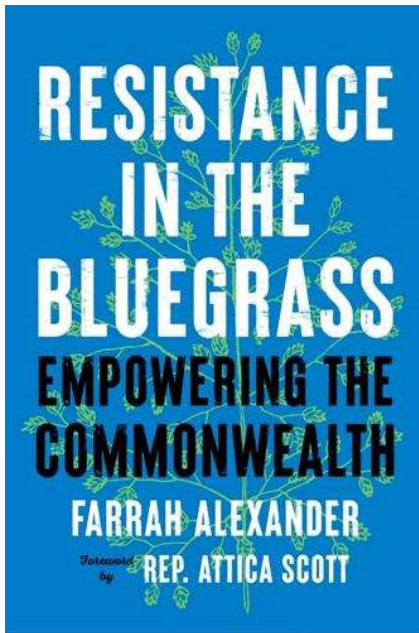


## Kentuckians have helped shape political landscape

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*“Resistance in the Bluegrass: Empowering the Commonwealth,”* by Farrah Alexander. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2022, 266 pages, \$18.94 (paperback).



“When describing what the Commonwealth of Kentucky is most known for, you may suggest the Kentucky Derby or Kentucky Fried Chicken,” Farrah Alexander notes near the beginning of “Resistance in the Bluegrass: Empowering the Commonwealth,” her sophomore effort exploring the role activism has historically played – and continues to play – in the ongoing evolution of our little corner of the world. “At least, that’s what an Irishman in Dublin did when I said I was from Kentucky. You may not instantly think of power.”

“This is a persistent understatement of the Bluegrass,” she continues. “Too often Kentucky is dismissed as a flyover state (hello, we’re a flyover commonwealth!) or just a block of red on an electoral map of votes. Historically, Kentuckians have made vast contributions to our nation’s political landscape. In the early 1800s, Senator and Secretary of State Henry Clay represented Kentucky and influenced diplomatic policy by pioneering the war hawk philosophy. You likely can’t watch cable news for more

than 30 minutes without seeing Sen. Mitch McConnell, who has been representing Kentucky longer than I have been alive.”

So begins a foray into our collective past that Alexander meticulously integrates into an elaborate tapestry highlighting the contributions of Kentuckians in the long and winding road to a more just existence and a higher quality of life for more of our citizens – not just those at the top of the proverbial hierarchy. And the author takes a comprehensive approach to the task at hand, tackling, in order, the accomplishments of our leaders on poverty, the environment, religion, education, political representation, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and feminism and reproductive rights. A tall order, for sure, but one that she delivers on in spectacular fashion.

After a foreword by Rep. Attica Scott, the book consists of an introduction and nine fairly concise yet substantive chapters tackling the various topics listed above. Alexander’s writing style is straightforward and conversational; although it is obvious she has done her research, the narrative is easily accessible to a general audience. Honestly, the subject matter is instantly relatable to anyone actively involved in the never-ending struggle for diversity, equity and inclusion. One feature I especially liked was the inclusion of a brief “what you can do” section at the end of each chapter. In these powerful admonitions, Alexander is both inspirational as well as instructional.

For example, at the end of the first chapter on “Poverty,” there is a short “Empower the Poor” bullet list meant to provide a roadmap for Kentuckians who not only want to be aware of the issues that affect their lives, but who also want to be a part of the solution. In the first recommendation, Alexander encourages the reader to: “Look at the big picture and, like Ben Carter (who we met earlier in the chapter), attack the systemic issues facing the poor. Follow the actions of the state and

federal legislatures. On the Kentucky Equal Justice Center website, there is a fantastic database of introduced bills that affect the poor. Stay diligent and contact your representatives concerning these actions.”

Alexander is a prolific journalist and social critic who focuses primarily on feminism, parenting, social justice, politics and current events; her articles have been featured and/or referenced in Huffington Post, Scientific American, BuzzFeed, Cosmopolitan, Elle, Daily Mail and the BBC. This is her second book; her first being “Raising the Resistance: A Mother’s Guide to Practical Activism,” which was published in 2020 to wide acclaim.

I found “Resistance in the Bluegrass” to be enlightening on many levels; apparently Kentuckians have been proactively involved trying to make our country more responsive to the needs and aspirations of all its citizens throughout our history. “Racial Justice,” the sixth chapter, was one I found particularly captivating. It was here that I learned about the Bradens and the Wades – and their unique connection that forever endeared them to entire generations.

“Along with her husband Carl, Anne Braden understood and practiced the principles of antiracism decades before author Dr. Ibram X. Kendi brought the idea into the mainstream,” Alexander explains. “The Bradens not only supported desegregation and the civil rights movement; they embarked on the deeply introspective journey of examining how they, as white people, were responsible for upholding a system that oppressed Black people.”

“Andrew and Charlotte Wade, a Black couple with a toddler and a baby on the way, had a dream of owning a home in a nice suburban neighborhood, and a house in the Louisville suburb of Shively was perfect – House Hunters approved,” she continues. “Well, except of course for the little snag that, under Jim Crow-era housing practices, the Wades couldn’t purchase property. It wasn’t illegal per se, but it wasn’t probable that a Black family would be able to purchase a home in an all-white neighborhood.”

“So the Wades asked their friends the Bradens, would they purchase the property for them? In an ultimate test of their commitment to the cause, the Bradens took strong, determined action by purchasing the house for the Wades. On May 15, 1954, the Wades spent the first night in their new home just two days before the landmark Supreme Court decision declaring racial segregation in schools unconstitutional. Things were looking up for a very fleeting moment – until of course the Wades’ white neighbors noticed them and welcomed them to the neighborhood by burning a cross in their yard and shooting out the windows.”

Some days I think we’ve come a long way from that evil era; other days I’m not so sure.

Anyway, if you want to know the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say – and many others along those same lines – you’ll definitely want to pick up a copy of this superb account of how a few Kentuckians were able to rise above hate, bigotry and seemingly insurmountable odds, to make a positive and indelible difference in the lives of others.

As Jennifer Donnelly so astutely observed in “These Shallow Graves,” “We who have means and a voice must use them to help those who have neither.” Absolutely. Alexander has heightened my admiration and respect for many of our unsung neighbors. Highly recommended.

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