

Book Review (United States): George Floyd, A Life

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**Review of *His Name Is George Floyd: One Man's Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice*
By Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa
Viking, May 2022, 428 pages.**

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I PARTICIPATED IN the popular uprising for racial justice after George Floyd was murdered by a white Minneapolis cop on May 25, 2020. I thought I knew his story — how George Floyd died, where he came from and how he lived. The cold-blooded assassination of this typical Black man sparked a massive national and international response — the largest ever in this country.

But this new book goes much deeper into his early life and places him in the context of America's racial history, going back to slavery, emancipation and legal segregation, and the white backlash that persists.

Samuels and Olorunnipa begin with the well-known events of the case. In the opening pages titled "Flowers," they write:

"As a young man, Perry, as his family called him, had outside aspirations — to become a Supreme Court justice, a pro athlete, or a rap star. By the time his world came crashing down in the months before his death, he had been chasing more modest ambitions — a little stability, a job driving trucks, health insurance. Still, in his dying seconds, as he suffocated under a white police officer's knee, Floyd manage to speak his love.

"'Mama, I love you!' he screamed from the pavement where his cries of 'I can't breathe' were met with an indifference as deadly as hate.

"'Reese, I love you!' he yelled, a reference to his friend Maurice Hall, who was with him when he was handcuffed that Memorial Day evening.

"'Tell my kids I love them!'

“These words marked an end of life in which Floyd repeatedly found his dreams diminished, deferred, and derailed — in no small part because of the color of his skin.”

The fact: the death of a Black man in racist America at the hands of a cop occurs everywhere, every week some place in the country. The police officers — whether white, Black, Asian or Latino — follow the institutional rules.

All a cop must say to justify a shooting: “it was self-defense.” It didn’t matter if the Black victim was unarmed, mentally ill or walking down the street. The “problem” is the color of his/her skin.

Professionally Researched Narrative

Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa conducted over 400 interviews. They had access to the *Washington Post* extensive files on race and other journalists who covered the events of 2020 and since. Both reporters are Black men who know racism firsthand from their own life experiences.

Olorunnipa is the *Post*’s White House Bureau chief and of African (primarily Nigerian) descent. Samuels was born in the Bronx, New York, and is a national reporter who graduated from Northwestern University.

They interviewed friends and family of George Floyd. Nothing was left out — the good, bad and the scars of Perry’s life.

They, like the country, learned of the murder when a young Black female bystander, Darnella Frazier, posted her live phone video online. It showed Derek Chauvin’s knee on Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes until he was dead. It showed three other cops standing by with one holding Floyd down.

The story is told in three parts. The first, “Perry,” discusses who Floyd was up to his Memorial Day murder. Part Two talks about his life in Texas and family. Part Three, “Say His Name,” is about the popular uprising that followed his death, and the push for justice in the courts and Congress.

Chapter One describes in detail what that May 25 was like for George Perry Floyd Jr. I had wondered why he was at that community store and did not drive away. It turns out he regularly shopped there and was known by the owner and employees.

So why were the police called by the store about an allegedly counterfeit \$20 bill? Why did Floyd stay outside the store, across the street, after he was asked by a store employee to take back the bill and pay for his cigarettes again?

The four ex-cops (now serving time in prison) knew nothing about George Floyd or what he was up to. He was simply a Black man sitting in a car with a friend. They saw him, as the authors explain:

“He was young, poor, and Black in America — a recipe for irrelevance in a society that tended to push lads like him to the outskirts.

“However, he told everyone around him that he would leave an indelible mark one day.”

The Minneapolis police blamed the victim for his death. It gave a false justification of the murder (as police always do). But the pressure of the immediate public protests forced the firing and

prosecution of the cops and the jury conviction of Derek Chauvin.

The authors detail the testimonies at the trial using transcripts and firsthand reports. Floyd's background is important, they write, to understand how typical Black men are killed by police with few ever forced to pay a price.

