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## The Summer of 1964

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### THE CHILDREN BOB MOSES LED: A NOVEL OF FREEDOM SUMMER

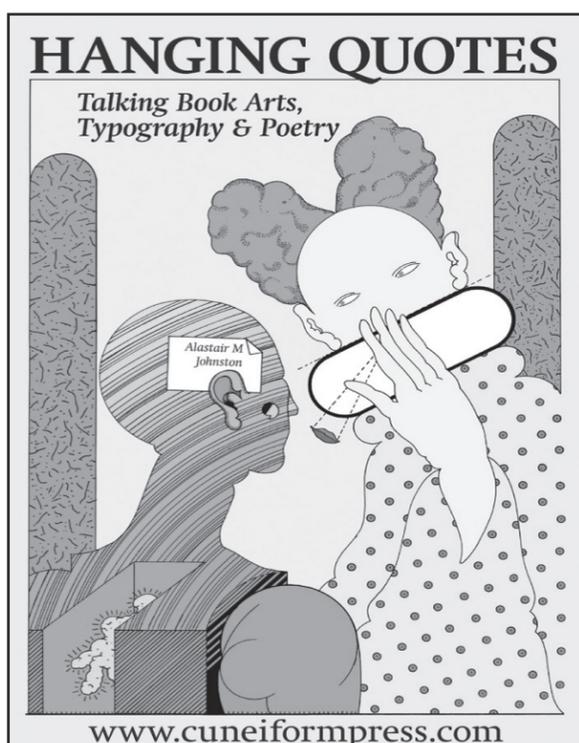
William Heath

New South Books—  
Twentieth Anniversary Edition  
www.newsouthbooks.com  
364 Page; Print, \$23.95

Good historical fiction tells a story while staying true to the facts. The best historical fiction does that while offering an analysis that is both subtle and true to the situation. William Heath manages to achieve all of this and more in his novel *The Children Bob Moses Led: A Novel of Freedom Summer*, written in 1995 but reissued in 2014 to honor the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer.

Heath builds the narrative around the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group known for its sometimes frustrating adherence to participatory democracy and its resulting lack of clear leadership. He recapitulates this structure in the novel, leaving the reader with no clear heroes but with a number of likeable yet flawed young men and women who worked alongside local people in Mississippi, hoping to make a difference in the world and in their own lives. Rather than fall into the pitfall of so many others whose stories turn into celebrations of heroic characters stepping in to save local blacks, most recently and notably in Kathryn Stockett's novel, *The Help* (2009), Heath traces the complex motivations of White and Black activists, showing the altruistic along with the selfish. He also helps the reader understand the complex situation and behavior of local people who wanted to fight their own oppression but had to weigh that desire against the danger they faced for challenging the local power structure, leaving the reader to ponder the extent to which Freedom Summer succeeded. He concludes by speaking through one of the "local people" after the failure of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to take seats at the national Democratic Convention in 1964:

I used to think Mississippi negroes was the only peoples in the world who was always afraid of losin' they jobs. But that ain't so. Even the president of the United States is afraid of losin' his job. He knew we had justice on our side, but he was scared. That's why he didn't do right by us.



This helplessness, and the question of whether or not characters had the courage to do what was right in the face of intense pressure, provides the tension that holds the novel together and leaves the reader wondering how far society has come since that promising and disappointing summer.

The chapters alternate between the perspectives of Bob Moses, one of the real-life architects of Freedom Summer, and Tom Morton, a fictional character who represents a typical Freedom Summer volunteer. Through Moses, Heath introduces the historical context of the movement, and through Morton, he analyzes the complex motives of the volunteers, the terror they faced, and the question of whether the movement succeeded or failed. As both of these men make friends among African Americans in Mississippi and other Freedom Summer participants, Heath adds characters that allow him to explore multiple perspectives. The result is a rich, deep, and painfully honest account of Freedom Summer.

