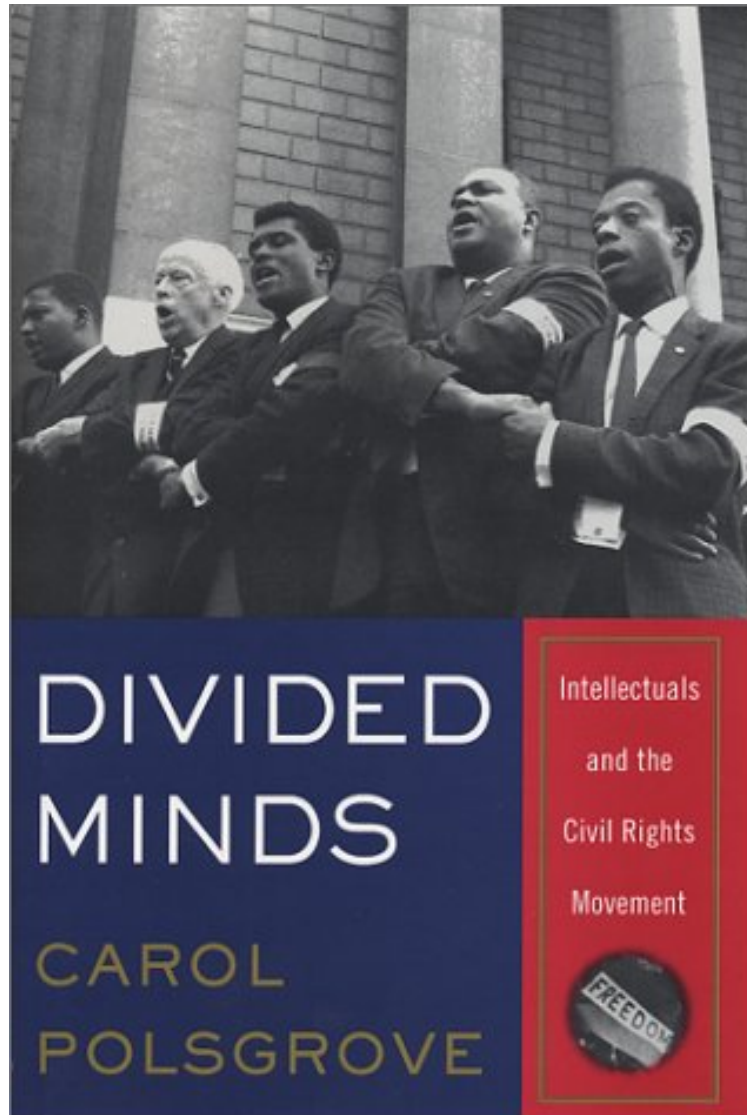


## Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement

*Carol Polsgrove*

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**Carol Polsgrove : Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Slouching Towards BirminghamBy A CustomerCarol Polsgrove has written an insightful and provocative commentary on the caution and reserve with which most of the nation's leading liberal intellectuals responded to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling that institutionalized racial segregation was unconstitutional. She shows how the atmosphere of suspicion and fear of communist subversion generated by the

McCarthy Era was used by those opposed to racial equality to smear the academics and intellectuals, both black and white, who spoke publicly in favor of desegregation, ruining their careers and diminishing their influence in the movement for civil rights. A series of personal stories involving public figures as diverse as William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Lorraine Hansberry keep the narrative constantly changing scene. But the central story involves the emergence of James Baldwin as the unlikely intellectual soul of the movement who gave voice to the rising anger and impatience among blacks for true social change. The author weaves a compelling, behind-the-scenes account of the first dozen years of the civil rights movement that adds deeper meaning to the hateful images of police dogs, fire hoses of marchers, National Guard troops separating black school children from angry white mobs and others that are seared into the collective consciousness. The author concludes with a pointed indictment of academic intellectuals who forsook the risk of invoking moral leadership in outrage against the most enduring evil in American society in favor of the comfort and security of ivory tower discourses. Polsgrove has made an important contribution to illuminating what is surely one of the least inspiring eras of American intellectual history.<sup>3</sup> of 3 people found the following review helpful. Slouching Towards Birmingham By A Customer Carol Polsgrove's excellent work is a compelling account that has the feel of a behind-the-scenes report of how the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling began a slow evolution of political and intellectual thought that initially was muted and cautious in support of the emerging civil rights movement. Well-researched and thoughtfully written, the book fills in around many edges of the mental collage of hateful images that anyone growing up in America in the late 1950s and 1960s carries around with them today. Southern literary fans should particularly find the book illuminating. Anyone that did not grow up during the 1960s will find the book an essential reference. I highly recommend it.<sup>3</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. Incisive commentary on key period in American history By A Customer This book recounts recent history with the excitement of today's news. Participating in the civil rights movement required courage-- some intellectuals had it, and some didn't. The portrait of James Baldwin is particularly interesting, as is the discussion of novelist William Faulkner's off-again on-again public support of what he really knew to be right.

