

DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South

by
Osha Gray Davidson

Author:

In his own words, Osha Gray Davidson is “...a story teller of the non-fiction variety. I use words, images, and sounds – online, in books and magazines, or in movie theaters – to tell the stories I think are important.” He has worked widely in the media and publishing fields in such diverse roles as: project reporter, science writer, contributing writer, journalist, photographer, screenplay writer, Adjunct Faculty, special correspondent, and website publisher. His research, writing, reporting, and images appear in a broad variety of formats, including: *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *Energy & the Environment (Forbes)*, *Mother Jones*, *National Geographic*, *Popular Science*, Salon.com, and many others.

Mr. Davis’ areas of study range from GIS and Coral Reef Ecology to American Indian Studies. His book titles include *Clean Break: The Story of Germany’s Energy Transformation and What Americans Can Learn from It* (Insideclimate News, 2012), *Kirstenbosch: Africa’s Garden* (Blurb Press, 2011), *The Enchanted Prairie* (University of Iowa Press, 2009), and many others. His work is included in several anthologies, and he has exhibited his photography and presented research from Hawaii to Germany.

Summary:

C. P. Ellis grew up in the poor white section of Durham, North Carolina, and as a young man joined the Ku Klux Klan. Ann Atwater, a single mother from the poor black part of town, quit her job as a household domestic to join the civil rights fight. During the 1960s, as the country struggled with the explosive issue of race, Ellis and Atwater met on opposite sides of the public school integration issue. Their encounters were charged with hatred and suspicion. In an amazing set of transformations, however, each of them came to see how the other had been exploited by the South’s rigid power structure, and they forged a friendship that flourished against a backdrop of unrelenting bigotry. (from the publisher)

Questions:

1. “The myth most pertinent to this story is that America is a classless society, where anyone can rise from humble origins to become whatever he or she aspires to be, limited only by individual ability and level of commitment to work hard.” (Introduction) Do you believe this is a myth? Why or why not?
2. How were C.P. Ellis’s and Ann Atwater’s young lives similar? How were they different?

3. The NC Mutual Life Insurance Company was “the closest thing to a government that the nation of black Americans had at that time.” How so?
4. Why were there such contradictory stories about African American life in Durham during the 1950’s?
5. In what ways was the Mutual a “case study of the color-caste system at work?”
6. Discuss this statement: “The Big Men of Durham learned an important lesson from the Populist affair: the best way to preserve the status quo was to keep blacks and whites fighting each other.”
7. How did the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois differ?
8. What does “separate but equal” mean to you? How does this apply to school desegregation in Durham?
9. What factors influenced C.P. Ellis’s decision to join the Ku Klux Klan?
10. Discuss the issues with housing in Durham during the 1960’s. How was Ann Atwater involved?
11. In 1971, an organizational meeting was held to discuss problems in Durham Schools. The group included “blacks, whites, liberals, conservatives, Klansmen, NAACP people.” What happened during and after the meeting? How did this lead to Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis co-chairing a “charrette” committee?
12. How did Ann and C.P. finally discover some common ground? What happened as a result?