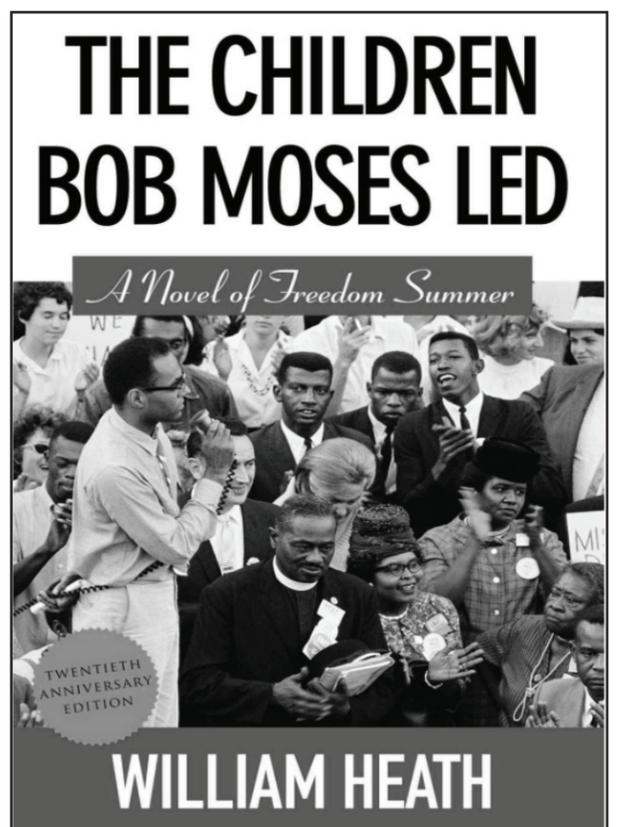
The Moses chapters rely heavily upon history and show impressive research in both primary and secondary sources. Heath draws upon SNCC field reports and other records at a variety of archives from the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta, Georgia to the comprehensive collection at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He also consulted collections at Stanford and Howard universities and

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the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, searched an impressive number of contemporary newspapers, and conducted interviews of both participants and civil rights scholars. His research is solid, and he uses these chapters to recount the events that led to Freedom Summer.

Most impressively, Heath touches upon something on which many civil rights scholars are now focusing—the relationship between the Movement and representatives of the political establishment who wanted to control it and keep it from becoming radical enough to offend the average northern Democrat. In one passage, Al Lowenstein represents the liberal Democratic establishment, trying to impose order on the chaotic structure of SNCC, warning Moses that the curriculum of the Freedom Schools was too radical and lamenting that Eleanor Roosevelt was no longer around to oversee them all. Moses responds by refusing to allow him to "use SNCC and the MFDP to 'deliver' support to Hubert Humphrey and your liberal friends" and insisting "you don't trust us; you think we have a hidden agenda to radicalize blacks and overthrow the country. To prevent that, you're trying to find a devious way to take control of SNCC." At the same time, Moses did realize that, eventually, SNCC would have to "work out some kind of understanding with the type of liberals Al represented." The question left for the reader is to what extent such compromises served pragmatic ends to Movement goals and to what extent they meant abandoning Movement principles.

Through Morton, a middle class white youth from Ohio whose parents graduated from the reform-minded Oberlin College and who gained his first experience with the Movement during the March on Washington, Heath speaks to a number of central issues, including White denial, the total absence of compassion in the White South, the unreliable black middle class, the fear that paralyzed many black poor, the role of complicit police and local officials,



and the ineffectiveness of the FBI. As he explores each of these factors, he draws vivid images of the fear that pervaded the times, describing Mississippi as undergoing a "reign of terror" that allowed local powers to create a "padlocked police state" as they actively participated not only in the murders of local people like Herbert Lee who challenged the status quo, but also the murders of civil rights activists Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Mickey Schwerner. He also uses Morton and his colleagues in the Movement to develop his main point—civil rights activists were neither heroes nor fools: they were people doing what they could to make the world better and to deal with their own issues. For Whites like Morton, those issues involved their own sense of guilt and idealism, and for characters like Feelgood, a Black militant who had mixed feelings about White participants, they included anger and frustration. All in all, these characters put a realistic face on the mythical Freedom Summer volunteer and bring the entire Movement to life.

*The Children Bob Moses Led* is a gripping novel for all age groups, from young adults to mature readers who may remember the summer of 1964. For those with limited historical background, Heath provides enough context to bring them into the story and spark their curiosity. For those well versed in the time, he provides a strong narrative that brings old facts to life. Though a great read on its own, it is ideal for classroom use in both English and history classes, and the publisher has provided an online study guide to facilitate classroom use. The press's decision to reissue this book seems particularly apropos at a time when the nation is facing a new surge of hate crimes and new questions about local leadership and law enforcement (<http://www.splcenter.org>). In words that apply just as much in 2015 as in 1964, Morton concludes by calling American politics "a series of glib slogans for mass consumption" rather than "a compassionate response to serious problems." He leaves the reader to consider what remains to be done and how to achieve the illusive changes.

*Beverly Tomek is a historian of civil rights movements in the US. In addition to books that focus on African colonization and antislavery, she has written articles about the twentieth-century civil rights movement, most recently focusing on Freedom Summer and Freedom Schools. She is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Houston-Victoria.*