

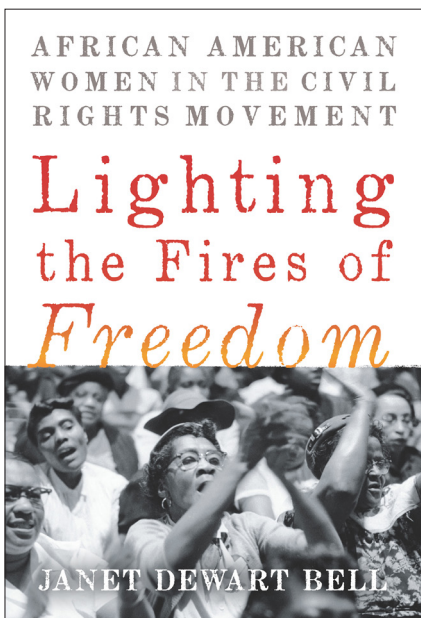


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Publication Date: May 8, 2018
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“A fresh and revealing oral history of the Civil Rights Movement as told by nine African American women . . . striking and fascinating stories that greatly enrich our appreciation of the crucial roles women of diverse backgrounds played in the pivotal fight for civil rights.”—*Booklist*

LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM *African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* by Janet Dewart Bell



“Polls and election results confirm that black women lead in supporting racial and gender equality. **LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM** helps to complete history, explain the present, and guide us to the future—through the voices and wisdom of some of the black women who co-created the Civil Rights Movement.”—**Gloria Steinem**

“A must-read for anyone interested in race, gender, class, American political development, the Civil Rights Movement, and the power of social change.”—**Christina M. Greer**, PhD, associate professor of political science at Fordham University

“Today’s activists have much to learn from these amazing women. You’ll wish you’d marched side by side with every one of them.”—**Letty Cottin Pogrebin**, co-founding editor of *Ms.* magazine

Selected as one of Patrik’s Picks in the April 2018 issue of *ESSENCE*
One of Book Riot’s “29 Amazing New Books Coming in 2018”
One of Autostraddle’s “65 Queer and Feminist Books to Read in 2018”

Most Americans know the name of Rosa Parks, the black woman who famously refused to give up her seat to a white person on a bus in Alabama, and helped to ignite the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Equally well known is Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., and a formidable force in her own right. But most Americans—black and white alike—would have a hard time naming any other important female leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, although there were many. Now, Janet Dewart Bell—winner of an Emmy award as well as the latest winner of the Studs and Ida Terkel Prize—acknowledges these women to their rightful place in history in **LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement** (The New Press; May 8, 2018; \$25.99), which will be published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

In this landmark work based on Bell’s in-depth interviews, nine women who led the fight to free the United States from the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow tell their extraordinary stories in their own words.

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New York, NY 10005
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www.thenewpress.com

Publication Date: May 8, 2018 • \$25.99 • Hardcover • 240 pp • ISBN 978-1-62097-335-6

With remarkable courage in the face of uncertain and often dangerous conditions, many put their lives on the line through direct action, such as sit-ins, freedom rides, and school integration. Others raised funds or provided housing and food to civil rights workers, frequently jeopardizing their own lives and livelihoods. They were students, organizers, and activists who went on to become leaders of national and international organizations, government officials, publishers, journalists, lawyers, teachers, chefs, and doctors.

Furthermore, they represent other African American women over the decades who did not stand on ceremony, but simply did the work that needed to be done—all without expectation of personal gain. These often unnamed women helped to construct the cultural architecture for profound change. Tellingly, Bell was inspired to write **LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM** as a tribute to her own mother, a hardworking maid whose financial and emotional support helped make it possible for Bell to participate in the Civil Rights Movement herself.

As Bell demonstrates, black women brought unique focus and perspectives to their work as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. With triple consciousness—of sex, race, and class—these women did work that was at once pragmatic, necessary, and visionary in response to the conditions of their time and place. Their individual and collective life journeys provide inspiration and lessons upon which today's burgeoning social movements can build.

In **LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM**, Bell presents the compelling, complex, and inspiring stories of these valiant women:

Leah Chase. A celebrated chef and community leader from New Orleans, she helped to bring about change simply by doing what she does best: bringing people together over good food and providing an atmosphere of warmth and caring. During the Civil Rights Movement, she hosted Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee, and many others of all races and backgrounds at her family restaurant, Dooky Chase. Her interracial gatherings were by their very nature in defiance of the South's segregation laws. Yet her restaurant was never raided or shut down for her then illegal activities, perhaps because she and her family were held in such high regard throughout New Orleans. She is still cooking there at age ninety-five.

