Black Like Me By John Howard Griffin: Critical Review

You will never know what someone is going through until you walk in their shoes for a day. This statement perfectly describes the actions of John Howard Griffin who decided to swap his honored life as a white, southern male and darken his skin to learn about life as an unprivileged, black man first-hand. He wrote about this experience in his historical non-fiction called" Black Like Me" which received an Anisfield- Wolf book award for nonfiction. This autobiography takes place in 1959, Mansfield, Texas. Griffin, a white journalist, was baffled because of his inability to understand "[what] it is like to experience discrimination based on skin color" as a white man.(1)To encounter this, he did what most people wouldn't do, and assimilated into black society, by darkening his skin tone with medication and tanning sessions and finding connections into black civilization. Throughout the book, Griffin visited many places such as New Orleans, Louisiana, Biloxi, Mississippi, Mobile and Montgomery, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia. In these cities, he learned the many ways racism took form and how sadistic people could be. After he was done experiencing the grueling reality of a black man in the south, he scrubbed his body clean of the miseries of the pigmentation of his skin and continued his life as a white, privileged man.

This book was written to show its readers the experience of someone who is discriminated against because of the color of their skin and not for who they are as a person. As a white man, Griffin did not have any concerns on how people treated him because the color of his skin came as a reliant of good fortune he didn't even know he had. Before his transition into a black man, he wondered if the people who knew him would treat him as himself or as "some nameless negro" after seeing him with dark skin. (4) The answer was made clear with the many negative reactions numerous people gave him during his journey. His excursion inspired many people to try to put themselves into the place of others, especially minority groups, that are being discriminated against. This helps create empathy between people and aid them to come together to change the many wrongs of society. Actions such as this helped abolish things, such as, slavery and Jim Crow laws.

Throughout the book, Griffin argues that one cannot comprehend someone else's struggles unless they experience them themselves. As a white man, in the beginning of the book, he could not understand what African Americans went through on the daily basis, but when he walked through the streets with the same skin color as the people who are getting discriminated against, he understood the position he was in. He realized that "[he was a negro] and [his] concern was the white man and how to get along with him." (29) Griffin had to learn that there were certain ways black people had to treat white people even when the white people don't treat them the same way. This was something he did not have to worry about as a white man.

This book was written very well and was very descriptive. Many quotes in this book are very emotional and invest you further into the book, such as, "to sob would be to realize and to realize would be despair". (73) This book is great at showing the emotions of the narrator well and allows the reader to sympathize with Griffin. The narrator writes with such clarity and emotion, that it feels like the reader is with the narrator. Although the book was very investing, it did have some unnecessary chapters where nothing happened, such as November 27, where he stated he" remained in his room more and more each day". (122) This causes the reader to

lose interest and not pay attention to the what they are reading. This autobiography is very clear in what is happening and was easy to follow along and very simple, for example," fear dims even the sunlight". (100) These features make this book an enjoyable, non-hassle book to read.