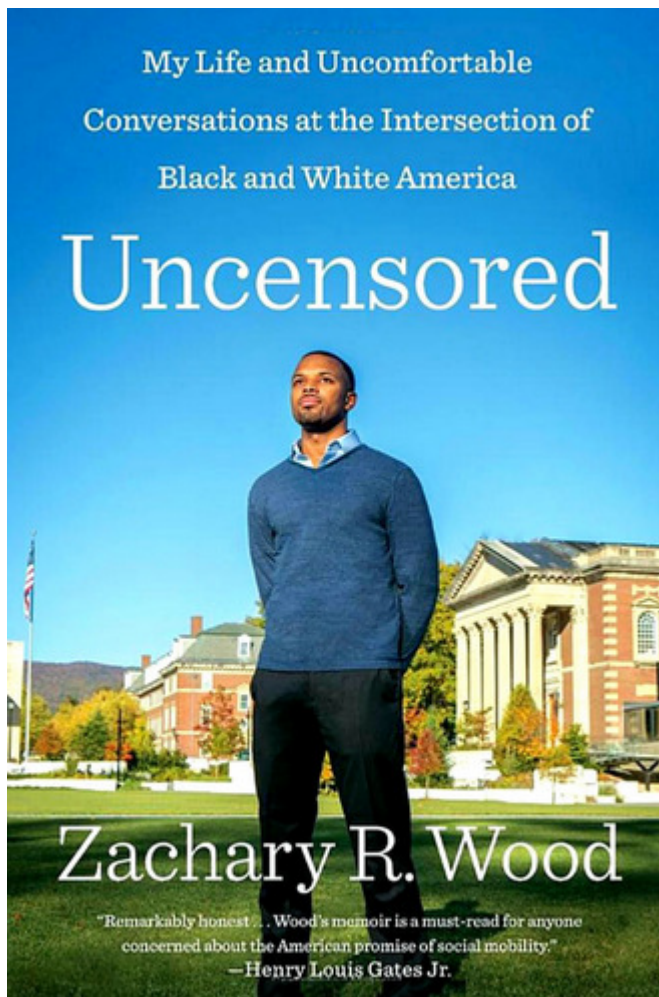


ENCOURAGING & INSPIRING

Wood seeks common ground

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“Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America” by Zachary R. Wood. New York: Dutton (an imprint of Random House), 2018, 272 pages, \$26. (hardcover).



“As the topic of free speech on college campuses has continued to cause controversy, protests and even bursts of violence across the country, the criticism most often levied against campus activists is that they’re too sensitive,” Zachary R. Wood observes near the beginning of “Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America,” his new best-seller about life at the forefront of the racial divide in the United States.

“On campus, their feelings are coddled,” he continues. “Class materials that may be upsetting are given a trigger warning. Speech codes restrict many college students from talking about certain subjects. And controversial speakers such as Venker and Derbyshire are kept away. The result is millions of college students who have little tolerance for healthy debate and view someone voicing his or her opposing view as an attack on their very personhood.”

So begins Wood’s extraordinarily perceptive and courageous foray into one of the cloudier corners of the American psyche. Eloquently articulated, the author has constructed a narrative that works on multiple levels. On the one hand,

“Uncensored” is a razor-sharp critique of the current status of our ongoing discourse on an aspect of our society that has long been a flashpoint of discontent. On the other hand, it is a deeply personal and moving story of one man’s never-ending struggle to rise above his circumstances and realize his innate potential.

“Uncensored” consists of an introduction, 11 relatively succinct chapters and an epilogue, and is primarily the author’s personal story of how he overcame seemingly insurmountable adversity to achieve success in a world that seemed to be perpetually against everything he aspired to be. The underlying purpose behind this powerful treatise is his desire to redefine the nation’s often painful and increasingly strained dialogue on race within a more productive architecture.

A 2018 graduate of Williams College, Wood is a Robert L. Bartley Fellow at The Wall Street Journal. As an undergraduate, Wood served as president of Uncomfortable Learning, a student organization that achieved a national reputation for sponsoring controversial campus speakers. His articles have appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Huffington Post, The Nation, The Weekly Standard, Times Higher Education, Inside Higher Education, Jet and SLAM Magazine. This is his first book.

I found Wood's description of his early life fascinating. His parents separated when he was very young and he preferred spending time with his father. And, given his description of his mother, it is not difficult to see why:

“When I wasn't wishing I'd never wake up, I went to sleep hoping that the next day my mom would wake up and want to have fun, because I dreaded being around her when she was angry. I never knew what was coming next. Every morning when I woke up, I had to quickly read all the signs to surmise what kind of mood she was in and act accordingly. On good days, her behavior was lighthearted, playful and energetic. On bad days, she was severely distressed, and I worried about her. It was clear that she was suffering. She believed that every color she saw held a secret message and dragged me along, chasing buses and trucks, reading them for a sign that would tell her what to do next. I was still in the first grade when my mom started to believe that the government was after her.”

Think about being raised in this kind of situation. It's difficult enough for those who have some understanding of mental illness and the toll it can take on those around the person afflicted. I cannot imagine the impact dealing with this kind of erratic and incomprehensible behavior would have on a young child who really has no clue about what he is experiencing. At the same time, it becomes obvious to the reader how Wood's upbringing shaped and influenced the man he became a few years later.

Ultimately, Wood retains a guardedly optimistic – although notably cautious – posture with respect to the future. His prose neatly captures the essence of the political disconnect that characterizes and permeates much of the conversation these days when it comes to finding a way out of our current imbroglio. Witness this gem from the epilogue:

“But I believe that making headway with issues of expression and inclusion in America will require patience, persistence and a demonstrated willingness to thoughtfully engage from all sides. It should be acknowledged that some conservatives have used arguments about free speech and intellectual freedom to attack liberals and dismissively characterize them as narrow-minded, intolerant and oversensitive. In response, several liberal commentators have hit back, suggesting that some conservatives only champion free speech because their views are less prominent in American institutions of higher education.”

I was encouraged and even inspired by “Uncensored.” In the current era of political and cultural polarization, it is refreshing to run across someone who has remained undaunted in his quest to understand and find common ground with everyone – including those with whom he disagrees vehemently. As Wood persuasively asserts, the journey out of the wilderness in which we find ourselves will require more discourse, not less. Throughout history, closed minds have always been a precursor to catastrophe.

Our fate is not sealed, but it will necessitate thinking outside the box and across lines in the sand we have foolishly drawn. Highly recommended.

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