First Opinion: “Introducing Mr. Civil Rights”


*Jessica Whitelaw*

In the latest release in a hot new series of biographies for young adults, Chris Crowe tells a captivating narrative of the life and career of one of the most famous civil rights lawyers in the country, “Mr. Civil Rights.” Crowe’s biography, *Up Close Justice: Thurgood Marshall*, lives up to its name; it zeroes in and brings into focus the life of Thurgood Marshall—from his childhood in Baltimore during the early twentieth century to his later groundbreaking work in the Civil Rights Movement. Crowe situates the life of Thurgood Marshall in his time; he traces the makings of this man and shows how he grew into the person he became.

Crowe paints a lively portrait of Marshall. He traces the first appearances of Marshall’s trademark feistiness and high energy to elementary school where he was said to have often landed himself in trouble, frustrating both his parents and teachers while amusing his friends. Crowe also outlines Marshall’s earliest lessons in civil liberty back to his days in high school when he got to know the United States Constitution well in a rather unusual way; the principal had him memorize sections of it in the furnace room as a consequence for various behavioral infractions. Crowe is convincing in his argument that it was this same cockiness, spiritedness, and learning that Marshall later drew upon during his career as a top-notch civil rights lawyer. From his earliest years as a fighter who was determined and feisty, Marshall’s qualities gave him the courage and commitment to defy racism as his life’s work.
Although a prankster, Marshall learned the value of hard work, beginning with his first job as a delivery boy at the age of seven. Later, his work as a lawyer was initially carried out with little pay and much risk. In addition to learning the value of hard work, Marshall learned from his parents to devote himself to the cause of racial justice. They taught him, above all, not to be fooled “about the pervasiveness of racism” (56). In law school he would come to more fully understand what this meant and decide to do something.

Crowe shows how Marshall rose to the top legal position at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and later became the first African American lawyer on the U.S. Supreme Court. He tried many cases from both sides of the bench, including the most famous for *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, a landmark legal ruling on desegregation of schools.

This is a story for all of us; it is both a historical account and a human story, and Crowe has succeeded in creating a biography that weaves these together. In the end, readers know something about how one man, in a particular time and place, made his way in the world and went on to be dubbed “Mr. Civil Rights.” History is truly made accessible in this engaging volume. Readers will appreciate Crowe’s notes on the process of writing the account as well. The “Source Notes” at the end of the book offer an inside view into Crowe’s research, both in terms of what resources he used, but more importantly, how the author considered his reader, as a historian and as a writer. By drawing attention to the form of biography, Crowe provides an insider’s view into some of the ins and outs of the genre.

About the Author

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