What Really Matters

_They Can’t Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement_
by Wesley Lowery
LITTLE BROWN & CO., 2016

REVIEWED BY DAVE IASEVOLI

Wesley Lowery, a *Washington Post* reporter, has transformed his Pulitzer-Prize-winning coverage of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Cleveland into an engaging narrative that can serve us all as a historical reference through our nation’s next chapters of violence and civil disobedience. Lowery reveals his hand immediately as an entrenched reporter in the Black Lives Matter movement. He calls for further mobilization in a journalistic voice that manages to sound impassioned yet fair-minded.

Even though we “all know the story” of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and too many others, we tend to blur together the details of their deaths. Lowery does not proceed in a linear fashion to “set the record straight” so much as to build a case for a new incarnation of the half-century-old Civil Rights movement—one whose leaders do not step out from behind pulpits, but from blogs and tweets and posts. His book begins with his arrest in Ferguson, for not complying with orders to vacate a McDonald’s quickly enough. This happened immediately after the horrible details surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, began to unfold.

The book’s real point of origin, however, is Obama’s election in 2008.

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Lowery notes “the headlines of the Obama years often seemed [to be] a yearbook of black death” (15). The possibility of a “post-racial” era for our United States quickly transformed into a tease, then a myth, and finally, a lie, with a growing roster of Black deaths at the hands of police and others: unarmed Oscar Grant, shot by an Oakland transit officer on New Year’s Day 2009, and then, in 2012, the unarmed Trayvon Martin, shot by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman as the former talked on his cellphone to his girlfriend. These two notable deaths polarized our nation into protest camps vs. supporters of “law and order.”

Even though many U.S. citizens are at least dimly aware of the statistic, “one unarmed black person [is] shot and killed by police every ten days,” the death of Brown in Ferguson served as the catalyst for both the creation of Black Lives Matter and the even greater rallying cry, “the fire next time”—as James Baldwin prophesied (16). Lowery writes with care in disentangling critical aspects of the Ferguson situation, such as the falsehood that Brown shouted “Hands up, don’t shoot!” He connects the current waves of protest and riot with those of the past century, and notes that “… of the more than 100 such race riots since 1935, almost all have been sparked by some type of police incident” (29). We expect police officers to serve and protect our lives and homes, and, further, many of our citizens share the fundamental understanding that, on occasion, the police officer’s discharge of this duty demands deadly force. Yet we also expect that the police need to be held accountable for the murder of an individual who poses no immediate threat to the former’s life.

Lowery adds to the growing literature about Black Lives Matter with brief, incisive portraits of the leaders who created, named, and emerged from this movement. His interviews with Alicia Garza and DeRay Mckesson show this reporter’s avocation for fair, unbiased description. For example, Lowery extols Mckesson’s passion and diligence, while also identifying his more egocentric behaviors. But the book’s true revelation may be the importance of Twitter and Instagram in journalism today. (This aspect of the book is especially relevant in light of our new Commander-in-Tweet’s dependence upon his often-incendiary hashtags to communicate.) Lowery constantly refers to the ubiquity of hashtags devoted to a social cause (e.g. #ferguson—“tweeted more than 27 million times”) (90), the number of followers behind select tweeters (“DeRay
[McKesson] had amassed tens of thousands of followers on Twitter” (103), and the status of certain leaders’ messages (“I’m one of the big tweeters here”) (150). What results is the paradox of the book itself: They Can’t Kill Us All is sustained testimony that may survive as a document of record—in the face of social media’s ephemera.

Lowery inserts numbers—typically death tolls—with a quiet precision: 10,000 police killings over the course of a decade resulted in only 54 officers charged with a crime, with most of the latter exonerated. But the author’s goal is not to indict police departments; rather, he collates his reports here so that the reader can re-visit and re-consider—without the clamor of media hysteria—the most significant events in the context of a nation whose racial currents constantly re-form:

For most of the year after Michael Brown’s death, my reporting focused on policing policy—tactics, best practices, and reform—with race serving as an ever-present subplot. My goal was and is to pull back the veil over a profession that had become among the least accessible and least transparent corners of government (190).

What do police officers make of the past few years’ unrest and protest and even riots headed by Black Lives Matter? Lowery does not have much to offer in this respect. His hundreds of interviews include the voices of attorneys, as well as activists and the families of those killed, but not the police. If we ignore the trumpeted headlines to listen for unmediated opinions from police forces, we are likely to hear only The Blue Wall of Silence. In my educational institution, a public university in upstate, rural New York, where I teach a diversity course to prospective teachers, several students have averred that “Blue Lives Matter” in the context of our discussions of race and resistance to oppression today. And back in my original Brooklyn neighborhood, I just recently noticed the bizarre take on the American flag that has become a banner for police support: it is colored black, white, and blue, with 50 white stars on a black field. As the bluevivesmatter.blue website describes the flag:

When you display a thin blue line flag in front of your house, you’re making a statement that Blue Lives Matter, and you support law enforcement.
You are sending a message that you believe in personal accountability and that you won’t stand silent as criminals victimize our communities. On this flag, one black bar below represents the criminal element in society. One black bar above represents the innocent citizens. What stands in the middle is a thin blue line of committed Police.

Lowery’s book closes with the attacks of retribution against police—in Dallas and Baton Rouge—and he takes pains to describe the nation’s anger and confusion, especially within the law-enforcement community. Many blamed the rhetoric, tactics, and physical protests of Black Lives Matter for these attacks. Some of the students I teach, and many of my current neighbors in Upstate New York, ascribe the deaths of police to Black activists. In They Can’t Kill Us All, the author connects the current opponents of Black protest to historical episodes in the Civil Rights movement, such as when the FBI blamed Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., for the riots of the ’60s (226). But again, Lowery does not provide insight into the reactions of middle- and working-class Whites. Finally, Lowery leaves us thinking about the imminent “transfer of power” from Obama to his successor—still unknown at the time of this book’s publication—and the pressing need for continued activism in the face of unchecked authority. [204]