

ATLANTA'S NEW FACE

A debut novel examines gentrification.

THEM

By Nathan McCall

Atria, 352 pages



THE SETTING IN NATHAN MCCALL'S debut novel, *Them*, is a tree-lined street in Atlanta, but the racial drama that unfolds echoes a territorial friction occurring across American cities wherever gentrification takes hold.

The novel takes place a few blocks from Martin Luther King's boyhood home and Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King was ordained and served as pastor. These serve as reminders that two generations later interracial community remains an elusive dream. McCall presents instead a perverse mutation of that dream—a world where affluent whites

with a naïve and vaguely missionary mentality bypass Atlanta's Virginia Highlands and Peachtree Avenue and filter into an historically Black neighborhood, satisfied that they are investing while upgrading a seemingly dilapidated community. Physically, the distance between newcomers and established residents is slight, often just the next yard over. Psychologically, it is a chasm.

McCall has been exploring that chasm for more than a decade, beginning with his stunning memoir, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, and a follow-up book of personal essays,

What's Going On, that confront Black-white racial dynamics with a searing and unsparring tone that recalls James Baldwin. In a conversation during his current book tour, the soft-voiced author explained that he chose fiction for his next exploration of race in part to widen his mental lens and remove himself from the spotlight after years of "feeling like a lab mouse." He investigated the inner workings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as the work of South African novelists Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee.

"One of the things I like about South-African writers is that they take race head on," McCall said. "There seems to be an unspoken rule that you can't do that in America."

Them ambitiously attempts to directly enter the confused minds of both whites and Blacks struggling to navigate a contemporary conflict: gentrification. The novel alternates between the viewpoints of two protagonists: Barlowe Reed, a ruminating 40-year-old Black man hoping to buy his longtime rental property, and Sandy Gilmore, a sheltered white liberal perplexed by the wall of coldness that greets her and husband Sean when they move in next door to Barlowe.

Gentrification is painful in real life and in this novel. Sean assumes a drunken Black man urinating on his lawn is a mugger. Pickering, the demagogic Black preacher who fancies himself a spiritual heir to MLK, incites a crowd to resist white intrusion. Tyrone, Barlowe's live-in nephew, assaults Sean in a property dispute. The violence that ensues feels inevitable.

In the six years that McCall spent constructing this drama, he oddly found himself drawing the privileged Sandy more easily than the indignant Barlowe. "With Barlowe, I made a conscious effort to create a character as distant from myself as possible," McCall said. "But Sandy I knew. I've had so many conversations about race with white friends and colleagues where I know their heart is in the right place but they aren't aware of the unconscious racism."

He describes Atlanta's Emory University, where he has taught journalism and African American studies, as an institutional prototype of surface liberalism, characterized by white faculty who lead self-satisfying diversity initiatives but fold the moment a racial conversation becomes uncomfortable.

"One of the incidents I drew on in shaping Sandy's character was a colleague of mine who prided herself on valuing diversity. She got into a conflict with a Black employee

who said she called her a racial name. My colleague was offended that I didn't just take her word for it and told me, 'You seem pleased I have to go through this.' I felt like, 'Well obviously you need to go through this. You wake up every day and have a choice about whether to deal with race. I wake up every day and have to prepare myself to deal with it.'"

In the novel, Sandy gets her initial exposure beyond the comfort zone when entering the Black-owned neighborhood mini-mart to buy a bottle of shampoo. She discovers, as locals look on, entertained, that the store carries no hair-care products for white women. Confused, she absurdly convinces herself that she is breaking through a racial barrier. She imagines herself transposed to the historic place of the Little Rock Nine in 1957: "White people, their faces brimming with hate, lined each side of the walk, shouting obscenities as they were restrained by state troopers...Now, walking through the mini-mart with the spirit of that girl's courage nudging her on, Sandy knew what she had to do." She approaches the check-out counter, purchase in hand, determined to stake claim to the market.

Regardless of Sandy's intention to build bridges, like other sheltered, liberal whites in *Them*, her inadequate reference point for dealing with race is a sentimentalized scrapbook of civil rights-era images. And ultimately she and the other incoming whites can escape ongoing discomfort because the momentum of gentrification protects their interests, symbolized when a white proprietor buys out the mini-mart and turns it into an espresso bar.

The Nathan McCall who enters white liberalism's logic in *Them* has evolved radically from the white-hating, troubled youth in Portsmouth, Virginia, who dominates the early pages of *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. In his 1993 autobiography, McCall describes a brutal struggle to decipher and negotiate the complex codes of Black macho and white mainstream culture enough to attain sanity, integrity and a measure of peace.

