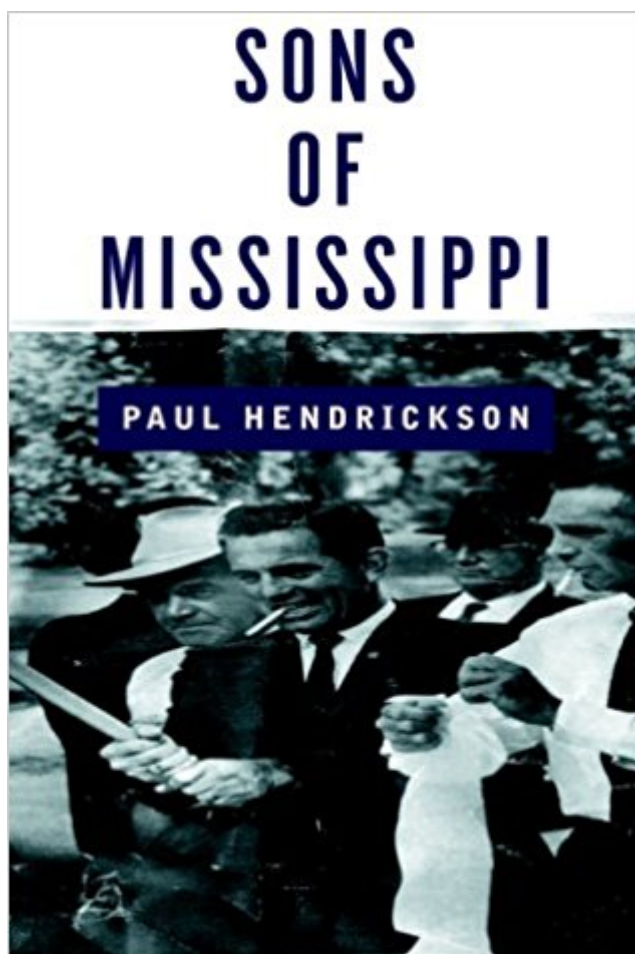


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# Sons Of Mississippi: A Story Of Race And Its Legacy



## Synopsis

Sons of Mississippi recounts the story of seven white Mississippi lawmen depicted in a horrifically telling 1962 Life magazine photograph and of the racial intolerance that is their legacy. In that photograph, which appears on the front of this jacket, the lawmen (six sheriffs and a deputy sheriff) admire a billy club with obvious pleasure, preparing for the unrest they anticipate and to which they clearly intend to contribute in the wake of James Meredith's planned attempt to integrate the University of Mississippi. In finding the stories of these men, Paul Hendrickson gives us an extraordinarily revealing picture of racism in America at that moment. But his ultimate focus is on the part this legacy has played in the lives of their children and grandchildren. One of them is a grandson—a high school dropout and many times married—who achieves an elegant poignancy in his struggle against the racism to which he sometimes succumbs. One son is a sheriff, as his father was and in the same town. Another grandson patrols the U.S. border with Mexico—a law enforcement officer like the two generations before him—driven by the beliefs and deeds of his forebears. In all the portraits, we see how the prejudice bequeathed by the fathers has been transformed, or remained untouched, in the sons. For its sense of fragile hope, Sons of Mississippi is a profoundly important, revelatory work of still-evolving history. A stunning book by a masterful writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Nothing is ever escaped," is the woeful reminder Hendrickson imparts in this magisterial group

biography-cum-social history, a powerful, unsettling, and beautifully told account of Mississippi's still painful past. Hendrickson, author of the searching Robert McNamara chronicle *The Living and the Dead* (an NBA finalist), sets out to profile seven Mississippi sheriffs photographed while one of their number postures with a billy club just before the 1962 riots against the integration of the University of Mississippi at Oxford ("Ole Miss"). The picture, shot by freelance photographer Charlie Moore, was published in *Life* magazine soon after, and it captured Hendrickson's imagination when he came upon it decades later. Chapter by chapter, Hendrickson reconstructs the everyday existences of the seven sheriffs, concentrating on the time of the photo, but taking his subjects through to their deaths. None are now living, but Hendrickson interviewed former Natchez sheriff John Ed Cothram in the early '90s, and the Cothram chapters comprise a paradigmatically subtle and eerie portrait of the intelligence and banality of evil, and how it destroys individuals. The number of telling quotes, interviews with friends and family, primary and secondary sources, allusions to art and history, and gut reactions Hendrickson offers are what really make the book. He begins with a wrenching retelling of the Emmett Till lynching-seven years before James Meredith fought for and finally won admission to Ole Miss, a bloody story Hendrickson also recounts (in addition to a fascinating recent interview with Meredith himself). The book's final third tries to get at the legacy of Mississippi's particular brand of segregation-the whites and blacks Hendrickson interviews throughout articulate it masterfully-by profiling the children of the men in the photo and of Meredith, with sad and inconclusive results. While Hendrickson can be intrusive in telling readers how to interpret his subjects, he repeatedly comes up with electric interview material, and deftly places these men within the defining events of their times, when "a 100-year-old way of life was cracking beneath them."Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

