



“Some actions are so absolutely simple and right that they amount to genius. *Black Like Me* was an act of genius on the part of Mr. Griffin.”

– Cyril Connolly, *Sunday Times of London*

**Robert Bonazzi discussing  
John Howard Griffin's  
Black Like Me.**

**Friday, July 30th, 7:30pm  
B & N Sunset Valley  
5601 Brodie Lane, Suite 300  
More info: 892-3493**

#### **ABOUT JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN**

Known primarily as the author of the modern classic, *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) was a true Renaissance man. Having fought in the French Resistance and been a solo observer on an island in the South Pacific during World War II, he became a critically-acclaimed novelist and essayist, a remarkable photographer and musicologist, and a dynamic lecturer and teacher. On October 28, 1959, after a decade of blindness and a remarkable and inexplicable recovery, John Howard Griffin dyed himself black and began an odyssey of discovery through the segregated American South. The result was *Black Like Me*, arguably the single most important documentation of 20th century American racism ever written.

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Because of *Black Like Me*, Griffin was personally vilified, hanged in effigy in his hometown, and threatened with death for the rest of his life. Griffin's courageous act and the book it generated earned him international respect as a human rights activist. Griffin worked with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Dick Gregory, Saul Alinsky, and NAACP Director Roy Wilkins during the Civil Rights era. He taught seminars at the University of Peace with Nobel Peace Laureate Father Dominique Pire, and delivered hundreds of lectures worldwide. Earlier, during a decade of blindness (1947-1957), he wrote novels. His 1952 bestseller, *The Devil Rides Outside* was a test case in a controversial censorship trial that was settled in his favor by the US Supreme Court. Later in his life, Griffin was also recognized for his magnificent black & white photographic portraits, which were featured in his photographic books *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Griffin was also Thomas Merton's biographer) and *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures*.

***Black Like Me* is essential reading as a basic text for study of this great contemporary social problem. It is a social document of the first order, providing material absolutely unavailable elsewhere with such authenticity that it cannot be dismissed. — San Francisco Chronicle**

#### **REVIEW FROM THE SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS, MAY 2004 — Steve Bennett, Book Editor**

"He was wide open to experience," says Robert Bonazzi of John Howard Griffin, the late Texas writer who "passed" for black in the late '50s and wrote about the experience in the 1961 book *Black Like Me*. "And he was wide open to helping people."

The same can be said of Bonazzi, a poet, essayist, critic, author, teacher, publisher, and, for the last seven months, Southtown resident in San Antonio.

Says poet Naomi Shihab Nye of Bonazzi: "He has been immensely generous with many writers – it is his basic nature – always taking the time to respond with depth and meaning to anything anyone gives him to read."

This afternoon, Bonazzi, the literary executor of Griffin's estate, will discuss *Black Like Me* during a book talk at the Barnes & Noble Fiesta Trail bookstore. More than anyone else, Bonazzi is responsible for what he calls "a Griffin revival."

*Black Like Me*, which has sold some 10 million copies, recently was printed in trade paperback for the first time and recorded as an audio book. A new film is in the works. Last year, San Antonio's Wings Press published Griffin's [posthumous] "Paris novel," *Street of the Seven Angels*, which led to the March publication of the "definitive" hardcover edition of *Black Like Me* (Wings Press, \$24.95), just in time for the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark desegregation ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, on May 17.

The Wings edition of *Black Like Me* corrects errors reprinted in paperback editions for years, restores key passages deleted from Griffin's original manuscript, includes Griffin's 1976 epilogue "What's Happened Since *Black Like Me*" as well as Griffin's 1979 essay on race, "Beyond Otherness," written a year before his death. The new edition also features Don Rutledge's historic photographs of Griffin in New Orleans "disguised as a Negro," and a new foreword by Studs Terkel.

"For my money, it's the most important book ever written in Texas in terms of its sociological impact," says Bryce Milligan, Wings Press publisher. "It made a huge difference to lots of people in this state, throughout the U.S., and around the world."

Griffin's and Bonazzi's lives have been intertwined since 1966, when Bonazzi, then a graduate student at the University of Houston, wrote to the author at his farm in Mansfield and asked for an interview. It was granted, and Bonazzi published it in his own literary quarterly, which evolved into *Latitudes Press*, a critically acclaimed small press that published works by such writers as Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Bly, Thomas Merton, W.S. Merwin and Elena Poniatowska before ceasing operations in 2000.

**With this book, John Howard Griffin easily takes rank as probably the country's most venturesome student of race relations. It is a piercing and memorable document. – Newsweek**

In 1982, Griffin's widow Elizabeth asked Bonazzi, by now a family friend, to help with Griffin's archives. Soon, they became, as Bonazzi puts it, "more than friends" and were married. They spent years putting "all this stuff" in order, then began posthumously bringing out books such as *Follow the Ecstasy*, Griffin's biography of Thomas Merton.

After Elizabeth died in 2000, Bonazzi, who's 61 now, shut down *Latitudes Press* and began to think about the rest of his life. He's extremely proud of the Wings edition of *Black Like Me* and eventually moved to San Antonio late last year to work with Milligan at the press and write. He says he's written 40 poems since moving to San Antonio – he usually completes maybe two to five a year – and he's working on a "memoir of mentors," which he's calling "Wisdom Gathers Slowly" and which will include chapters on Merton, Bly and, of course, Griffin.

"They're personal essays on people who've opened me up to so many things," he says.

Why Griffin? Why *Black Like Me*?

"My initial fascination was with the way it was done," Bonazzi says. "It reads like a novel. As a reader I was immersed in his immersion (in the black community). We're in on the secret. That's why it touches so many young readers and has been effective in schools – kids get into it because it's a story. I've taught it at the high school and college levels, and students really respond to it."

"I think its impact on the white community has been significant," Bonazzi continues. "Griffin always said, 'I don't speak for black people. I speak for myself.' He made a pact with Martin Luther King to go into white communities and do his work there, because he said they're the ones that needed to be illuminated to the realities."

"The real courage of the book is not so much what he did," adds Bonazzi, "but that he faced his own racism. To me, that's the key to the book."

**A stinging indictment of thoughtless, needless inhumanity. No one can read it without suffering. – Dallas Morning News**