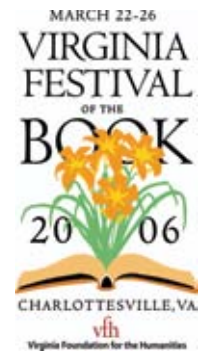


The Best of Enemies by Osha Gray Davidson recommended by Rudy Abramson

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Rudy Abramson—author of *Spanning the Century, Hallowed Ground*, and co-editor of *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*—recommends *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* by Osha Gray Davidson. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



When I read *The Best of Enemies* in 1996, I thought it was one of the most stirring and hopeful stories I had ever read about the civil rights movement in the South. I still do. In the intervening ten years I have pressed my copy into the hands of several friends and urged them to read it—and with equal fervor insisted that they promise to return it. Their word has been good, and so I have taken up the worn volume again recently, reminded of it by Durham North Carolina's return to the headlines in the imbroglio over rape charges and the Duke University lacrosse team.

As the title informs, this is a book about redemption.

It is the story of one Claiborne Paul Ellis, Exalted Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan of Durham, and Ann Atwater, a black domestic, thrown together in the city's efforts to save itself during the integration crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s. From seething hostility, near physical violence, and refusal to speak, Ellis and Atwater gradually forge an extraordinary friendship that helps to preserve peace in their community.

In the abstract this does not sound particularly remarkable, but as Osha Gray Davidson transports us to Durham, the transformation of C.P. Ellis, as he was called, and Ann Atwater becomes breath-taking. Consider the chasm: on the night Martin Luther King was slain in Memphis, Ellis cheered at the news and gathered fellow Klansmen to drink beer and celebrate through the night at his gas station. At one confrontation before the Durham City Council, an enraged Atwater pulls a knife from her purse and attempts to stab Ellis in the neck.

When all is said and done, the reader can only embrace them both and take comfort in what they eventually do and appreciate the genius that forced them together. In the end, the old Klansman goes to school and becomes a labor activist. Similarly uplifted, Atwater soldiers on as a non-violent activist for fair housing.

Davidson read about Ellis and Atwater in *Race*, one of the many collections by oral historian Studs Terkel and was undoubtedly drawn to their powerful personal story. His friendship with and interviews with Ellis, Atwater, and other principals took place three decades after the events. Now, nearly half a century later, Ellis and Atwater are no less compelling as individuals, but, in light of recent southern history they have become metaphoric figures, too.

Given that histories and memoirs of the Civil Rights movement continue to appear regularly, I probably would not have returned to *The Best of Enemies* except for the media's—read cable TV's—obsession with the rape charges against three Duke lacrosse players.

I am glad all of my friends who borrowed the book returned it because I found it worthwhile not only to get reacquainted with C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater, but to revisit Durham.

Osha Davidson reveals the community involved far better than the cable's passing efforts to explain the town-and-gown cultures that form the backdrop for the unfortunate situation at Durham and Duke.

Ten years after I first read it, I again had the reaction that I'd had the first time: "Wow, I wish I had written than."