No movement in the 20th century posed such a stark moral challenge to American intellectuals as that of civil rights. Yet the response of prominent writers and thinkers was hesitant and ambivalent. William Faulkner spoke out for desegregation but asked the North to "go slow". Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois had difficulty being heard while editors sought out more moderate voices. Other less patient voices struggled to emerge and put themselves at risk to air their views but it was James Baldwin who threw down a gauntlet to other intellectuals in his brilliant and revolutionary "The Fire Next Time". This text tells the history of the civil rights movement, full of stories of unaccountable bravery and inexplicable timidity - often the products of the same divided minds.

From Publishers Weekly In the decade after *Brown v. Board of Education*, "white intellectuals, in the North and the South... having helped for so long to keep Negroes apart and below... were faced with the challenge of racial equality," asserts Polsgrove (It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, but Didn't We Have Fun? *Esquire* in the Sixties). In this disturbing book, she shows them to have been "fearful, cautious, distracted, or simply indifferent." Based on interviews and archival research, she indicts not only prominent novelists and thinkers, including William Faulkner, Norman Mailer, Hannah Arendt and even the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr ("none better exemplifies the caution that northern white intellectuals... displayed toward desegregation"), but also their editors (who were "more interested in southern whites' responses to the Negro challenge than in what Negroes had to say") and the media, which "at a time when national magazines ought to have been leading the way to change... opened their pages to those who resisted it." Many of the best-known African-American novelists, cowed by "the emotional and political atmosphere of the McCarthy days," fare little better than their white counterparts in Polsgrove's hands. Only a few heroes emerge from her portrait: Lillian Smith, Kenneth Clark, Lawrence Reddick, James Silver, and most importantly, James Baldwin. Polsgrove concludes her accessible and disturbing account with a thought-provoking broadside against contemporary American intellectuals, who she thinks "have abandoned their responsibility even more completely" than those in the 1950s and 1960s and whose "publishing industry has moved farther and farther from any sense of obligation for the social enterprise." (May) Forecast: A wide range of periodicals (and their editors) from major weeklies and monthlies to small journals take a thrashing here. Polsgrove could set off a firestorm if she doesn't get the silent treatment. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From *The New Yorker* Between 1954, when the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional, and the mid-sixties, when Congress passed civil-rights and voting-rights bills, American academics and writers were invited to opine on race relations. In this brisk and understated account, Polsgrove shows that, with a few brave exceptions, whites told blacks to be patient rather than risk white Southerners' violence. Editors were slow to call on black thinkers, and, in the McCarthy era, racists found support for their argument that desegregation was a Communist plot. In 1960, the sit-ins staged by black students interrupted the timid debate, and, soon after, James Baldwin's *New Yorker* essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind" gave condescending white intellectuals a sense of black anger and suffering. Copyright © 2005 *The New Yorker* From Booklist Polsgrove explores why American intellectuals, black and white, didn't lend their voices more aggressively to

the call for racial justice during the infancy of the civil rights movement, especially in the period after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) required school desegregation. Celebrated Southern authors William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren were at best ambivalent about the growing unrest in their region. National magazines ignored pro-integration writers, such as Lillian Smith, in favor of writers and historians who promoted a gradualist approach to ending discrimination. In the North and among black expatriates in Paris, intellectuals were similarly restrained in supporting desegregation. Fear of reprisals from entrenched anticommunist campaigns silenced or dampened many black intellectuals, who had noted the marginalization of the radical W. E. B. Du Bois and the ruined career of Paul Robeson. James Baldwin broke the silence with *The Fire Next Time* (1963), opening the floodgates of protest and resistance. An absorbing book about a troubled time in U.S. history, whose lessons continue to resonate. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved