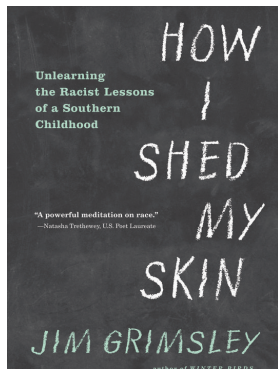


Memoir of racist past is only 'Skin' deep

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(Photo: Algonquin)

Award-winning novelist [Jim Grimsley](#) (*Winter Birds*) clearly was determined to spin a quiet non-fiction tale about the American South's unquiet era of integration. That he has succeeded in his aim with this very muted memoir proves a marginally mixed blessing.

How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood (**1/2 out of four) approaches integration from a stealth perspective that promises something revelatory. He chooses not to focus on brutish white racists on the bloody side of the southern divide, or on black strivers and their struggles. Instead, Grimsley attempts to illuminate the shaded, shadow ground occupied by people like himself and his family from the eastern hills of North Carolina, country folks who sustained a segregated society by passing down their assumptions of white supremacy and black inferiority generation after generation without being especially vocal or militant about it.

Grimsley wishes to tease out how this thinking was instilled in him, and to chart how he eventually managed to "unlearn" it. This would seem a potentially riveting enterprise, full of opportunities for revelation. Grimsley,

however, largely shuns revelations and epiphanies, asserting the unexceptional essence of his story in prose that is gentle and modestly ornamented but often lacks thrust.

"My thoughts were on the trivialities of the day," he writes early on, and again and again his remembrance-of-things-past-focus on the mundane muffles the seismic detonations that were roiling not just the surface of his southern world, but the very substance of it.

Grimsley opens his story at a dramatic peak that he chooses not to sustain. It's August 1966 and the Freedom of Choice movement aimed at the integration of segregated southern schools has brought three black girls into Grimsley's sixth-grade class at his previously all-white elementary school. "Never once did any adult give me any advice about how to treat the new black students in our school," Grimsley notes. "On the rare occasions when I heard adults discuss integration, they spoke to one another in the coded, guarded manner typical of adults, presuming a knowledge that I had yet to gain."

Yet, 11-year-old Grimsley, seated at a desk directly in front of one of these courageous young ladies, shocks himself by suddenly turning to Violet Strahan and calling her a name.

"'You black bitch,' I said.

"...Violet hardly even blinked. 'You white cracker bitch,' she said back to me, without hesitation.

"...I sat dumbfounded. There had been no likelihood, in my fantasy, that she could speak back. A flush came to my face.

"'You didn't think I'd say that, did you?' Violet goes on, with wondrous self-presence. 'Black is beautiful. I love my black skin. What do you think about that?'"

This is breathtaking stuff. In a sense, *How I Shed My Skin* never recovers from it. It is Violet who launches Grimsley on his journey of re-examination, but along the way he discards her and the vitality of her confrontational power. "Violet had returned to the black school, J. W. Willie Elementary School, for her seventh-grade term," Grimsley very offhandedly informs us four chapters later, dispatching his nemesis with a single sentence.

Violet does not reappear for some 130 pages, before turning up fleetingly in a classroom at the newly integrated J.W. Willie High School three years later, to torment Grimsley with pronouncements about [Malcolm X](#). "White people killed Malcolm X," Violet announces one day from across the classroom aisle. "I didn't know he was dead," writes Grimsley, "and so I had no reply."

How I Shed My Skin is a litany of little things — the collapse of Grimsley's parents' marriage, his coming to terms with his own homosexuality amid the social dynamics of junior high school and, finally, high school.

All of this is rich material for memoir writing. Ultimately, however, it is beside the point. Integration underlies everything described in this book but barely surfaces vividly enough to grab the story and take charge — as, in time, it did take charge of Grimsley's tiny, unyielding community and the great resistant world beyond it.