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Book Review - Road Through Midnight: A Civil Rights Memorial

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Off the SHELF

Road Through Midnight: A Civil Rights Memorial by Jessica Ingram (University of North Carolina Press, 2020: ISBN 9781469654232, \$35.00)

Jessica Ingram's *Road Through Midnight* has the heft and feel of an art book and the pleasing matte finish of an exhibition catalog, or a catalog raisonné, until you realize it's not *exactly* that kind of book. Although this book includes Ingram's award-winning photography, it is much more than her photographic art. The cover features a dark photograph of a vaguely familiar dirt road which is almost indistinguishable from its dark blue background. *Road Through Midnight* is a journey through a landscape of violence and resistance during the Jim Crow era in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Alabama. Ingram's book answers questions many of us ask: What happened on this piece of land? What does it look like now? What happened to the victims? What happened to the perpetrators?

The incidents detailed in *Road Through Midnight* are frozen in time, and yet they are also part of the continuation of a racist American history that began with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans on these shores. This racist history continued through a robust slave trade, Emancipation, Reconstruction, convict leasing and Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, and mass incarceration. Most of the events in *Road Through Midnight* took place in the 1960s

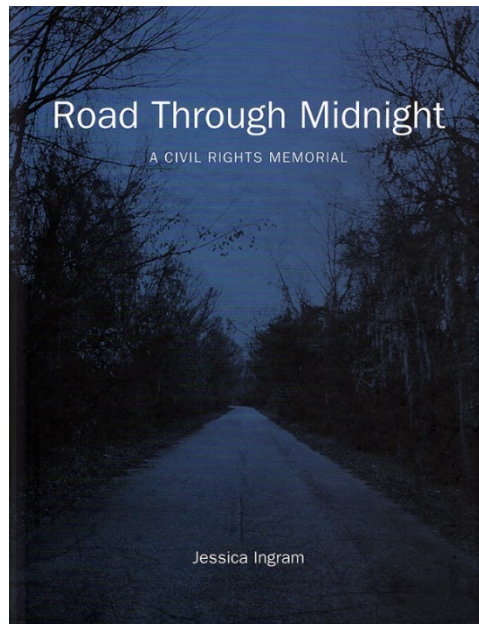
but are nearly identical to many others in that historical arc.

Each account begins with Ingram's photograph of a place followed by a shiny black page, which allows readers to gather their thoughts and emotions before continuing; the page is almost shiny enough to see yourself reflected on it. Next comes a brief account of what is known about what happened at that place—in some

cases, we will never know, exactly. Each account is written in white text on a black background, with the victim's name in bold white almost as a reminder of White-on-Black violence. This work has the feel of something holy.

Some of the victims of these violent acts are well known: Medgar Evers; Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner; and Emmett Till. Others are not as well known: Clinton Melton, Mattie Green, and Reverend George W. Lee. Incidentally, Reverend Lee's

widow insisted on an open casket several months before Mamie Till did the same for her son, Emmett. For each victim, the facts of their murder are stated, with details supplemented from newspaper accounts, other narratives, and ephemera. Interviews with surviving relatives and reporters—people with firsthand information—appear with Ingram's photographs. If a case was reopened, and if the perpetrators were brought to justice, the reader also discovers that. Some victims are memorialized with roadside markers or monuments; for others, it seems, the memorial



is the retelling of their stories that connects their lives to the present.

Road Through Midnight contains a few brief texts that serve more as teaching tools than as retellings of violence. These texts touch on topics like the origins of the Ku Klux Klan; the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan and the Stone Mountain carving; and Koinonia Farm, an interracial community near Americus, Georgia, that exists today.

In the book's afterword, the author says, "we must do the work of remembering." *Road*

Through Midnight is not an easy read, nor is it meant to be, but it is a powerful means for learning part of our shared history. Jessica Ingram spent more than a decade creating what she describes as "an interpretive and suggestive work rather than a scholarly one," but one that—through her photographs, detailed research, and many personal interviews—will help readers connect the past to the present and with what still remains to be done. Highly recommended.

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