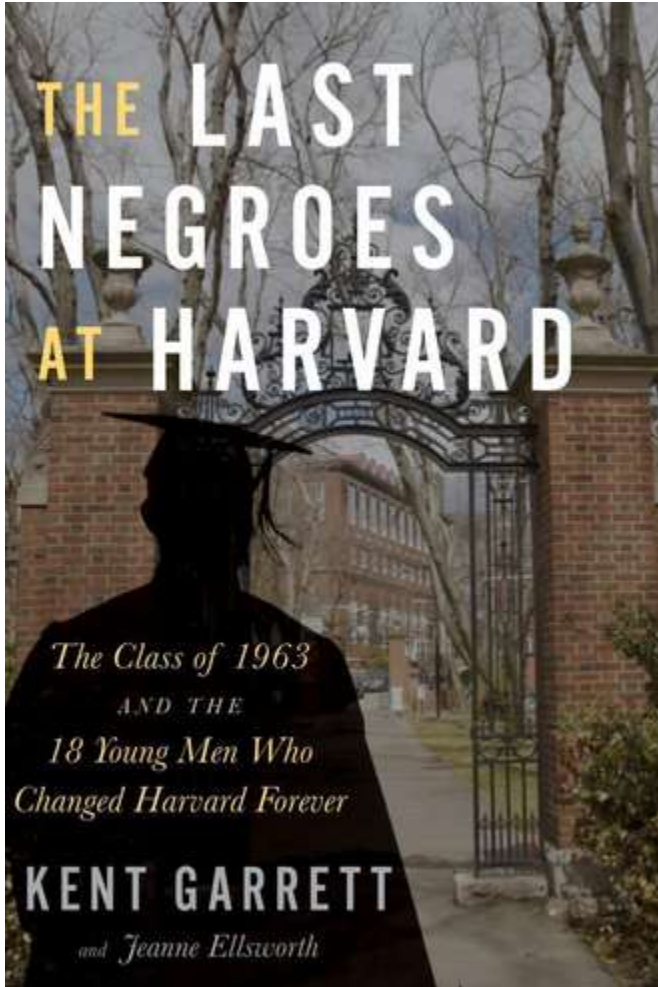


Powerful Stories

Book is a transformative experience

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The Last Negroes at Harvard: The Class of 1963 and the 18 Young Men Who Changed Harvard Forever by Kent Garrett and Jeanne Ellsworth. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020, 320 pages, \$27 (hardcover).



“I met Jeanne (Ellsworth) via an online dating service, and when we had dinner one evening I told her about my ideas,” Kent Garrett writes near the beginning of “The Last Negroes at Harvard: The Class of 1963 and the 18 Young Men Who Changed Harvard Forever,” explaining the origins of the book he wrote with his life partner. “She was about to retire from university teaching – her field was the history of education in the United States – and she was fascinated by the possibilities.”

“From that first conversation, we’ve been on the quest,” he continues. “Indeed, we became partners in life and in ‘The Last Negroes at Harvard’ project. We would spend the next eight years tracking down and talking to my classmates, starting with no more than a list of names that I pulled from my memory and wrote on a yellow legal pad.”

Admittedly, I was hooked as soon as I read the preface to this intriguing and insightful foray into the lives of an exceptionally talented group of educational pioneers. In addition to analyzing the efficacy of the finished product, I have always been drawn to the often equally-fascinating story of how something comes to

be written. In the present case, I was not disappointed. Without a doubt, this is one of the most inspiring – and one of the most instructive – volumes I have ever had the privilege of reading and reflecting upon. I got to see – and vicariously explore – the world from a completely different perspective; i.e., one well outside the confines of the comfort zone I have been sheltered within for much of my life. Garrett and Ellsworth’s prose is powerful stuff.

For starters, the book is well-researched, with eight pages of source notes at the conclusion of the preface, 10 chapters and epilogue that make up the main narrative. I was particularly impressed with “The Gallery,” which consists of the last 53 pages of the manuscript and provides a picture as well as a brief biography of each of the 17 men profiled (in addition to Garrett). At the time of publication, 12 of these individuals were still alive; sadly, six have passed away.

“The Last Negroes at Harvard” works on multiple levels. It is a window into daily life at one of our nation’s preeminent institutions of higher learning for a group of students who some thought should

not even be there. It is also a critique on how the civil rights movement was slowly making progress and the impact it was having on both individuals and institutions. Still, it was the universal themes that have permeated our culture since time immemorial that seemed to really pique my interest. Witness the following passage from “Curiosities,” the second chapter and one that I found especially thought-provoking:

“Not totally blind to our desire for female companionship, Harvard, like most single-sex colleges and prep schools, held ‘mixers’ – stilted affairs with members of the opposite sex shipped in for the occasion. Then commenced the mingling, choosing, presenting oneself, small talk and insanity. ... As if this wasn’t bad enough, the whole thing was wildly more complex for us Negroes, because the ‘mixing’ intended was strictly boy-girl, not white-Black. Dating at the time had one official purpose – marriage. In a 1958 poll, fully 96 percent of white Americans reported that they disapproved of interracial marriage, and it was illegal in about half of the states.”

Garrett, who graduated from Harvard in 1963 and is one of the “18 Young Men” mentioned in the title of the book, was born in the Fort Greene Projects in Brooklyn, N.Y. He excelled in the New York City Public Schools and was admitted to Harvard in 1959. One of the producers of the groundbreaking public TV program “Black Journal,” he had a 30-year, Emmy and Peabody award-winning career with CBS and NBC News. After his retirement in 1997, he became an organic dairy farmer in upstate New York. Ellsworth grew up in New Jersey, where she taught elementary school for 10 years. She eventually earned her Ph.D. in the social foundations of education from the University of Buffalo. Retiring in 2007 after a successful career as a teacher educator in the State University of New York system for 20 years, she moved to the Catskill Mountains, where she still lives with Garrett.

I mentioned previously that the book is powerful. Garrett and Ellsworth literally transport the reader back in time, to a world that many have forgotten or never knew existed at all. Most everyone has probably heard of James Meredith, the first African-American admitted to Ole Miss. Try to imagine what it was like to be an African-American college student at an elite university witnessing the events that were dramatically unfolding some 1,200 miles to the south.

“I don’t remember the precise moment when I heard about James Meredith’s awful experiences; it wasn’t burned into my memory like seeing Emmett Till’s gruesome remains in that magazine photo,” the authors write in “Afro Americans: Fall 1962 and Spring 1963,” the ninth chapter. “I do remember feeling a little stupid for having gone along in my comfortable world, naively assuming that this integration thing was going to be as easy for the rest of the country as it seemed to be at Harvard. Now what might happen? Maybe the segregationists would prevail. Maybe James Meredith would be lynched, and soon I’d see a photo of his ruined corpse in ‘Jet’ magazine. A boy who was a lot like me was suffering the bitter hatred and murderous violence of whites who were a lot like my classmates. At times, this awareness made me relapse into the wariness I had when I first arrived as a freshman, the gnawing idea that I didn’t really belong there.”

Reading the individual and collective stories of these remarkable young men is a transformative experience. It is obvious Harvard left an indelible mark – mostly for better, but sometimes for worse – on these phenomenal human beings; their lives were altered in ways they could not have imagined before stepping onto the hallowed ground of Harvard Square. By the same measure, it is equally apparent they had a similar impact on the institution. Indeed, Garrett and Ellsworth have captured an important episode in the still-unfolding interplay between social justice and its inherent connection to higher education. This may be required reading in my graduate classes.

Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.