Dr. June Jackson Christmas. One of the first African Americans to graduate from Vassar College, she championed the cause of interned Japanese Americans during World War II. As a trailblazing psychiatrist, she specialized in community mental health care, especially for low-income African Americans, and served as mental health commissioner for New York City under three mayors. With her husband, Walter Christmas, she waged a personal fight against housing discrimination that changed New York City law. During the Civil Rights Movement, she and her husband opened their New York City home to provide respite, as well as counseling and fundraising support, for civil rights workers from the South.

Aileen Hernandez. She began her activism as a student leader at Howard University during World War II in then legally segregated Washington, D.C. In 1964, she became the first woman and the first African American to be appointed to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), from which she resigned because of its unwillingness to address sexual harassment. She was the first African American president of the National Organization for Women, which she left after it elected an all-white officer slate. She later co-founded the National Women's Political Caucus and Black Women Organized for Political Action. She also served on the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. A pioneer in issues concerning intersectionality of race, sex, and class, she was socially active for her entire life, until shortly before she died at age ninety in 2017.

Diane Nash. She led the Nashville Sit-in Movement, which preceded the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and coordinated the Birmingham, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi Freedom Ride after the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) was forced to discontinue it. Her tactical and unwavering support of the Freedom Riders was critical to their success throughout the South. In 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr., nominated her for an award from the NAACP's New York branch, acknowledging her as the "driving spirit in the nonviolent assault on segregation at lunch counters." After her work with the Freedom Riders, she returned to her hometown of Chicago and became an advocate for fair housing.

Judy Richardson. During her freshman year at Swarthmore College, she joined the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) group on campus that was organizing against segregation in nearby cities. She left Swarthmore after her freshman year to join the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Among many other duties, she helped to monitor SNCC's 24-hour, 800-like telephone line—literally a lifeline for SNCC activists. She later cofounded Drum and Spear bookstore and Drum and Spear Press in Washington, D.C., both of which were instrumental in publishing and promoting black literature. As part of their mission, she helped originate and host a popular children's radio program as the character BibiAmina to introduce children to black children's literature and African folk tales. She later became the series associate producer and education director for *Eyes on the Prize*, the seminal fourteen-hour PBS series on the Civil Rights Movement. She is on the board of the SNCC Legacy Project, which collaborates with Duke University and others on SNCC's legacy and continuing work on contemporary issues, including Black Lives Matter and progressive educational organizations. She continues to lecture, write, and conduct teacher workshops about the Movement then and now.

Kathleen Cleaver. Her activism was inspired by her parents and their circle of friends and colleagues in Tuskegee, Alabama, where service and fighting for one's rights were expected. She was the first woman to serve on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party, where she developed communications strategy and outreach to media. She and her then-husband Eldridge Cleaver spent four years in exile from the United States in Algeria and Korea, where their children were born. Kathleen Cleaver returned to the United States in 1973, and with her husband created the Revolutionary People's Communication Network. She later graduated from Yale University summa cum laude and went on to Yale Law School, graduating in 1989. She clerked for federal judge A. Leon Higginbotham and became a law professor.

Gay McDougall. The first African American to integrate Agnes Scott College in Georgia, as well as a graduate of Yale Law School and the London School of Economics, she forged a storied career in international human rights. She became the first United Nations expert on minority issues and was instrumental in the Free South Africa Movement's protests against apartheid from 1980 to 1994. Later she was named as one of five international members of the South Africa governmental body established to administer the country's first democratic, nonracial elections, resulting in the election of President Nelson Mandela and the transition from apartheid. She accompanied Mandela when he voted for the first time and was the first American to be elected to oversee the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and has been recognized with a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for her human rights work. She has been a professor at Fordham Law School's Leitner Center for International Law and Justice and is currently a member of the faculty of the Oxford University Masters of International Human Rights Law Programme. In 2015, the government of South Africa bestowed on her their national medal of honor for non-citizens, the Order of O. R. Tambo Award, for her extraordinary contributions to ending apartheid.

Gloria Richardson. Born in 1922, she was an older adult during the Civil Rights Movement, who first became involved to support her teenage daughter and other youth demonstrators. Unlike the gentle public persona of Rosa Parks, Richardson was openly militant, leading street protests and questioning nonviolence as a tactic. Her stance inspired later efforts of the Black Panthers and others who adopted more militant responses to social injustices. Because of the successful protests that she led as head of the Cambridge (Maryland) Nonviolent Action Committee, *Ebony* magazine named her “the Lady General of Civil Rights.” She later moved to New York City and worked in human services. Now in her nineties, she supports the youth of the Black Lives Matter movement and has not lost her passion for justice.

