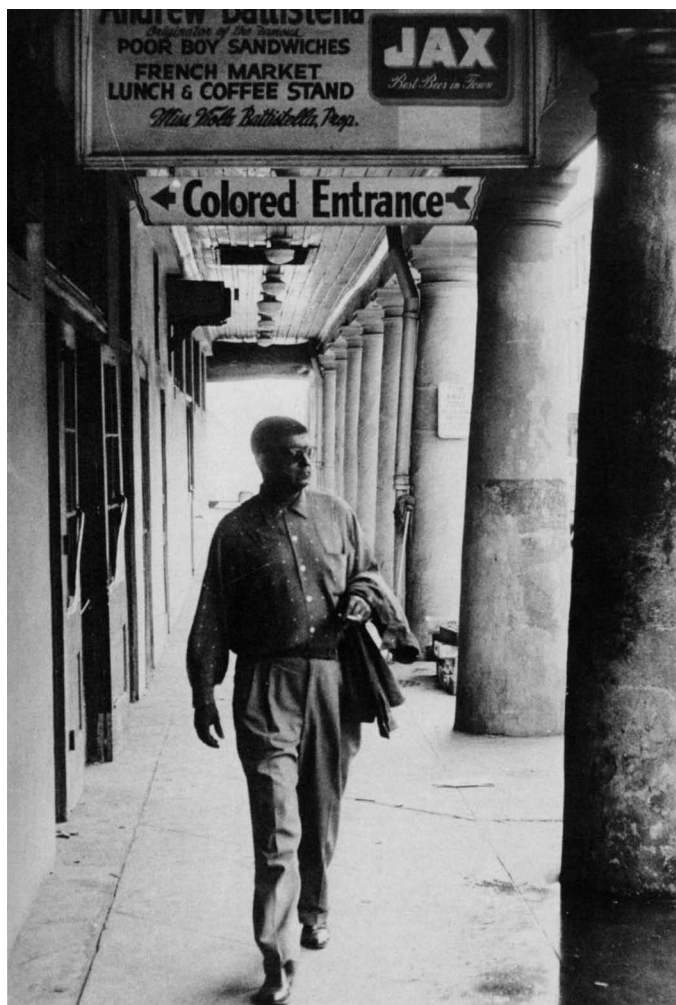


# A Tribute to John Howard Griffin

For the 45th Anniversary of  
*Black Like Me*



An Exhibit at the Aubrey Watzek Library  
Lewis & Clark College  
Portland, Oregon  
January - April 2006

## Exhibited Books

Listed according to exhibit arrangement starting with top left of case.

John Howard Griffin. *The Church and the Black Man*. Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1969.

*The John Howard Griffin Reader*. Selected and edited by Bradford Daniel. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1968, [c1967].

John Howard Griffin. *Black Like Me*. 1961. Four editions displayed.

Robert Bonazzi. *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c1997.

John Howard Griffin. *Twelve Photographic Portraits*. Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1973.

John Howard Griffin. *The Hermitage Journals: A Diary Kept While Working on the Biography of Thomas Merton*. edited by Conger Beasley, Jr. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, c1981.

John Howard Griffin. *Nuni*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.

By John Howard Griffin. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*. Photographs by Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.

Interview with John Howard Griffin in *Latitudes*. Vol. 1, No. 1, February 1967. Houston: Latitudes Press. edited by Robert Bonazzi.

John Howard Griffin and Yves R. Simon. *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures*. Foreword by Anthony Simon. Albany: Magi Books, c1974.

John Howard Griffin. *The Devil Rides Outside*. Fort Worth: Smiths, 1952.

John Howard Griffin. *Land of the High Sky*. Midland, Texas: First National Bank of Midland, c1959.

John Howard Griffin. *Street of the Seven Angels*. Edited and with an introduction by Robert Bonazzi. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, c2003.

John Howard Griffin and Theodore Freedman. *Mansfield, Texas: A Report of the Crisis Situation Resulting from Efforts to Desegregate the School System*. New York, NY: Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith, [1957?].

