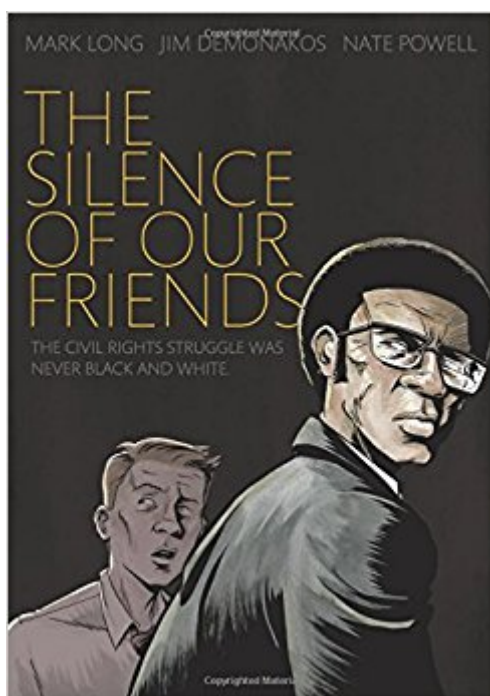


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# The Silence Of Our Friends : The Civil Rights Struggle Was Never Black And White



## Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERAs the civil rights struggle heats up in Texas, two families—one white, one black—find common ground. This semi-autobiographical tale is set in 1967 Texas, against the backdrop of the fight for civil rights. A white family from a notoriously racist neighborhood in the suburbs and a black family from its poorest ward cross Houston's color line, overcoming humiliation, degradation, and violence to win the freedom of five black college students unjustly charged with the murder of a policeman. *The Silence of Our Friends* follows events through the point of view of young Mark Long, whose father is a reporter covering the story. Semi-fictionalized, this story has its roots solidly in very real events. With art from the brilliant Nate Powell (*Swallow Me Whole*) bringing the tale to heart-wrenching life, *The Silence of Our Friends* is a new and important entry in the body of civil rights literature.

**The Silence of Our Friends Author Q&A**How much of this book's story is based on real events? Mark Long: Creating a book like this one required us to find a balance between factual accuracy and emotional authenticity. Some details as well as names have been changed for storytelling purposes. But the facts are that in 1967 Texas Southern University students began a boycott of classes after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was banned from campus, and on May 17th they staged a sit down protest on Wheeler Avenue over conditions at the nearby city garbage dump. The protest evolved into a police riot that night when an undercover officer was shot and over 200 officers responded by pouring rifle and machinegun fire into the men's dormitory. The police later stormed the dormitory and arrested 489 students after a policeman was shot and killed. All but 5 of the students were released the next day. They came to be called the "TSU Five" and were charged with the murder of the slain officer. Only one of the students stood trial in Victoria Texas due to publicity in Houston. His trial ended with the dismissal of all charges against the five when it was discovered that the officer was shot accidentally by another officer.

With the civil rights struggle as a backdrop to the story, how did you balance a contemporary perspective on race with the reality of race issues at the time? Nate Powell: While visualizing and adapting Mark's largely autobiographical work on the story, I found myself calling on my own experiences as a kid in Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas in the 1980's. Though the story takes place in a specific historical framework, many of the attitudes, details, atmospheric elements, and anecdotes were extremely familiar to me -- sometimes too familiar. As the pages progressed, the twenty years between our Southern childhood experiences didn't seem like much of a difference at all, which was certainly disturbing at times. There were frequent case-by-case conversations about accurate depictions of racism, the privilege of authorship, and inherent charge carried by racism's role in the book. Generally speaking, we determined that this was in many ways a brutal story but a very

accurate one, and respecting the very real violence carried by certain words and actions allowed us to give them their ugly space in the narrative, for better or for worse. Is much knowledge of the civil rights movement required? Mark Long: Everything that pushes the narrative forward is contained within the story's pages, and a lot of the civil rights and struggle-related content is specific to Houston in 1967-68. It definitely covers what readers might need to know without having expertise on the civil rights movement. Having said that, however, I think readers are rewarded throughout the book as characters are offered windows through which they witness a much more massive social upheaval, framed within the last few months of Dr. Martin Luther King's too-short life. There's no easy way to categorize this book, how would you describe it? Mark Long: I'd say it's a culture's own coming-of-age tale. By that, I mean it's first and foremost an exploration of shifting boundaries: towns and neighborhoods, friends and families, customs and attitudes all on the threshold of massive (and ongoing) change. The boundaries themselves take on lives of their own at times. In a more traditional sense, it's also equal parts a story centering on two families' internal relationships as they find themselves in each other's orbit, struggle narrative, friendship-betrayal tale, and courtroom drama. Why choose to tell this story in a graphic format? Nate Powell: As the story's climax is dependent on sorting through multiple points of view, it's appropriate that comics are ideal medium by which to tell a tale with so many lenses. The book offers a pretty intimate view of the world through main characters' points of view, but bringing the narrative even closer through Mark's eyes and balancing them all without judgment highlight the strengths of comics storytelling.

