

Questions for Discussion

1. The subtitle says the book is “an unusual story of social change.” Why do you think the author considers *The Education of Mr. Mayfield* different from other published works about the pre-civil-rights and civil-rights South?

2. In the first chapter, considerable weight is given to Stuart Purser’s friend Applehead. Readers never hear of him again except in minor references. But in what other instances do Applehead’s signifying traits emerge in the book?

3. Do you think that Stuart Purser’s offer of a job and learning opportunity to M. B. Mayfield is a case of a do-good guilty mentality or an honest attempt to provide opportunity? Why?

4. Beginning in the late 1940s, many Ole Miss students enshrouded themselves in symbolism of the Confederacy, though previous students had not done so. Why do you think they become so obsessed with such symbolism?

5. William Faulkner is recognized today as Oxford’s most important native son. Why did the people of Oxford and Ole Miss so soundly reject his literary and social contributions in the 1950s?

6. Folk artist Theora Hamblett makes an appearance in the book. Her work ultimately garnered significant acclaim, while Mayfield toiled most of his life in relative obscurity. What differences and similarities do you see between the two in terms of artistic ability, direction, personal upbringing, and challenges faced?

7. When M. B. Mayfield returned to Ecru for good, he was decidedly more comfortable in his home environment than he had been in his youth. What had changed by the 1980s in his perspective and the perspective of the rural South?

8. All of the key characters in the book happen to be artists of one kind or another. What characteristics do you think creative types share that make them open to possibilities?



About the Author

David Magee remembers picking up books from his family’s home shelves as a child. A guardian of words, his father had a habit of marking in pencil the grammatical errors he found in each of the hundreds of books he had read over the years. Seeing such attention given to language helped show Magee the importance of words and stories.

Magee dreamed of one day writing a book of his own, a book his father would devour. And he knew that if he were to write a book, he wanted it to be about his first love, the place where his father taught as a professor, the University of Mississippi.

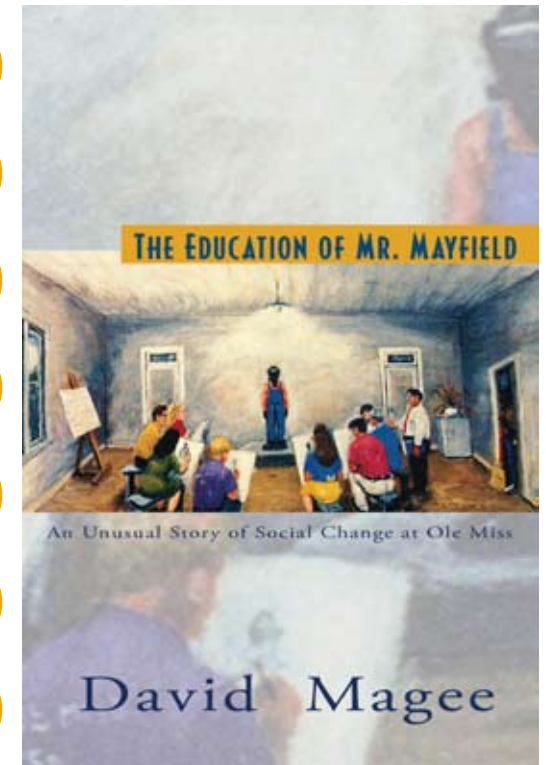
For years, he had studied a fascinating story about a white university professor who hired a black man as janitor so he could educate him secretly, since blacks were not allowed to enroll at the time. *The Education of Mr. Mayfield*, Magee’s twelfth book, is undoubtedly his most cherished because it is the one he always wanted to write, the one he knew would command the most attention on his father’s shelves.

A former newspaper editor and columnist, Magee became a businessman and city councilman in Oxford, Mississippi, before turning his attention to writing in 2002. He lives today with his wife and three children on Lookout Mountain, Tennessee.