To help us understand racism in America, former *Washington Post* journalist Hendrickson tells the story of the seven white Mississippi sheriffs shown admiring a billy club in a famed 1962 photograph. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Author Paul Hendrickson has written a very well researched book on racism in Mississippi while concentrating on seven Mississippi sheriffs photographed on the campus of the University of Mississippi during the fall of 1962 when James Meredith was to be enrolled at the University. The author spends Part One of the book painting very unflattering portraits of the bigoted men in the picture. Part Two emphasizes the past and present life of James Meredith who appears to be somewhat difficult to understand. As one of Meredith's sons says in Part Three, "My father has an

overwhelming need to be famous and so will do whatever he thinks will provide that and get him attention--Jesse Helms, David Duke, you name it, even if it's only for a day...I'll call it his eccentric philosophy. This is my theory. He does these things--almost as a kind of offensive strike to throw you off...For instance, supporting David Duke. Why in hell would you even support a racist like David Duke if you're James Meredith? Well, maybe he knows he's going to get all these articles and letters about that, condemning him. And that somehow gives him the energy to do what he wants to do next." In addition to speaking to Meredith's children in Part Three, the author also visits two of the sheriffs in the picture that were alive at the time (one died shortly after) in addition to some of their children and grandchildren. A number of these offspring are working in law enforcement or in other jobs in which they must relate with fellow workers who are African Americans. The book is slightly more than 300 pages long. Part Three may have told me a little more than I cared to know about the lives of the descendants of the bigoted sheriffs pictured on the cover of the book. I guess we can say these men were a product of their time, and their descendants have become more enlightened through the passage of time. Bigotry is a learned behavior and through the passage of the generations progress can continue to be made.

This book has traveled with me: four apartments, seven years. So much time had passed since I bought it, I don't even remember what made me get it. Every couple years, I would unpack it again and put it on my bookshelf, not even labeling it as an unread book - it had been with me so long it was almost a piece of furniture, a part of my moving experience. With the anniversary of MLK's speech, Civil Rights stories were everywhere. I couldn't get enough; I had to quench my thirst. I knew immediately I had something that could do that: Sons of Mississippi. This book's prose was immediately apparent; it sucks you in and lets you feel that sticky, southern humidity as events unfold. As Hendrickson recounts the historic events, you can't help but feel he's captured the moment perfectly and presents it squarely to you. The foundation of the book is unique as well; the picture that adorns the cover represents seven men at the height of civil rights tension getting ready to put down a riot. While these men were not large players, they are all intractably tied to Mississippi life, politics and racism. Henderson's story relies on two fundamental truths: everyone has a story and the past affects the future. He dives into the lives of these seven men through interviews, documents, witnesses, and media clippings. He pulls seven discrete figures to the forefront of our consciousness and allows us realize how many people were involved in the institution of slavery. This is where his book is at its best; pulling facts and stories from the depth of southern lore. The second truth, while ultimately an important part of the book, fell a bit more flat. As Henderson begins

to dive into second or third generations, it is easy to start feeling a bit letdown. It's hard to live up to the tension, drama and shock of the civil rights era with following the life of someone who works at Home Depot. But, this doesn't mean it is downgrades this book; it is just an off-pace layer that doesn't add as much substance as the first. Some of the best nuggets in the book are about James Meredith, the man who integrated at Ole Miss and where most of the tension comes from. Not all the brave warriors we uphold in our history are clean characters that fit our molds. His families present conditions carried the second part of the book for me. After many years and many boxes, I read Sons of Mississippi. I should have read it sooner.

The print on this book is very small and the paper quality not so good. Makes it hard to read for older eyes. The story so far is not giving a great insight into why these people did the things they did or what in their life made them that way. To be fair, I am only half way through the book as it is so difficult to read much at one sitting due to the small print type. Will update when finished if my opinion of the story changes

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