John Howard Griffin Short Bio And Themes Of Black Like Me

John Howard Griffin was a journalist from Texas who wrote about his accounts of temporarily passing as an African American man and his journey through the Deep South. He published a full account of his journey in his book Black Like Me.

John Howard Griffin, the author and main character, is a white man living in Texas in 1959. As a journalist who focused on race relations, he was committed to the cause of racial justice and was frustrated by his inability to understand the black experience. Griffin decides to take a fairly unconventional approach and undergoes medical treatment to change the color of his skin and temporarily become a black man.

After a treatment of UV light and a combination of oral medicine and skin dyes, Griffin was surprised of the extent to which he was treated. He was unable to find a job, found it difficult to find a restroom he could use, and was even attacked by a white bully. After a couple days in New Orleans, Griffin continued his journey into Mississippi and Alabama.

It is here in the deep south where he was truly taken aback. There were codes that dictated how people of color could behave, openly bigoted members of the media, and even lynch mobs. After seeing first hand the passive resistance movement break out in Montgomery, he transitioned back and forth regularly between colors and noticed a pattern. When he was a white man, white people treated him with respect and people of color treated him with suspicious fear; when he was a black man, people of color treated him with generosity, while white people treated him with contempt.

The book ends with Griffin publishing his findings and the backlash that follows it. He eventually had to move away to flee the threats on his and his family's lives. Before he goes, he has a final talk with a little African American boy, to whom he explained that racism is a result of social conditioning, not any inherent quality within people of any color. And issued a plea with him to never revert to violence.

This book resonated with me because it focused on the fact that you can never truly know what someone is going through unless you see through their eyes. Griffin had the unique experience of being able to live as a white man and an African American in the late fifties' early sixties. His takeaway that we are all inherently the same as humans but are shaped by our surroundings and community reflect what we were taught this semester in class. We all have cognitive biases in our brain that influence how we treat each other. This was evident with how Griffin was mistreated by each race when he was a different color then them. Griffin was the constant, the same person, regardless of what his skin looked like, but the experience he went through was drastically different depending on if he died his skin.

I think if Griffin were sitting next to me today, he would want us to value each other as humans and never assume what someone of a different race is going through. All we should do is try our best to be inclusive of all people regardless of background.