The Background

Floyd struggled with substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, and criminal activities as an adult. He served time in prison.

He first grew up in a trailer park in North Carolina, and as a teenager his mother moved the family to Houston's Third Ward seeking a better life. Segregation and racism followed the family. Their housing project was 99 percent Black. They continued to live in poverty.

"To help the world understand Perry as they saw him," the authors obtained haircuts from his barbers, visited the areas he called home, and spoke with his extended family, friends and associates as well as former lovers.

Floyd, 6'4," was a big man, a star football player in high school but not good enough to get into professional sports. He was a loving brother and son. He was respected by his community.

He was poor, had little access to health care, and started using drugs and became a trader. He was not the hardest worker.

He sought to get out of that life and improve himself. He had many friends to help him. It's why he moved to Minneapolis in 2014 where he had a relative.

The truth is that George Floyd, Jr. was a victim of the "War on Drugs" pushed by Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Clinton against the Black community. That racist war helps explain why police officers feel free to murder Black men or imprison them.

African Americans were the hardest hit by the Covid pandemic. Floyd suffered the same fate as millions of people during the coronavirus crisis: He was out of work and looking for a new job in 2020.

Family and Community

As I read this personal story, I felt a certain joy in how the authors were able to show in a positive light how a poor family and community lived, breathed, and functioned as human beings.

My mother's family grew up in Detroit's "Black Bottom," which no longer exists. Samuels and Olorunnipa show the warmth of the family and neighbors — not unusual for Black families living in large cities like Houston, Detroit, Chicago and elsewhere.

We all know the saying, "You can't let the racism keep you down." George Floyd, Jr. did that as best he could. He was a living, breathing human being with flaws and desires.

He was normal. More than a victim of police terror and death, he was real.

The authors tell the story of Floyd's ancestry, looking back over 300 years of American history. What emerges is the clearest possible case for the justice and urgency of reparations.

Floyd's great-great-grandfather had been born a slave. During Reconstruction in the late-1800s he owned 500 acres of land (only two percent of white farmers had the same amount of land) in North Carolina.

What should have been multigenerational Black wealth was stolen from him and his descendants in the white post-Reconstruction terror afterwards and the rise of Jim Crow segregation, when African Americans became third class citizens.

The Movement for Black Lives

I see one major omission in the book: It does not adequately discuss the leadership role of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the fight for racial justice.

The Floyd family participated in the protests and their voices are strongly presented. Yet the key to arresting and prosecuting the four cops was the popular uprising in Minneapolis and nationally. This was the biggest protest movement ever in the country, both spontaneous and with new local and national leaders who remain active now.

Many of the movement leaders demanded radical reforms of policing; some called for defunding and transferring those resources to community groups. Others called to abolish the police force as it exists and start over, combined with calls to end the prison industrial complex.

The authors describe the protests in Minneapolis and from around the world (from New Zealand and Australia to the United Kingdom and France). They note the power of that movement, but don't indicate an opinion — either positive or critical — about what it represents beyond the moment.

They present the BLM largely as slogans: "Black Lives Matter! No Justice! No Peace! Say His Name!" — but don't go into the movement's longer-term potential. Could it become a powerful political challenge to the criminal system itself?

More is written about the leadership role of one of the lawyers for the family, particularly Ben Crump who represents many families around the country of slain Black men and women, and civil rights leaders such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. And of course, there's the role of Keith Ellison, the first Black Minnesota Attorney General.

Emerging Leadership

Who were the militant activists and leaders of the grassroots movement? The implication is that the diversity of protesters was only because of agreement on the demand "Justice for George Floyd," not the broader criminality of the policing and carceral justice systems.

The BLM leaders, for the most part, understood the link between the two — and how reliance on electoral politics could be a diversion or even undermine the protests, in the absence of an independent political party fighting for freedom and racial justice.

