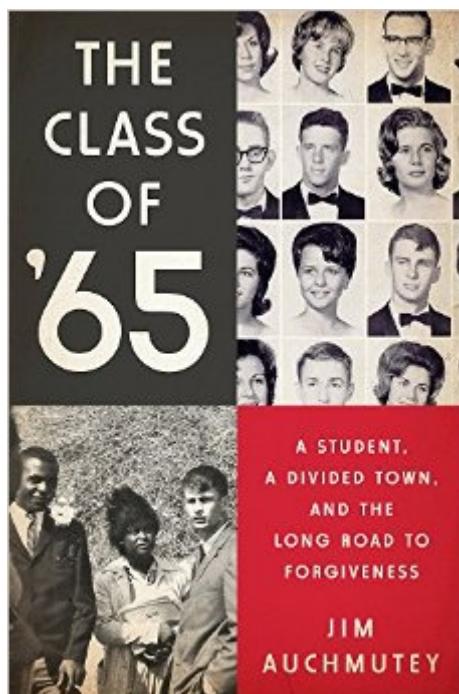


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# The Class Of '65: A Student, A Divided Town, And The Long Road To Forgiveness



## **Synopsis**

In the midst of racial strife, one young man showed courage and empathy. It took forty years for the others to join him; Being a student at Americus High School was the worst experience of Greg Wittkamper's life. Greg came from a nearby Christian commune, Koinonia, whose members devoutly and publicly supported racial equality. When he refused to insult and attack his school's first black students in 1964, Greg was mistreated as badly as they were: harassed and bullied and beaten. In the summer after his senior year, as racial strife in Americus reached its peak, Greg left Georgia. Forty-one years later, a dozen former classmates wrote letters to Greg, asking his forgiveness and inviting him to return for a class reunion. Their words opened a vein of painful memory and unresolved emotion, and set him on a journey that would prove healing and saddening. The Class of '65 is more than a heartbreak story from the segregated South. It is also about four of Greg's classmates; David Morgan, Joseph Logan, Deanie Dudley, and Celia Harvey; who came to reconsider the attitudes they grew up with. How did they change? Why, half a lifetime later, did reaching out to the most despised boy in school matter to them? This noble book reminds us that while ordinary people may acquiesce to oppression, we all have the capacity to alter our outlook and redeem ourselves.

## **Book Information**

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: PublicAffairs (March 31, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1610393546

ISBN-13: 978-1610393546

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.9 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (95 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #43,490 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans > History #34 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > History #84 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > Reform & Policy

## **Customer Reviews**

This highly readable yet painful account leaves me with much to ponder about civil rights in our nation, both then and now. One only has to listen to right-wing talk shows about President Obama to

know that the road toward common decency needs more travelers. Greg Wittkamper's fellow students at Americus High School apologized, and I applaud them for it. But have they organized a class reunion and invited the courageous African Americans who suffered violence while integrating Americus schools? That would heal some, though perhaps not all, scars and make a satisfying sequel to this extremely important book.

A skillfully told parable of redemption in the truest sense -- the kind that takes deep, long cycles to complete. The young man, Greg, through no fault of his own, is imperiled by the religious views of his parents and community (the very name of the farm on which they live). His life unfolds to show that a deep spirituality can evolve in a given soul quite apart from the trappings of any one religion, but with the roots of its particularity intact. The story is doubly rich for the subplot of his four classmates, who prove that eyes which once were blind, no matter how long, may eventually see. An experienced journalist and lifelong observer of his fellow Southerners, Auchmutey weaves their stories against the backdrop of one of the most roiling moments in the country's history with compassion and insight. A great read, highly relevant to the ongoing struggle to understand race in America.

I graduated from Americus High School in 1958, and I was already a liberal. Of course I am white. Being called a "nigger-lover" was the only harassment that I faced. After 1959, I moved to Atlanta and got to know many leaders of the civil rights movement. It was hard to walk across a downtown Atlanta street and not see John Lewis or Vernon Jordan or numerous others. I could forget for a while what a racist town Americus was. I did some work in the civil rights movement and in 1972 I was a national organizer for the McGovern campaign. In that category I would visit cities in other states, including Louisiana. Black McGovern supporters there had a wonderfully strong group led by a civil rights leader, David Dennis. The first times I went to their meetings, they were unfriendly. I discovered that they thought I was an FBI agent. That's how bad Americus was in those days. I had black friends in Atlanta call Louisiana and vouch for me. Jim Auchmutey has done a brilliant job of bringing back the horrific drama of my hometown in those tense and horrific years. Greg Wittkamper is a man of courage, and he was a teenager of courage, too.

I didn't buy this book from but at an event where the author spoke to us. I loved the book and couldn't put it down, finishing it on the second day. It was a timely book for me given the recent kerfuffle over the RFRA laws that initially passed in Indiana and Arkansas. I also graduated from

high school in 1965, the same as the book's protagonist, Greg Wittkamper. The book left me rather speechless as I read of all the abuse Greg suffered as he went to Americus High School. The book makes the point that those students only reflected the attitudes of their parents which may well be true but it also shows that there were few independent thinkers among them. Greg was probably a stronger person than I would have been given those circumstances and I was glad to read the several letters of apology (or phone calls) that his tormentors wrote to him as they invited him to the 40th reunion of their high school. Greg was raised at Koinonea, a Christian commune that his tormentors accused of being communist (it wasn't) and mixing with blacks (it did). It is now better known as the place where Habitat for Humanity was founded. The book will stay with me for a long time. Highly recommended.

This book reads with a suspenseful intensity that makes it impossible to put down. It begins with the founding of a pacifist, Christian commune in southwest Georgia named Koinonia (Greek for fellowship). But as their views of racial equality become known, local racists dynamite their market, try to kill their founder and shoot at their children playing outside. The story escalates into the heart of the civil rights struggle; a story that is not as well known as Selma, though it should be. King, Abernathy, John Lewis and SNCC are all there. But the power of this story is that we feel it personally through a boy living out nonviolence in the high school crucible. And then in the story of his classmates who had the courage to seek forgiveness.

I enjoyed this book. I was able to see history from the eyes of an average young man who was an extraordinarily man. I would most definitely recommend this book to anyone any age. It tells of the civil rights movements from a average man perspective, but this average man was already an outcast of the normal because of his faith or his parents faith and living style. The time may be set in the 1960's and before but the life lessons can still be taught today. even though the social society has changed we still have a long way to go. I would recommend this book be read as a learning tool in the classroom today, where "bullying" is still a concern to many. Also teaches that life will continue after high school and what you do in high school can be reflected back on years later. Thumbs up to the author for a great job on telling Greg's story. Thumbs up to Greg for teaching us how we should treat one another.

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