

Sick of Sickness

Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi is the autobiography of an African American woman, covering her life from the earliest years till she graduated from college, the 1940's, 50's and the beginning of the 60's. Her childhood memories were defined by the extreme poverty of the rural South, which in her case was hardened by the fact that her mother was a single parent for a long time, struggling to bring up an ever increasing number of children. When Anne, known at this time as Essia Mae, got into contact the first time with white people around the age 4-5, she noticed that they occupied different status in society. This aroused her naïve curiosity. By the time she got into high school, her family conditions slightly normalized, because her mother had a partner who acted as the head of the house and supported them. Nevertheless Anne still had to work every day so the family could afford to send her and her siblings to school. Besides being a maid, she managed to maintain her good grades, learn to play the piano, participate in church activities. But when her employer, a racist white women gave her a hard time, and her stepfather showed too much active interest (and hatred) towards the teenage girl, she moved out and finished her high school living at relatives in a nearby village. At her new school, she excelled in every subject again and became a good basketball player as well. Although she worked full time every summer, she could not save enough money for college so she entered one on a sport scholarship. After struggling with the small town mentality of the Natchez College for two years, she transferred with a full scholarship to a more prestigious college, where she finally was surrounded by people up to her level of intelligence. By this time the injustices of the racially segregated South disturbed her so much that she became an activist in the civil rights movements. Throughout the book people, who Anne knew were beaten or killed basically for the single reason that they were black. The author wove into the narrative of the book the milieu of racism as it was part of her every day life in one way or another. The organizations she worked with towards the end of her college years and after (NAACP, SNCC, and CORE) provided an opportunity for her to try to change the system. It also became her social and support network. Her experiences taught her that racism was (is?) institutionalized in the US and I believe this is the main theme in the book.

I started to admire Ms. Moody and her attitude towards hardship when she started to admire Emma, the relative she was living with during the second part of her high school years. Her leg was shot through the door by a desperate black man. Emma, instead of being angry with the person who shot her, directed her feelings towards the whites who created the economic, political, and social system in a way that it was "almost impossible for the Negro men to earn a living" (Moody, 208). Anne being 15 at this time learned her first real lesson about looking for the bigger picture of the society even in a very tangible and bloody event. She could have chosen to be angry at the poor man, but with Emma's help recognized the circumstance's role in the act. Beside individual white people who were bigots and damaged the lives of countless African Americans they also fought to protect the system that was designed to treat the Blacks unfair, unequal, and discriminatory way. After the famous Woolworth's sit-in--where she was physically attacked and humiliated because she was part of the group that demanded service at a "whites-only" counter--she had a revelation-like learning experience. Up till then she hated whites in Mississippi, but now she realized: "It was impossible for me to hate sickness" [of racist white people] (Moody, 267). Despite the hostility she just endured she climbed out from the trap of becoming similar to her attackers. She did not become "racist" who would hate all whites like some white people hate(d) all African Americans. She wrote the book in 1968, three years after the story in it ended. The novel's closing lines are questioning whether the aforementioned system and sickness can be ever overcome. I certainly hope so, but not surprised that she burned out in the struggle.