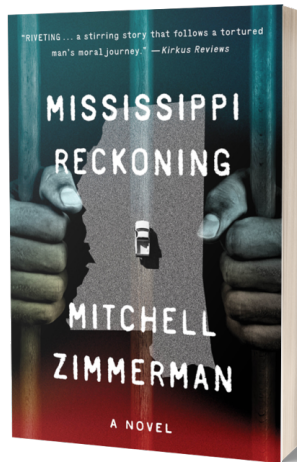


ON BOOKS: A means of keeping faith

by Philip Martin | May 12, 2019



I don't want to oversell Mitchell Zimmerman's *Mississippi Reckoning* (Hunts Point Press, \$15.99).

It is, in some ways, a very basic book, with some on-the-nose characterizations that, were they not supported by the author's experience, could be taken as stereotypes. It is written in a matter-of-fact manner that stresses clarity over poetry, a kind of anti-style that serves as an unfussy delivery system for the unfolding narrative.

The main character is a little too explicit in spelling out his internal conflicts -- as a narrator he too often states what we might have inferred. There's a sex scene that feels gratuitous, as though the conventions of made-for-cable movies had somehow briefly colonized the book.

In fact, the main criticism of *Mississippi Reckoning* might be that it's a book that seems to want to be a movie -- or maybe it's an inchoate movie.

None of that should dissuade anyone from reading it.

It is a powerful novel that derives most of its juice from the history it wends through and around. What happens in *Mississippi Reckoning* didn't happen in real life -- at least the main character never existed and never went on a mission to right a decades-old murder -- but the killings of civil rights workers James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman did occur in the summer of 1964, and their killers did escape punishment commensurate with their crimes. And the circumstances surrounding their abduction and the actions -- and nonactions -- of fellow civil rights workers, local police and the FBI are reported faithfully in the book.

Zimmerman is a retired lawyer who, in the early '60s, was a civil rights activist in Arkansas, Georgia and Mississippi. He worked for years in a large law firm that specializes in representing technology and life sciences companies in Silicon Valley and along the Pacific Rim. In a brief afterword, the author thanks his former firm for their support of his successful 22-year struggle to get a pro bono client off San Quentin's death row.

Zimmerman's protagonist Gideon Roth (some readers will remember Arkansas attorney/author Grif Stockley's Gideon Page character) works for a law firm that also specializes in tech firms, but otherwise bears no resemblance to Zimmerman's firm: Roth's firm was not particularly supportive of his 14-year, ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to save a death row inmate from the gas chamber.

Roth witnesses the execution of Kareem Jackson, whose background and family history he'd painstakingly excavated. That Kareem was a product of violent pathologies and damaged as a child didn't matter to the justices reviewing his case. (Zimmerman is, as might be expected, particularly good at presenting various legal problems for and against Kareem's pleadings.)

After the execution, Roth becomes a liability, and his firm is quick to sever ties with him.

Which accelerates the downward spiral he's already on. In short order, he runs off his wife and becomes obsessed with the events of the summer of 1964. (The book is apparently set in the mid-to-late '90s, though one of the historic events occurs near the end actually happened in May 2001. Zimmerman might be taking a little artistic license with those facts; this is hinted at by his writing that the event "was reported" in "mid-July." The important thing is cellphones don't yet exist in Roth's universe.)

He decides his life and career have been worthless and that he needs to somehow atone for the deaths of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman. He feels an especial connection to these men because he was unable to get the FBI to intervene while the men might still have been alive.

And so Roth decides to become an assassin, one of what Paul Schrader would call "God's lonely men." He uses his expertise to devise a plan, changes his appearance, and starts off on a road trip that will carry him back to the heart of darkness that is Mississippi.

Roth's dilemma is well-framed; he's a moral actor who has come to believe that justice can only be served by people willing to martyr themselves. But he's smart enough to wonder how much of his impulse is born of egoism, and whether the ultimate consequences of his actions are even foreseeable.

Mississippi Reckoning is not subtle, but is affecting and highly readable as it commingles fact and invention in artful ways. Zimmerman's methods sometimes put me in mind of James Ellroy's Los Angeles novels, which similarly employ historic figures and events.

The rule around these parts is that those who get their history from movies and novels deserve the history they get. But *Mississippi Reckoning*, while a work of fiction, also feels like a means of keeping faith.