JOHN F. BLAIR
PUBLISHER

1406 Plaza Drive,
Winston-Salem, NC 27103
800.222.9796 fax 336.768.9194
www.blairpub.com



THE EDUCATION OF
MR. MAYFIELD
BY
DAVID MAGEE

ISBN # 978-0-89587-366-8
\$19.95 Hardcover
Publication Date: September 2009

David Magee on race and growing up in the South

My mother never verbalized the six-letter word Southern whites so liberally used in reference to blacks in the twentieth century—anytime that I heard, at least. She did not have to, relying instead upon silent insinuations that pointed to the word as if it were written in bold letters on a chalkboard for everyone to see.

“You know,” she might say, “they just don’t know any better. I’m not prejudiced. Really, I’m not.”

Born in the final months of the Great Depression and raised by lower-middle-class white parents who made ends meet as best they could on a two-hundred-acre sharecropper’s cotton farm in central Mississippi, she never went to school with blacks because the law did not allow it. The only African-Americans she came into contact with worked for her family and lived on the farm or filled similar roles for neighboring white families. While her parents were only partially educated and lived just above poverty, the blacks she knew lived in small frame homes made from unfinished planks, with dirt floors and walls papered in brittle, yellowing newsprint. Most black adults had never finished grade school, and most of their children did not attend school, working instead on the farm. She knew the names of some, but mostly she knew them by the collective reference employed by her parents—the six-letter word.

My mother was a married adult by the time Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil-rights movement of the 1960s battled state and local laws from Alabama to Tennessee that made blacks second-class citizens. Until those enlightening years that ended the longstanding oppression that forced blacks to sit at the back of the bus, drink from different water fountains, and attend subpar schools, I suspect my mother used the word plainly and openly, hav-

ing been taught to do so by daily social reinforcement.

Her mother, a senior citizen by the time of the civil-rights movement, was no doubt well beyond cultivation at that point. But my mother, I suppose, was still young enough to make a generational leap in the 1960s, trying in her own way to evolve by dropping use of racial slurs once and for all, while articulating in a sort of self-convincing manner that she believed blacks held potential for greater good. This was what she taught in our home, and I listened.

When it came time to enroll me for school, she put me in public classrooms with a student body evenly divided between whites and blacks. I began school just two years after integration and did not seem to know things had ever been any different. Derogatory terms were used by both blacks and whites, but rarely were they racially charged. About the only times I heard such references as a youth or in later years as an adult was in discussions with people from older generations.

Still, I remember from my earliest days sensing something more was there. When I invited my black friend to spend one Friday night at my house, his mother said no. I did not understand why. When two black men sat on the back pew at my Oxford, Mississippi, church one Sunday morning, I watched two white men approach them. The two blacks quickly left. I did not understand why. And when I sat in the stadium in the late 1970s at Ole Miss football games and heard grumblings from white fans when a black quarterback split playing time with a more popular white quarterback, I did not understand why.

Simply put, I wrote this book to better understand why such things happened, how progress has been made, and why we sometimes continue to build barriers over seemingly inconsequential differences.

Books and Authors That Influenced My Writing

Few books illustrate the troubles of the pre-civil-rights South better than John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill*. This classic novel, Grisham’s first, is a work I have turned to time and again for both its detail and its powerful story line. The crimes in his fictional work are chilling. The crimes in my true story are more subtle but nonetheless pervasive.

Among nonfiction works, Michael Lewis’s *The Blind Side* and Nadine Cohodas’s *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* are favorites that effectively illustrate the benefits of opportunity and the evolution of longstanding Southern racial ideals.

One can easily find countless takes on the subject of racial conflict in the modern South. From enduring works like Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the more obscure nonfiction *Taming the Storm* by Jack Bass, each has a valued place for readers seeking to step into the future with a full grasp on the past. My objective in writing *The Education of Mr. Mayfield* was simply to illustrate an obscure but important story to help us all better understand where we came from and where we are going.

“Writing *The Education of Mr. Mayfield* taught me more about myself than years of attempted self-discovery. Seemingly, the races had nothing in common. But what I found is that we have everything.”

~David Magee