

Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County

Harper

By Kristen Green

ISBN: 9780062268679

Introduction



In the wake of the Supreme Court's unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Virginia's Prince Edward County refused to obey the law. Rather than desegregate, the county closed its public schools, locking and chaining the doors. The community's white leaders quickly established a private academy, commandeering supplies from the shuttered public schools to use in their all-white classrooms. Meanwhile, black parents had few options: keep their kids at home, move across county lines, or send them to live with relatives in other states. For five years, the schools remained closed.

Kristen Green, a longtime newspaper reporter, grew up in Farmville and attended Prince Edward Academy, which didn't admit black students until 1986. In her journey to uncover what happened in her hometown before she was born, Green tells the stories of families divided by the school closures and of 1,700 black children denied an education. As she peels back the layers of this haunting period in our nation's past, her own family's role—no less complex and painful—comes to light.

Questions for Discussion

About the Book:

1. What role did Elsie play in the author's life? Do you think that she ever felt that she was an equal member of the community, even after desegregation? There are many moments in the book when Elsie is silent. How do you interpret that silence?
2. Why do you think the county's white leaders criticized blacks for demanding integrated schools? What was at stake if the schools integrated? Why did so few whites speak out against the school closures?
3. How did you feel when residents of the town repeatedly expressed the sentiment that enough had already been said about Prince Edward's history?
4. Which of the black students' stories did you find most moving? What do you think are some of the lasting impacts of the school closures on them, their families, and the community?

5. In relation to the school closures, do you think appropriate acts of reconciliation have taken place in Prince Edward County and across the state of Virginia? What more could be done, if anything?
6. The author is revealing some difficult things about her family's past. Do you think she is justified in bringing forth this information?
7. The author tells her story about growing up in a sheltered environment in Prince Edward County. What were the things that she learned about herself after she went away for college, and how did her experience working as a journalist help shape her new worldview? What do you think are the benefits of living outside of your comfort zone?
8. The author is thankful to be able to raise her multiracial children in a diverse community. Why is it important for her that her children know about what happened in her hometown?
9. How did you feel about the author's expression of shame and guilt for the role her town and family played in closing the schools? Why do you think she decided those feelings were important to wrestle with, especially in such a public way? Do you think any good can come from addressing them?

About society:

1. How has this story changed your perception of the history of desegregation, particularly school desegregation in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*?
 2. The author writes about how her hometown, while more integrated today than it was historically, still seems divided. Is a truly racially integrated society possible in the U.S.?
 3. It's clear why black Americans should care about this story, but why should white Americans?
 4. How is the Prince Edward story related to other unpleasant truths in American history?
 5. Schools in many ways are as separate and unequal today as they were sixty years ago. Why have we failed to integrate schools in this country and what can we do to make it better?
 6. Discussions about the enduring nature of American racism are largely driven by blacks. Why aren't whites more engaged in this discussion? If they were, how might it benefit America?
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7. When Robert T. Redd, the longtime headmaster of Prince Edward Academy, defends the actions of the proponents of school segregation, he says, “They made it on the basis of what they thought at that time was in the best interest of our country and our dearest possession—our children.” Do you think that what is best for a community is shaped by the ideologies of the time, or is there always a clear distinction between what is right and wrong?

Kristen would love to join your book club’s discussions of *Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County*, by phone/video chat or in person, when possible.

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Visit kristengreen.net to learn more about the book