## **Book Information**

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Age Range: 11 - 18 years

Grade Level: 6 - 12

## Customer Reviews

Set in Houston in 1968, this graphic novel is based on Long's childhood memories of the events surrounding a little-remembered incident from the civil rights movement. As the students of Texas Southern University gear up for a demonstration involving Stokely Carmichael's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, smaller satellite confrontations around town hint at the violence to come. The story unfolds from two sets of eyes, those of a white TV reporter (Long's father) and a black demonstration leader. Deciding that "men of conscience have got to join together," the two forge a friendship that crosses the color line, is not looked upon favorably by either of their communities, and gets tested when the demonstration turns ugly. Powell is one of the finest young cartoonists around, and his artwork—with full-bodied figures, a loose compositional style, and inky black-and-white tones—unflinchingly mines the drama of both petty slashes of racism and larger instances of civil unrest. All the more powerful for its unfortunate familiarity, this account also shows how small acts of humanity can outclass even the most determined hatred. --Ian Chipman

"[This] civil rights graphic novel already seems to have 'Eisner nomination' written down the side." - Bleeding Cool  
"You can't help but feel moved by this story and you can't walk away unchanged. The combination of story and art works perfectly in capturing this event and this time period. I'm predicting this book will be one of the best graphic novels of the year, perhaps even one of the best books of the year." - Musings of a Librarian  
"...absolutely engaging and a complex graphic novel that I think could be analyzed on a deeper level and has broader historical themes. It is fantastic from beginning to the very end with the author's note and will hopefully affect you as much as it did me." - Good Books and Good Wine  
"...an engrossing narrative about race in America, while honestly dealing with a host of other real-world issues, including familial relationships, friendship, dependency, "other"-ness, and perhaps most importantly, the search for common ground." - Publisher's Weekly  
A moving evocation of a tipping point in our country's regrettable history of race relations, Long and Demonakos's story flows perfectly in Eisner and Ignatz Award winner Powell's (Swallow Me Whole) graceful and vivid yet unpretty black-and-gray wash.. - Library Journal  
"convincingly depicts the systemic racism, blatant and subtle, that suffused and corroded everything during [the] period" [Powell's] imagery amplifies the effects of the book's

multiple perspectives – the overwhelmed kid's-eye view of uneasy family dynamics and open Texas spaces, the hyperkinetic chaos on campus, the cropped literalism of TV newscasts." – The New York Times "...an engrossing narrative about race in America, while honestly dealing with a host of other real-world issues, including familial relationships, friendship, dependency, "other"-ness, and perhaps most importantly, the search for common ground." – Publisher's Weekly "A moving evocation of a tipping point in our country's regrettable history of race relations, Long and Demonakos's story flows perfectly in Eisner and Ignatz Award winner Powell's graceful and vivid yet unpretty black-and-gray wash." – School Library Journal

I bought this book as a birthday present for my younger brother who is currently in the eighth grade. I did a lot of searching and read a lot of reviews before making a decision on what graphic novels to get him, but I still made sure to read them myself to make sure the content and reading level was appropriate. The Silence of Our Friends gets five stars all around! The art is fantastic. The narrative has many provoking complexities but is still accessible for junior high to high school reading levels. Finally, the memoir retelling of civil-rights era turbulence is emotionally catalyzing and painfully current. I personally enjoyed the read and I hope my brother will too. Five stars from this demanding English major.

A fascinating, moving insight into a period of American history pivotal in the cultural and civil development of the US. Presented as a graphic novel, this autobiographical work serves as a potent reminder of the social progress humanity has, and continues, to achieve.

A great graphic history of an episode in the civil rights struggle set in Houston, TX. It depicts the efforts of good people to bring an end to the violence and chaos that surround them.

Great story for everyone to read.

Very relevant today!

Found this at a comic book store and LOVED it so much that I had to buy it for my sister.

We should all read this graphic novel. True story. As we celebrate civil rights this month, it's

certainly worth a look. Well done.

First and foremost, the book is a great story - filled with tension and understated power. The pacing and the pauses give plenty of time for the reader to wonder what they would do in the circumstance, what they would feel. I couldn't put it down. It also speaks of a powerful time in American history - bearing witness from a very human perspective on the manifestations of racism and divisions between people in that time and in that place. Highly recommended - top notch!

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