways that better inform our actions in the world.

There are three different genres included here—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—in an attempt to help us experience these lives in different “registers.” While they may not represent every civil rights issue we might want to explore, they raise useful questions that can help us interrogate further. Edward P. Jones novel, *The Known World* begins where many might expect to begin: the history of institutionalized racial inequality in the U.S within the system of slavery—but with a twist. Natasha Trethewey’s poems in *Native Guard* offer powerful meditations on the personal and the historical, on the rights we deserve as citizens as well as the rights we deserve at home. Kevin Boyle’s nonfiction work *The Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* offers up excellent historical research and gripping storytelling as he brings the history of racial inequality into the twentieth century and reeducates us on a violent period most of us would rather forget. Louise Erdrich’s complex novel *A Plague of Doves* takes the discussion of civil rights beyond the historically familiar black/white and out to the plains as she explores the nuances of injustice, property rights, and inter-racial family histories related to Native Americans. Finally, Katherine Boo’s nonfiction

bestseller *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* takes the conversation to an international setting, raising important questions about income inequality across the world and to what extent our participation in an increasingly global economy connects to civil rights issues outside our borders.

The Known World

by Edward P. Jones

Jones' well researched historical novel weaves together different time sequences and family histories as it follows the story of former slave Henry Townsend in early 19th-century Virginia. Having learned a model for accessing success from the most powerful white man in Manchester County, Townsend works to buy his own plantation and his own slaves in an attempt to distance himself from his unequal past and participate in a local version of the American Dream. Later, his wife has to manage the farm and move forward, reconciling her own ethics and those reflected in her husbands' decisions. This engaging novel shakes up our assumptions about the antebellum world and raises important questions about ambition, power, identity, race, and property—and the consequences that come with the decisions made in regards to them. Fans of Toni Morrison's historical novel *Beloved* might find parallels in Jones' storytelling style: rich, historical detail; a non-linear structure that weaves the present and past together to test the limits of memory and our choices in a given moment; hints of the supernatural appearing in everyday settings; and strong, complex characters with moral questions to unravel.

Popular cultural commentator Ta-Nahasi Coates calls for “collective introspection” in our reckoning with American history, that we see the direct lines between the institution of slavery, later patterns of racial segregation and “red-lining,” and the current policies that maintain systems of inequality. Jones' novel shows that the history of slavery is more complicated than we sometimes remember. When free blacks own other people of their own race, or enact violence on them as overseers, what systems of inequality are entrenched in the culture to perpetuate group self-exploitation? When economic and social advantage can only be gained through immoral means, how can one truly find equality in that system?

Native Guard

by Natasha Trethewey

Poems are seldom included in the “Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma” series; however, poems often provide powerful meditations on a theme, and meditating *together* on such themes holds the possibility of enriching the community engaged in mutual exploration. Natasha Trethewey, one of the finest living poets in the U.S., offers an accessible collection of related poems that explore her own childhood history in the

South alongside an exploration of the history of the Louisiana “Native Guard,” an African American branch of the National Guard that served the state during the Civil War. These explorations are framed by the opening poem, which establishes the poet’s road trip back to the Gulf Coast as she embarks on a trip that evokes her own family’s past in the region as well as engages her in historical research. Domestic violence and historical injustice stand side-by-side for Tretheway in this region, both needing to be reckoned with, and evoked in such titles as “Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi,” “Miscegenation,” and “My Mother Dreams Another Country.” As she warns from the book’s opening lines, “You can get there from here, though/there’s no going home.” Readers follow the poet’s journey through memory and our larger shared histories as she processes it all through lyrical language and rich images. Readers not accustomed to poetry may find themselves challenged, but through discussion may also find themselves gaining from others’ interpretations.

The Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age
by Kevin Boyle

This work of engrossing nonfiction follows the story of a young African American doctor named Ossian Sweet, who sought to buy a house in a majority-white neighborhood in Michigan and was resisted by the existing residents. Kevin Boyle, an excellent researcher, writes like a novelist and tells a compelling story of some of our more shameful cultural impulses. He deftly intertwines man’s personal history (and the legal case that grew out of a hazy incident of violence) with larger issues of race and the national epidemic of racial violence in the period, like the 1921 incident in Tulsa. Sweet’s own story follows that of many young, ambitious African Americans who were engaged in the project of “racial uplift” in the early twentieth century, as he worked his way from the rural south to the urban north, through formal education and new opportunities. Unfortunately, the story includes the backlash against such ambition, as it was felt in his life and all over communities where African Americans were attempting to integrate into a less segregated set of professional and residential options. However, the story ends with hope and an account of the new activism that created protections against such civil discrimination.

A Plague of Doves
by Louise Erdrich

As in all of her novels, Erdrich weaves together multiple perspectives and generational views, excavating the powerful ways that a shared multiethnic history ripples into our current lives and relationships. Likewise, the novel displays Erdrich’s trademark blend of tragic circumstances and light comic moments. The premise at the root of the story is the unsolved murder of a 19th-century North Dakota farm family, wrongly blamed on some nearby members of the Ojibwa tribe, who paid for the accusation with their lives.

One of the book's multiple narrators, a mixed Ojibwa/white teenage girl, serves as the modern day perspective in a three-part narrative, naively processing along with us her grandfather's tribal understanding and a judge's knowledge of the local history. Together the three gradually bring to light the story's real fabric, both the smooth romantic ties and the historically uneasiness knots of which American history is woven. The word "justice" appears many times throughout the novel, which offers meditations on the nature of justice in human society, in tribal culture, and in families. It seems a slippery, uncontrollable concept in the end, since, after all, "justice is prey to unknown dreams."

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity

by Katherine Boo

Boo's book tells the true story of a family who lives in the slums of Mumbai, India, taking the discussion of civil rights into an international context. The family's home stands in sight of the city's luxury hotels, and the income inequality gaps ebb and flow along with the global economy . . . who would think that the 2008 U.S. mortgage crisis that sent our economy into a tailspin would affect the income opportunities for trash recyclers living in impromptu slum housing across the globe? Based on ethnographic research and extensive interviews with residents of Mumbai's "squat" neighborhoods, Boo's descriptions of the people and settings are compelling, full of pathos and honesty about the ugliness of struggling for survival as well as the small glimmers of happiness available to anyone with the right outlook. The community comes to life through her rich storytelling, particularly the central plot element of the Husain family's embroilment in a crime they did not commit. Its unfolding raises questions about justice, corruption, opportunity, economic progress and gentrification, and discrimination based on religion, caste, and gender. As Boo writes about her research process and the reasons for writing the book, "To me, becoming attached to a country involves pressing uncomfortable questions about justice and opportunity for its least powerful citizens. The better one knows those people, the greater the compulsion to press." Reading *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* teaches us much about another culture, but also forces us to reflect on relative privilege and raises questions about parallel issues in our culture: to what extent are societies connected and indebted to one another in an increasingly shrinking world?

Credits

This program is part of the Pulitzer Prizes Centennial Campfires Initiative, a joint venture of the Pulitzer Prizes Board and the Federation of State Humanities Councils in celebration of the 2016 centennial of the Prizes. The initiative seeks to illuminate the impact of journalism and the humanities on American life today, to imagine their future and to inspire new generations to consider the values represented by the body of Pulitzer Prize-winning work.

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“Civil Rights and Equality: A Pulitzer Prize Centennial Series” was developed by Tracy Floreani. Traci is Professor of English at Oklahoma City University, where she teaches American literature and academic writing. She has been involved in the “Let’s Talk About It” series and other public humanities initiatives for several years. Her research focuses on questions of identity, ethnicity, and social class in American literature and culture. Her publications include the book *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury*, and she is currently working on a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.



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