



Nonfiction Finalist Remarks
Rick Bowers | *Spies of Mississippi*

It is an honor to be a finalist for this wonderful award, particularly given the outstanding books selected for consideration.

I've been interested in the Civil Rights Movement for a long time, and as director of creative initiatives for the AARP, it has been my privilege to oversee a project that captured the stories of thousands of survivors of the movement.

My interest in the topic led me to uncover a little known fact: The State of Mississippi used taxpayer dollars to fund a secret campaign to spy on the civil rights movement and undercut its efforts.

I was shocked, of course, especially when I realized that even black people – from community leaders to private detectives working for hire – spied on behalf of the segregationist state.

But I was also very excited. As my colleagues here know, there's nothing like an untold story to get a nonfiction writer going. I just had to write a book.

I didn't quit my day job, but I did the next best thing—I took a leave of absence to get my research started and spent much of a summer in Jackson, MS, culling through the 140,000 page investigative files of the Mississippi State Sovereignty



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Commission, mining newspaper archives, and interviewing participants and those they had targeted.

I learned that state agents infiltrated the NAACP, tracked student activists, collaborated with the White Citizens' Councils, and even leaked information to the Ku Klux Klan.

Beginning that summer, I spend more than a year tracking down the man who served as the state's number one black agent—he was referred to in the files only as agent X-- so I could interview him and put a face and personality to the documents showing how he and his confederates turned over the names, descriptions, and license numbers of student activists. Some of whom later turned up dead.

I will never forget sitting in the Mississippi State Archives building in Jackson when the archivist brought me the file on Clyde Kennard – a young, black chicken farmer and decorated military veteran who committed the crime of applying to an all-white college (this was four years before James Meredith integrated Ole Miss). In an effort to force him to drop his application, state agents questioned his friends, family members, ministers and former teachers and even pressured a group of black educators to intervene to dissuade him from his course. They did try.



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When the young man refused to back down, the state investigator paid a visit to the White Citizens Council in Hattiesburg, whose leader offered to arrange an accident on the highway == "his car could be hit by a train" == to solve the problem. In the end, the state took a more "moderate" approach. Kennard was dragged into court on a false charge of facilitating the theft of five bags of chicken feed, found guilty and sentenced to seven years in prison at hard labor. He died shortly after his release.

But the shocking details of the State's misconduct and the broad public collaboration with it were just part of the story. The good news is that there were heroes in Mississippi as well as evil-doers and their victims. Brave men and women stood up to oppose the segregationist state, risking—and in some cases giving--their lives in the name of equality and justice. It's great to tell a story where the heroes win the day.

My goal was to entertain and inform, of course, but I also hoped to inspire young people to continue on the path toward equality and justice for all. On that score the response of readers over the past year has been the most rewarding -- and telling -- part of my experience. Young reader after young reader has said that he or she had no real sense of just how oppressive the system of segregation was for those who lived under its yoke. But they also say they continue to hear the voices of racial and social bias in our contemporary politics.



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When angry crowds shout the N-word at John Lewis for supporting health care reform, these young people make the connection. When the current governor of Mississippi – Hayley Barbour – states that the White Citizens’ Council was a positive force for racial peace, they make the connection. In their blogs and on their web sites – they encourage each other to stand against those who continue to play racial politics. For this writer, that has been the greatest prize of all.