Foreword to the 1999 Edition by Robert Coles

“There are a lot of voices in a novelist’s mind while he’s writing; and success or failure depends on knowing which voice to hear, when, and why”—so Walker Percy observed in an interview as he was struggling to understand the mysteries of his own writing life. He knew well that each persuasive, compelling novel represents a triumph of a particular person’s imaginative life enabled by a mix of psychological energy and talent that, in the end, defies abstract explanatory efforts. So with nonfiction—especially the kind offered in the pages that follow, wherein a dedicated, resourceful sociologist has traveled wide and far, asked dozens of men and women for their stories, and then tried to interpret and relate them in such a way that the rest of us will, in turn, be prompted to pay heed, to keep in mind how it goes for those “others” who live among us in late-twentieth-century America.

Here is a storytelling social science that draws its strength from ordinary people whose lives are brought directly to the reader through remarks made, questions answered, memories shared, experiences told. Here is a social science that connects the theoretical to the particular, that insists upon witnesses as well as formulations, that resists pretentious jargon, that employs clear, compelling narrative writing. Here is a localist social science, intent on immersion in the widest range of individuals, whose words, whose ideas and aspirations and worries and hopes are taken seriously indeed. Here is a social science, finally, that not only aims to describe the bare and sometimes brute facts of class and race in certain parts of the United States but takes a further, exemplary step: a professor asks those she is studying to become colleagues, and their thoughts become a series of lessons respectfully offered to those fellow citizens who become their readers.

The publication of this book has to be considered, in a sense, an occasion of great sadness—that the conditions of daily living described by the people

of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta still persist. I worked in both of those regions during the 1960s and 1970s, and I well remember meeting individuals very much like those we meet here. I also had the privilege of accompanying Senator Robert F. Kennedy during his visits to both regions—and as I read this book I kept remembering him as he sat in the humblest of homes up in the hollows of West Virginia or in one or another Mississippi town. In both places, like Professor Duncan, he was at pains to talk with the widest range of people, the quite well-to-do and the reasonably comfortable as well as the thoroughly vulnerable families who are all too numerous, and whose hard labor, of course, has enabled the cotton and coal economies to thrive over the generations.

I can still hear Robert Kennedy talking with tenant farmers and coal miners, schoolteachers and nurses, professional men and women, plantation owners and those who run coal mines, the same people who figure so prominently in these chapters. At one point, in Greenville, Mississippi, he clearly had become troubled by both what he had observed and what he had figured out—how intractable the social and economic system seemed, how tenacious its resistance to reform efforts on behalf of the majority who live in such dire circumstances. “This situation cannot last forever,” he said—his tired, frustrated, yet morally aroused voice indicating an obvious anxiety that, on the contrary, much needed change hardly seemed around any visible corner. Silence greeted his comment—as if everyone in the room knew better than to subscribe to such optimism, knew that the senator was hoping against hope rather than stating an unequivocal conviction. Finally, an African-American minister of great humility and shrewdness, a veteran of the civil rights movement that had recently stirred the Delta no end (while leaving unchanged the distribution of money and power in those heavily agricultural counties), spoke up: “All things do come in time, Senator. Yes sir, maybe by the end of this century, the end of this second millennium, it’ll be different here. Maybe the Lord will smile on us, and give us a better life, so you don’t have a few with everything and most everybody else with nothing. There are days that I think it’ll take the Second Coming for that to come about—but who knows? With the year 2000 the Lord might decide to pay us some attention here, and turn things around.”

Lots of nods followed those words, including a vigorous assent by the distinguished senator, whose wry smile helped everyone relax, and whose response prompted another round of bodily affirmation: “I hope you’re right, Reverend. I get your point—it may well be beyond all of us, the kind

of political and economic change that is needed here. Only the Lord—that's what you're saying—only he can do it. I hope he will. I hope it's not only up to him, though."

More than thirty years later, this book reminds us how long lasting those cries of moral anguish have been, and how right Robert Kennedy was to pick up on a minister's melancholy spiritual fatalism as he fought hard, every day, on behalf of his flock. I believe that he and his important visitor, both, alas, long gone from us, would welcome this book at a time when so many in our country seem all too indifferent to the plight of those millions who are really, rock-bottom poor. What follows is their story, a documentary exposition of great moral energy, informed by impressive intellectual skills: an extraordinary mix of social history, economic and political analysis, and direct observation by a boldly original researcher who has dared call upon those she interviewed to address the men and women who hold this book in their hands—and thereby bring those "worlds apart" a little closer for the rest of us.

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