That's what occurred — not for the first time — during the 2020 presidential election, when the main Black Democratic officeholders told activists to focus on the elections. While most Democratic presidential candidates expressed support for the protests and BLM, the eventual nominee, Joe Biden, did not. He made clear his call to "fund the police."

As president, Biden has indeed pushed for massively increased police funding. It is not a surprise there is growing disillusionment with Biden and Democrats. In the 2022 midterm elections, Black voting went down in major urban areas — even though most Black people continue to vote for

Democrats — because the issue is seen as self-preservation in a racist country.

Trump Republicans are rightly seen as a threat to Black survival. The fundamental political problem: there is no independent political party for the nationally oppressed or the working class as a whole.

After the civil rights victory in the 1960s that won voting rights and ended legal segregation, there was some discussion about building an independent Black political party, but it didn't take root.

The “most pro labor president” Biden also showed his pro-employer loyalties when he denied the rail unions the right to strike in December for paid sick days, even while claiming that he “supports” the idea.

It is no surprise that the mass protests after Floyd's murder declined after Biden's election with its promises of police reform. He met with members of the Floyd family, knowing that police reform legislation would never be passed by the Senate.

The Democrats did not pass a George Floyd Policing Act because of the archaic rules of the Senate that needs 60 votes. This allowed Biden off the hook and diverted energy to an electoral focus.

Who's Innocent and Who's Guilty

The methodology of the authors is to use original sources, transcripts, and interviews. While Perry could not speak for himself, his family, his friends, and the police themselves made clear who was innocent and why the police officers were guilty.

The story of America's systemic racism does come through convincingly. As the authors write at the end of the book, the case of “George Floyd did not eliminate institutional racism in America.” It did make the country understand it better.

The racist backlash by Republican and white supremacists defending the “Blue” was classic. They brought up lies about “Wokeness,” Critical Race Theory, history of slavery, the 1619 Project, and demonized the BLM leaders and movement.

The rise of Trumpism, and the transformation by the far right of the Republican Party, show how quickly a white backlash can reverse gains and lead to setbacks. The struggle, as every Black person knows, is long and hard.

The main lesson of the Black Lives Matter movement is the potential of a powerful multi-racial and ethnic coalition to stand with Black people.

Partial Justice Done

The life of George Floyd in one sense, as the authors document, was killed long before that May 25 day — a slow death from living in the United States. Some 300 years of racist practice made Derek Chauvin assume, as he had done before, he would get away with his brutality.

Yet the authors decided not to put America on trial, even with the facts to do so. Maybe that's why the BLM and antiracist leaders are not given their proper due.

The authors hope that a new day on racial justice would come as a lesson of Floyd's death and Chauvin's conviction. Politicians including Vice President Kamala Harris and Black elected officials have the same expectation. They had hoped for that future end of racial injustice after the first Black president Barack Obama was elected in 2008.

Black men, however, continue to be murdered by police — for mental illness, for walking down the street, for being Black.

Nevertheless, a certain victory was won in Minnesota. Derek Chauvin received 20 years in prison. The ruling class understood that someone had to pay to show the world that “bad” police are sometimes prosecuted.

The other former cops also received shorter prison time for not stopping Chauvin. J. Alexander Kueng was sentenced to three years, and Tou Thao to 3½ years. Thomas Lane, who held Floyd down, pled guilty to a charge of aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter in the killing, and was sentenced to three years.

Was justice done? No one really believes so. Perry is still dead. Few police ever face a jury. But it is important that four cops are in prison.

Finally, I urge readers to closely read the book’s extensive pages of “Notes” (391-411). They include hyperlinks to articles with more detailed information.

His Name Is George Floyd is an important contribution to the story of African Americans. A typical Black man’s life became a symbol of why the fightback epitomized by the Black Lives Matter movement is essential to learning the truth about police and state violence, and why popular uprisings are key to standing up to systemic racism.

Malik Miah

P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 222, January/February 2023:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc222/george-floyd-a-life/>