

# OPINIONS ABOUT BOOKS



They swayed upon a rocking-horse, and thought it Pegasus. — *Keats*

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## The Fire in the Flint

*The authors of the debate in this issue of THE FORUM were asked to review THE FIRE IN THE FLINT, a recent publication relevant to the subject under discussion. Their reviews are produced herewith.*

*Judge Fortson says, —*

The reaction of the half-breed to the rigid caste system of the South constitutes in itself not the least of the difficulties of the race problem. Of course, as the available statistics show, the number of negroes of mixed blood is relatively small, and, fortunately, where their activities lie along incendiary lines their influence is not great because of the innate conservatism of the blacks. Nevertheless, as one of the phenomena of the race question, its reaction provokes interest, and as a contribution illustrating the mental processes of the mulatto, *THE FIRE IN THE FLINT*, by Walter F. White (Alfred A. Knopf, \$2.50) may have a certain value. I can think of no other reason for its publication.

The story purports to portray life in a typical Southern town of about eight thousand people, half of whom are Negroes. The hero, whose color is a "rich

brown," after receiving a medical education in the North and spending six months at the Sorbonne, in Paris, returns home to practise his profession and to uplift his people. At first filled with faith, hope, and charity, he later gradually loses all three in the order named by reason of the cumulative atrocities practised upon his race, his family, and himself by the unspeakable whites, who are described as "a nation of petty minds and morals vindictive, vicious, and stupid."

Denied association with the whites, the author undertakes to prove them inferior to Negroes and to show that their society is wholly undesirable. This complex pervades the book. Not a single white man of the community is permitted to use language that is not commonly used by illiterate Negroes. On the other hand, the Negro preacher speaks as an illiterate only as a pose. White has an especially sharp tooth for the Anglo-Saxon. To carry his point facts are inverted, truth forsaken, and history denied. To "liberal" white men he attributes opinions and sentiments that are grotesque. As assaults upon white women are generally believed to be the underlying cause of lynching, the author has a compulsion to prove, by

white testimony, that "nine out of ten cases where these trifling women holler and claim they been raped, they ain't been no rape. And they lynch the 'nigra' to hush the matter up." He goes further and shows that in reality Negro women are assaulted by white men and Negro men are lynched for attempting to protect them.

The better class whites dare not condemn lynching for fear of losing caste. All Southern white men are cowards. Lincoln, we are solemnly informed, was not "begotten" in the South.

Of course the book can provoke only disgust and a mild amusement among the white people in the South, if it is read by them at all. Its influence upon the blacks will be nil. And to the mulattoes who may chance to read it, it is hard to perceive how it can bring either solace or hope. To those who are intelligently working towards a solution of the race problem with open minds it must appear as but another proof of the belief that to give the Negro an education along other than industrial lines is frequently worse than useless.

BLANTON FORTSON.

*Athens, Georgia.*

*Mr. Pickens says, —*

One of the best productions of its kind. It is a propaganda story in which the story is as attractive as the propaganda, and is not dependent upon the "moral" for its life. It sets forth, rather than describes, the abnormal and brutal relationship of southern United States "sentiment" toward its colored inhabitants. Withal it tells a good story of how a young Negro of a Georgia town, after being trained as physician and surgeon in the North and in France, went back to his home and did his best to dodge the "race question" and to make good, — and failed in both aims.

Only an American Negro can write such a story, — in the present generation. It is a story of real life among colored American humans and not of traditional or hysterical caricatures. *Dr. Kenneth Harper* gets lynched, — as any young colored doctor would get lynched in Georgia if he did the perfectly manly and right things which *Kenneth* did. And *Jane*, and even *Mamie*, suffer as ten thousand

colored girls suffer in the South. We realize that, instead of moving by their own power, they all are moved by the power and ideals of the story teller. We sympathize with their condition and admire their final choices, and are less attracted by the wavering course of *Dr. Harper* than by the unvacillating road to death chosen by his younger brother *Bob*. The course of *Bob*, after he saw the hurt and humiliation of his sister who had been raped by those who despise her race, is an epic of action.

Mr. White has investigated many lynchings and some interracial riots and massacres for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and he has selected the "Arkansas case" of 1919, as a model for exposing the condition of Southern Negroes in small towns and rural districts, and for describing their so far ineffectual efforts to better those conditions, — with the present sentiment about "niggers" which is found in employers, officers, and courts of law, and even in "good white folks."

It is an unpleasant picture, — and worse still, it is true. Some of the characters do a little more than they can do in real life in the South to-day, but they do the kind of things that are done. *Dr. Harper*, the intelligent Negro, would not get quite so far along with the better whites, and *Judge Stevenson*, the human and liberal white, might have in him but would not let out of him quite so much expression, — in the South.

The general attractiveness of the story ought to cause it to be read by many of those who are trying continually to dodge the picture which it discloses. Men will not love such a picture and will want to bring the time when it can be called *not true* to contemporary interracial life. By *The Fire in the Flint* an American will be interested, many will be instructed, and some will be pleased.

WILLIAM PICKENS.

*New York City.*

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