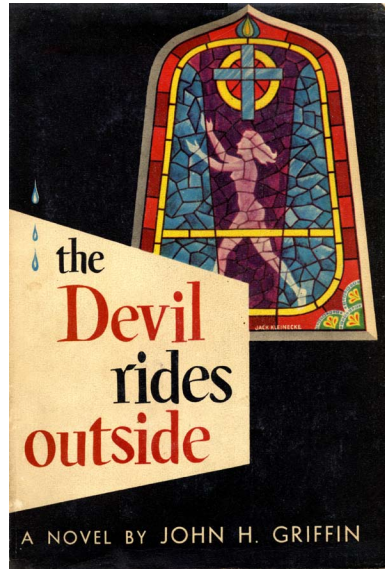
John Howard Griffin. *Scattered Shadows: A Memoir of Blindness and Vision*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c2004.

*Black Hands On a White Face: A Time-Piece of Experiences in a Black and White America, an Anthology*. Edited by Whit Burnett. New York: Dodd, Mead, c1971. Includes "Black Again, White Again by John Howard Griffin.

John Howard Griffin. *A Time To Be Human*. New York: Macmillan, c1977.

John Howard Griffin. *Encounters With the Other: A Personal Journey*. Edited with an introduction by Robert Bonazzi. Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1997.

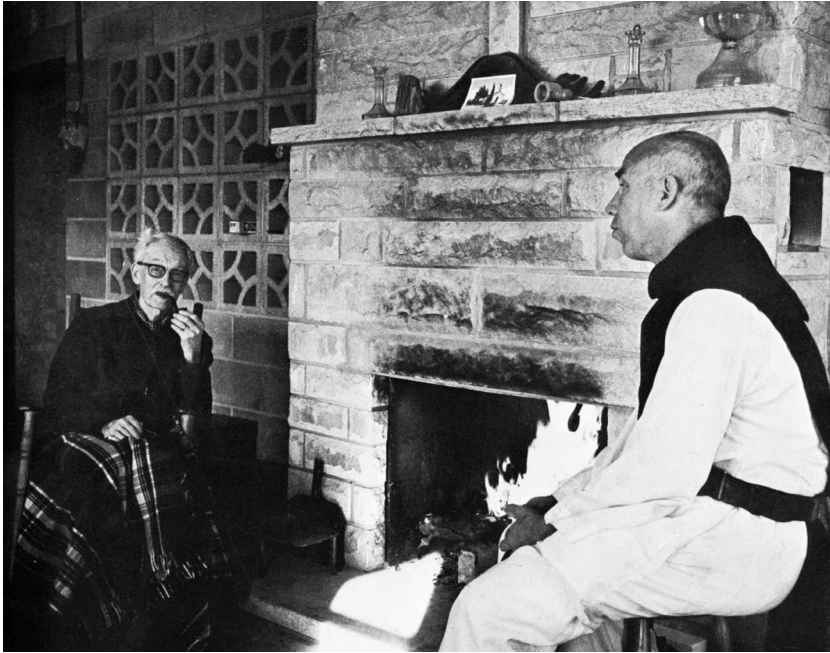
Best known for his classic *Black Like Me* (1961), John Howard Griffin (1920-1980) spent much of his writing life responding to the complicated demands of his literary vocation. He composed his first novel, *The Devil Rides Outside* (1952), by speaking the story in French into a tape recorder and then translating it into English as he transcribed the tape with a typewriter. No doubt, this rather complicated process calls for some explanation.



When he was in his early teens in Texas, and growing dissatisfied with the education he was receiving, Griffin wrote to the headmaster of a French lycée that he had read about. He requested admission and even specified that he would be willing to sweep floors to earn his tuition. Six months later the teenager received notice of his admission, as well as of a scholarship that would relieve him of any extra cleaning duties. Griffin therefore pursued an extensive education in France, first at the Lycée Descartes in Tours and then later as a medical student at the University of Poitiers, also in Tours. It was in his capacity as the acting head of the Asylum of Tours, during World War II, that Griffin worked as a member of the French underground resistance movement, smuggling Jewish children out of the country disguised as patients in straitjackets. When he discovered that his name was on a Nazi death list, Griffin fled the country as well. After returning to the United States, Griffin joined the Air Force and was later stationed on a remote island in the Solomon Islands chain, where he lived and worked among persons of the indigenous culture. It was during this period of service that he sustained the injuries that would lead to his blindness. Before his sight failed completely, he spent a year in France at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Pierre of Solesmes, known for its manuscripts of Gregorian chant, to study music, one of his early passions. He became totally blind in 1947.