On the surface, the Barlowe character in his new novel might appear to be based on McCall's own past. Barlowe faces ongoing abuse from figures in the white power structure, a condescending and manipulative boss and a disingenuously chummy landlord who evades Barlowe's offer to buy the rental property. But McCall said that beyond an aversion to flags and a shared background in the printing trade, the two have little in common.

"I decided to have Barlowe as someone with strong natural intelligence but little formal education," he said. "I figured that otherwise people would look for me in the character." McCall's primary goal was to capture the inner thoughts of Black city residents seeing whites move into their neighborhoods, an aim he first began to conceive soon after moving to Atlanta in 1998 and observing widespread gentrification.

McCall also became interested in exploring whether inter-racial dialogue could occur and offers a sprig of possibility through the cautious exchange Barlowe and Sandy develop across the fence as they garden. Gardening is the only interest the two communities share in *Them*, a faint vestige of an old South where the relationship to soil itself could serve as a metaphor for the complex connections between the races.

The talks between Sandy and Barlowe generate only the most paltry of insights. No one has a breakthrough. Hope lies more in the authenticity of the interchange, the faintest kindling of trust in a world where everyone sees everyone else across an invisible boundary as "them." But, in the end, their shared effort at good will cannot survive gentrification's relentless mental and physical disruptions.

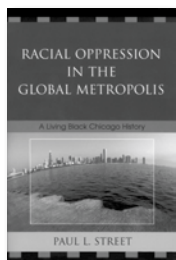
"For me, there was no other credible way to end it based on what I see in this country as it relates to the complexity of race," McCall said. "On an everyday basis, Blacks and whites and others work together and never really get to know or trust each other."

—Erik Gleibermann

RACIAL OPPRESSION IN THE GLOBAL METROPOLIS: A LIVING CHICAGO HISTORY

By Paul Street

Rowman & Littlefield, 312 pages



PEOPLE LOOKING FOR POSITIVE NEWS about Black progress in Chicago should not read this book. Replete with data, the book provides a sobering look at Carl Sandburg's "City of the big shoulders," arguing

convincingly that for most of Chicago's Black community, life has improved little in 50 years.

An independent scholar, Street expands on a 2004 report he wrote for the Chicago Urban League, "Still Separate, Unequal: Race, Place, Policy and the State of Black Chicago." The basic message of both works: Although a few Black individuals like Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama have garnered tremendous wealth, prestige and even positions of political power, the lot of most Black people has remained essentially unchanged, due to institutional racism, since *Brown v. Board* decision.

Black people in the Chicago area generally live in racially segregated neighborhoods, go to poor-quality schools and are over-represented in the criminal justice system, according to Street. The book's chapters each address this central point, with a particularly well-done one on the comparatively limited options for middle-class Blacks. A native of the Hyde Park neighborhood, Street also effectively traces the hollowing out of many of Chicago's Black communities after the industrial era drew to a close in the '70s and '80s.

The book has shortcomings. It promises more than it delivers as an analysis of the Chicago region. The voices of people living in these communities and those working to change the hard conditions are noticeably absent. Still, for a bracing look at what has and has not changed in Chicago, *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis* is worth the time.

—Jeff Kelly Lowenstein

SNITCH: INFORMANTS, COOPERATORS & THE CORRUPTION OF JUSTICE

By Ethan Brown

Public Affairs, 273 pages



BY THE TIME "Stop Snitchin'" hit mainstream awareness last year—with a memorable moment when the rapper Cam'ron told Anderson Cooper that he wouldn't even snitch on a serial killer next door—the slogan and subculture phenomenon of T-shirts, music video references and DVDs had become easy for pundits to tut-tut as irresponsible and dangerous, a street-life rebellious pose that smacked of witness intimidation.

Journalist Ethan Brown's book places the anti-snitching trend in its broader political and cultural context, arguing that it is "the poisoned fruit of two decades of highly punitive sentencing policy and the secretive, sprawling, and mostly unregulated cooperator and informant institution."

The book consists of hard-boiled street tales from several major drug and murder cases—including Tupac Shakur's—interspersed with hard-nosed policy dissections. Brown does a respectable job of building a clear-eyed case against the use of informants, and sentencing policies and enforcement practices that have created a situation where low-level dealers snitch on each other to get reduced sentences and prisons overflow with people of color, all the while having no impact on the drug trade.

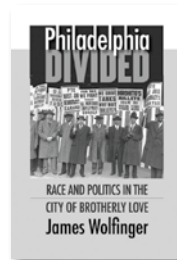
The chapter on Baltimore, tracing the origins of the explosive initial *Stop Snitching* DVD, is especially fascinating and reads like a plot from an episode of *The Wire*. There's also a groundbreaking chapter about a pair of young Muslim men charged in a "terrorist plot" to bomb a Manhattan subway station—a plot that turns out to have been concocted by an immigrant entrepreneur turned FBI informant.

