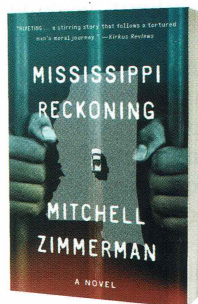


BOOK REVIEW

Mississippi Reckoning

By Mitchell Zimmerman
 Mitchell Zimmermann (2019)
 Reviewed by Natman Schaye



Mississippi Reckoning is a novel that opens with Kareem Jackson's execution as witnessed by his lawyer, Gideon Roth. Roth had veered from a successful civil practice, much to his partners' discontent, to spend a decade representing Jackson in post-conviction. We learn that, even before his client's execution, Roth's professional and personal lives, including his marriage, have deteriorated. The novel guides the reader through the monumental struggles that follow and his quest for justice on his own terms. As Roth's quest — and the story's tension — advance, the reader becomes intimately acquainted with the history of both Roth and Jackson.

Roth, we learn, comes of age in the 1960s. As a college student, he leaves his safe, middle-class cocoon in New York for a summer of doing volunteer civil rights work in Mississippi. Here, the fictional Roth joins nonfictional history. Shortly after his arrival, three civil rights advocates — Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, and James Chaney — are kidnapped and gunned down on a remote country road. After a period of time, the assailants are identified. One, Cecil

Price, is a police officer. They are eventually convicted, but not of murder, and receive lenient sentences. During Roth's tumultuous summer, he forms relationships with others whom he again engages with decades later as his life verges on catastrophe. He leaves Mississippi feeling that he has not done enough, a feeling that dogs him throughout the years that follow.

Roth goes on to build the American Dream. He falls in love and marries. Others recognize his legal talent, and he rises to become a partner in a Silicon Valley firm. But he fails his wife. Or does she fail him? He fails his partners. Or do they fail him? And while it would be hard to argue that he fails Kareem Jackson, Roth cannot save his life. As his life spirals downward after the execution, he struggles to come to grips with society's disparate treatment of Jackson and Price. Certainly, Jackson committed horrific crimes, but he was also a victim of horrific multigenerational discrimination and abuse. Price, on the other hand, committed equally horrific crimes but spent only a short time in prison before returning to his family. Having lost nearly everything, Roth decides to recreate himself and seek vengeance against Price.

As we follow Roth's quest, we learn of the Jackson family's struggles. The book aptly recounts the series of tragedies that culminated in Kareem's awful crimes. The family story is a mixture of unspeakable acts of racism, day-to-day bigotry, mental illness, and child abuse. It is the story of so many of our clients. And it provides a window into the reasons that our clients and their people are so often unable or unwilling to share their stories, even when the client's life hangs in the balance.

Roth ventures out on a cross country road trip. As the miles build, so does the tension. What will be Roth's destination? What is his destiny? *Mississippi Reckoning's* road trip is a suspense-filled journey well worth following to its ending. ■

About the Reviewer

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