

Praying for Sheetrock

A Work of Nonfiction

Melissa Fay Greene

For Discussion

1. Tom Poppell is an emblem of the tradition of American popular folk hero-villain. Residents said, “If you weren’t careful, he’d be your best friend.” (p. 5) What was it like to live under such a system? Have any of us experienced—in community, work, or family spheres—the benevolent dictatorship of a rogue?
2. Praying for Sheetrock charts the human tendency to confuse ideals with those who espouse them. The McIntosh County African American community suffers the fall of its flag-bearer. What impact did this have on the movement toward social change? Who will pick up the banner? Have we experienced this in our lives: a paragon of virtue or idealism, a political or religious standard-bearer, is revealed to be less than saintly? How might we maintain our focus on our ideals after the collapse of the leader?
3. Greene notes that “the Direct Descendants and their fellow white citizens . . . do not honor slavery or mourn its passing. They honor the time before slavery . . . They wish the question had never come up.” (p. 19) If the modern heirs—black and white—to the four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade could rewrite history, writing slavery out of it, what might race relations look like today in America? How might America’s relationship to Africa, and the relationship between whites and African Americans, be different?
4. In what ways might the “humility and submission” drilled into Deacon Thorpe, Deacon Curry, and other African American citizens have “promoted survival but undermined good judgment”? (p. 25) To what degree have powerful social norms regarding the role of women, or the propriety of heterosexuality, or the limited prospects for the disabled or for the poor, instilled “humility and submission” into individuals in our acquaintance or into ourselves?
5. What does it mean that “the old people of McIntosh County have lived on close, practical, and well-understood terms with God all their lives”? (p. 28) Why might “the old black people of McIntosh” have been “the least astonished group in America” if the Messiah arrived in their midst? (p. 27) Is this a familiar world to you? How does such a life—lived in the presence of the divine—differ from the norm in America today?
6. Fanny Palmer relays an oral history of slavery, passed down to her from her own grandmother. Her stories have a sound, texture, immediacy, personality, and wit generally lacking in academic approaches to the subject. What do we glean about the experience of slavery from her stories that

was absent from standard textbooks? Are there similar oral (or written) archives within our own family lines? Do these journals or stories offer an insider's angle on historic events that are otherwise understood, by most people, only through research and study?

7. One reviewer of *Praying for Sheetrock* observed that it “is a book about social change and the way it can really happen—in small measures, in individual homes, with participants who are simultaneously victims and heroes.” We live in an era in which utopian ambitions to remake societies from the top—to end global poverty, to install democracy in foreign dictatorships, for example—are the prevailing worldviews. In what ways can social change be installed top-down, and in what ways must it evolve bit-by-bit on the grass-roots level?

8. Greene writes that “Thurnell Alston was a thoughtful man and an angry man.” (p. 52) How did this combination of thoughtfulness and anger affect his behavior, his choices and decisions, his relationships with others, and the attitudes of others toward him?

9. The McIntosh County African American community achieved political resolve through church services and prayer. How did their profound religious faith steel them for the trials they faced? How has the modern political landscape been shaped by believers? What are the benefits of harnessing religious fervor to political ends? What are the dangers?

10. How did the legal support provided by Georgia Legal Services Program empower the black leaders of McIntosh County? Without access to the power of the law and the authority of the courts, what different turn might events have taken? Have any of us participated in programs that combined professional expertise and volunteerism with grass-roots leadership?

11. Interstate 95—despite Sheriff Poppell's best efforts—finally bisected McIntosh County. How did the incursions of I-95, followed by exit-ramp businesses, the construction of upscale bedroom communities in the country for Savannah and Brunswick, and the growth of tourism alter the Sheriff's grip on the county and everyone in it? What did McIntosh County gain by the invasion of the modern world? What did it lose?

12. Greene writes that Thurnell Alston, after his election in August 1978, “would like to show the whites that filing the lawsuits and carrying this election arose from a powerful sense of history that they refused to understand.” (p. 228) Alston believed that he rode upon a tide of history carrying his community toward an era of social equality. Do you agree that history carries black and white Americans toward an era of greater social equality? What might Alston see on the political landscape today that would instill hope or despair?

13. What is revealed about the group dynamics of McIntosh blacks and whites by Greene's statements that the blacks who crowded into City Hall “were at ease among themselves, close together” and that they “were people who had been rubbing up against each other all their lives”? (p. 130) How does this contrast with the whites' discomfort “in their own proximity to one another”? (p. 131) What other contrasts highlight differences between blacks and whites in terms of social and personal behavior and lifestyle?

14. What constituted the “strange collapse of vision” (p. 253) among the McIntosh blacks after the election of Alston to the county commission? How might we explain that collapse? What were its consequences?

15. Near the end of the book, Deacon Curry eloquently reflects on the multiple revelations, in his long life, of reaping what he has sown. Have we experienced the poetry of Biblical parable in our lives? In what ways does Deacon Curry’s story relate to the lives of the residents of McIntosh County?

About the Author

Melissa Fay Greene is an award-winning author and journalist whose writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Newsweek*. She is also the author of *Last Man Out: The Story of the Springhill Mine Disaster* and *There Is No Me Without You* (Bloomsbury Press). She lives in Atlanta, Georgia