It was because of his blindness and his comfort with the French language that Griffin composed his first novel by the unusual process outlined above. The novel's protagonist, a young musicologist studying Gregorian chant at an unspecified Benedictine monastery in France, is deeply influenced by the monks he comes to know, though by the novel's end he has not embraced their faith. However, Griffin himself pointed to the writing of this novel, along with the experiences that helped to

inspire it, as important influences on his own conversion to Catholicism. He became friends with such fellow Catholic converts as the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and the writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton. He went on to publish books about both figures: *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (1970) and *Jacques Maritain: Homage in Words and Pictures* (1974).



Photograph of Jacques Maritain and Thomas Merton by John Howard Griffin from *A Hidden Wholeness*.

Griffin's second novel, *Nuni* (1956), was inspired by his time on the Solomon Islands, though the protagonist is not a young soldier, but rather a professor of literature in his fifties. The wartime experiences that Griffin was relying on when he wrote *Nuni* deeply challenged certain of his cultural assumptions, including what he later referred to as his own "genteel racism," prejudicial attitudes masking themselves behind a facade of good manners and considerate conduct. On the Solomon Islands, Griffin found himself in a world where he was decidedly inept, where he regularly required the aid of a five-year-old boy to find his way through the jungle. Nevertheless, he continued to think of this ineptitude as merely an artifact of his relative unfamiliarity with the world and culture of the islands. As his writings show, it would require time, further experience, and deeper reflection for him to come to think of this culture as one of a dignity and worth equal to his own.

Unexpectedly, Griffin's sight returned in 1957. For the first time, he saw his wife, Elizabeth, whom he had married in 1953, and their two children; they went on to have two more children. In 1959 Griffin sought further insight into the dynamics of preju-

dice by journeying through the American South in the guise of an African-American man. Griffin had his skin medically darkened and simply presented himself as who he was. As he put it, "I decided not to change my name or identity.... If asked who I was or what I was doing, I would answer truthfully." As a member of the FBI said to him before he started the journey, as soon as white people saw that he was a black man, they would know all about him that they cared to know. In fact, Griffin encountered a variety of signals, including what he referred to as the "hate stare," informing him that the whites around him considered him to be inferior and other, his very presence an imposition. Even more shocking was his reaction to his own face in the mirror after his transformation: "The worst of it was that I could feel no companionship with this new person. I did not like the way he looked." Seeing himself in this way, Griffin came to realize how deeply in his own consciousness resided the very racist attitudes that he was opposing.

The series of articles that originally appeared in *Sepia* in 1960 were revised and published as *Black Like Me* in 1961. After these publications Griffin became a prominent spokesperson concerning racism in America. According to Robert Bonazzi, Griffin's official biographer, Griffin delivered in excess of a thousand lectures on the topic. Griffin was careful to point out, however, that he by no means considered himself to be a spokesman for persons of color, who have powerful voices of their own. Rather, Griffin often found himself in the position of saying much the same thing to white audiences that African-American speakers were saying, the latter of whom white audiences were often unable or unwilling to hear. In the course of his life as an activist, Griffin worked with such persons as Dick Gregory and Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was partly Griffin's commitment to social justice that led to his friendship with Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who wrote extensively on social justice issues in the sixties. Their friendship developed such that, after Merton's death in 1968, Griffin was appointed to be the monk's official biographer, a project that Griffin was forced to give up because of health problems. Nevertheless, two books related to his work with the Merton biography, *The Hermitage Journals* (1981) and *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (1983), were published soon after Griffin's death. Griffin left behind a considerable body of unpublished material, which has continued to appear under the editorship of Robert Bonazzi.

Jerry Harp



Publicity photograph of Griffin for *The Devil Rides Outside*, 1952.

Front image: Portrait of John Howard Griffin disguised as a black man in New Orleans, by Don Rutledge, 1959.

Exhibit curated by Jerry Harp  
for the Lewis & Clark College Special Collections.

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