Myrlie Evers. Most Americans, watching her deliver the invocation at the second inauguration of President Obama in 2013, would likely be surprised to know of her heroic history. As the wife of Medgar Evers, Mississippi’s first NAACP field secretary, she knew the dangers of activism for racial equality. Their home was firebombed in 1962, and in 1963, Medgar was assassinated in their driveway. Myrlie Evers later moved to California with their three young children. After graduating from college at the age of thirty-five, she became the director for community affairs for the Atlantic Richfield Company during the 1970s. Maintaining her commitment to civil rights and public service, she waged an unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, and later became the first black woman to serve on the Los Angeles Board of Public Works. At the age of sixty-two, she won a hard-fought election to become the chair of the NAACP, serving in that position for three years and helping to reinvigorate the organization. Meanwhile, she vigilantly pursued justice for the murder of her husband, a three-decade commitment that ended when the killer, an avowed white supremacist whose early trials had resulted in hung juries, was convicted in 1994.

As Janet Dewart Bell dramatically shows, the nine women profiled in her groundbreaking oral history answered the call for freedom with valor, commitment, and passion. They were principled and steadfast. They lit the fires and showed the way. All of them continued to serve after the height of their civil rights involvement—not only the broader black community but the nation as a whole—by remaining actively involved in social justice movements and activities.

Powerful, timely, and eye-opening, **LIGHTING THE FIRES OF FREEDOM** offers a significant new perspective on the Civil Rights Movement, while documenting the largely unheralded contributions of the African American women who played critical roles in leading it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet Dewart Bell is a social justice activist and among her accomplishments are an Emmy® for outstanding individual achievement (CBS-TV affiliate in Washington, DC) and programming for National Public Radio honored with a Peabody award, considered the highest award in broadcasting. In addition, she was Director of Communications and Public Relations for District Council 37, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), in New York City. She was the Communications Director for the National Committee on Household Employment, which helped gained federal minimum wage coverage for household workers. As a Visiting Research Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, she developed and taught a course on Effective Advocacy and co-taught a constitutional law course with her husband, Professor Derrick Bell. To celebrate his sixty-fifth birthday, she founded the Derrick Bell Lecture on Race in American Society series at the New York University School of Law. She lives in New York City.

**For more information or to interview Janet Dewart Bell, please contact:
Bev Rivero at 212-629-4636, brivero@thenewpress.com**

Advance Praise for *Lighting the Fires of Freedom*:

“Polls and election results confirm that black women lead in supporting racial and gender equality. *Lighting the Fires of Freedom* helps to complete history, explain the present, and guide us to the future—through the voices and wisdom of some of the black women who co-created the Civil Rights Movement.”

—**Gloria Steinem**

“Another important and critical contribution to the historical and present day story of #BlackGirlMagic.”

—**Rashad Robinson**, executive director, Color of Change

“All Americans need to know the stories of the brave women so beautifully profiled in Janet Dewart Bell’s important new book, *Lighting the Fires of Freedom*. Today’s generation of activists fighting for racial justice will be inspired and strengthened by reading her book and learning about the leadership and courage of these incredible women who were ‘woke’ before anyone ever used that word.”

—**Roger Hickey**, co-director, Campaign for America’s Future

“A must-read for anyone interested in race, gender, class, American political development, the Civil Rights Movement, and the power of social change.”

—**Christina M. Greer**, PhD, associate professor of political science at Fordham University

“Janet Dewart Bell’s compelling oral history, *Lighting the Fires of Freedom*, captures the unique voices of nine intrepid women who, each in her own way, contributed grit, love, strength, strategy, spirit, and a formidable personal commitment to the struggle for racial rights and dignity that have yet to be fully realized (and are now regressing by the minute). Today’s activists have much to learn from these amazing women. You’ll wish you’d marched side by side with every one of them.”

—**Letty Cottin Pogrebin**, co-founding editor of *Ms.* magazine

“A primer and an inspiration for anyone looking to make their mark during these times of change and uncertainty.”

—**Juhu Thukral**, human rights lawyer and inaugural speaker, Anita Hill Lecture Series

“Bell deploys impressive interviewing skills in this valuable collection of oral histories of nine female civil rights activists... This is a valuable and enlightening companion to other accounts of the movement.”

—***Publishers Weekly***

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“Candid testimony from impressive and influential women.”

—***Kirkus Reviews***

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