—Tram Nguyen

PHILADELPHIA DIVIDED: RACE AND POLITICS IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

By James Wolfinger

University of North Carolina Press, 336 pages



IN THE EYES OF many liberals, working-class whites' votes for the Republican party are antithetical to their own self-interests. It is a question that has vexed political commentators and historians alike, but

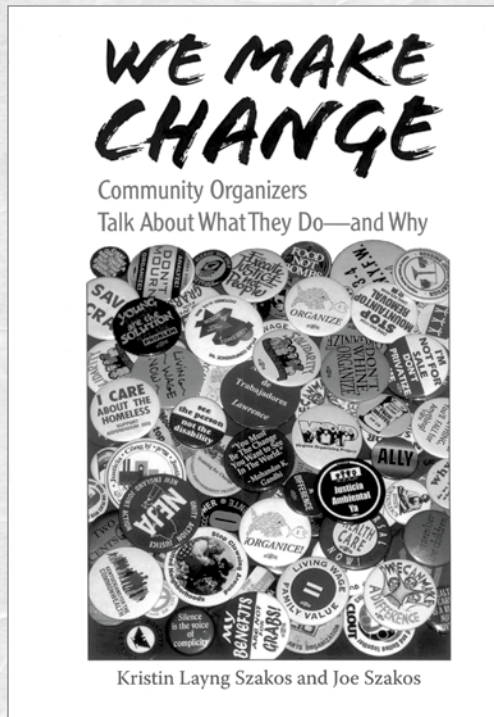
rather than look to the Reagan era, or even Vietnam, historian James Wolfinger begins his thorough exploration of the topic with New Deal liberalism in Philadelphia. In doing so, he demonstrates how racism in the North created an "inner city" of poor Black communities.

FDR's New Deal offered a rejuvenated livelihood for many citizens, especially for working-class ethnic whites—who were then Italian, Irish and Jewish immigrants. For Black Americans, the New Deal moved closer to fulfilling a promise of racial integration; indeed, FDR and the New Deal marked a sea change in Black loyalty from the party of Lincoln to the Democratic party. The New Deal brought these disparate groups into a fragile coalition.

But as Black activism gained victories in employment and housing, working-class whites saw Black advancement as an encroachment on their own rights. Wolfinger's documentation of how the Republican party and business executives exploited white working-class anxieties has a chilling resonance today. Conservative rhetoric painted federal intervention as despotic, Communist and moreover as empowering Blacks instead of protecting whites. Ethnic whites chose to ally themselves with business interests, because their fear of losing what they had outweighed other considerations. Wolfinger has delivered a book that deftly shows how the racist fear-mongering politics of the 1930s-50s has shaped our current political system.

—Alex Jung

BOOK IN THE SPOTLIGHT



WE MAKE CHANGE: COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY DO—AND WHY

By Kristin Layng Szakos and Joe Szakos
Vanderbilt University Press, 280 pages

WHAT DO PEOPLE KNOW about community organizers? Not enough, according to Kristin Layng Szakos, former editor of a journal on organizing in Appalachia, and Joe Szakos, executive director of the Virginia Organizing Project, who set out to remedy this situation by soliciting stories from dozens of community organizers across the country.

We Make Change parses the organizing experience into chapters like, “How I Started Organizing,” “What Makes a Good Organizer” and, kindly, “Disappointments Are Inevitable.” Interspersed throughout are first-person profiles of folks like Rhonda Anderson, Jerome Scott and Vivian Chang, who organize around environment, housing rights and poverty issues.

The book is an immensely readable resource of collected knowledge and lived experiences. Seasoned organizers will nod with knowing recognition as they read the words of their colleagues and the uninitiated will find the book a solid primer on the work of organizing a community.

—Julianne Ong Hing

HERE IS A SAMPLING FROM THE BOOK ON WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN ORGANIZER:

“Anyone who treats organizing as a job, as opposed to a passion, is probably not going to last. Let’s see. Humility, people skills, strategic thinking, an ability to listen. You have to be able to cope with failure and compromise and all the rest. I think you have to have some ideological basis for why you’re doing it. I think you have to have a political sense of why you’re there and what you want to accomplish in terms of your goals. Unfortunately, the right wing has community organizers, too. You have to be able to know the difference between what we’re trying to accomplish and what some of them are trying to accomplish.”

—Ben Thacker-Gwaltney,
the Virginia Organizing Project

“There’s got to be something inside a good organizer—a powerful drive to want to do this—that’s more than just, “I want to do a job.” ...A good organizer is not afraid to challenge people. Someone who can think larger picture, strategically, who has a bigger vision of what’s possible.”

—Patrick Sweeney,
Western Organization of Resource Councils