



# **He Calls Me By Lightning: The Life of Caliph Washington and the Forgotten Saga of Jim Crow, Southern Justice, and the Death Penalty**

*S. Jonathan Bass*

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## **He Calls Me By Lightning: The Life of Caliph Washington and the Forgotten Saga of Jim Crow, Southern Justice, and the Death Penalty** S. Jonathan Bass

Caliph Washington's life was never supposed to matter. As a black teenager from the vice-ridden city of Bessemer, Alabama, Washington was wrongfully convicted of killing an Alabama policeman in 1957. Sentenced to death, he came within minutes of the electric chair—nearly a dozen times. A Kafka-esque legal odyssey in which Washington's original conviction was overturned three times before he was finally released in 1972, his story is the kind that pervades the history of American justice. Here, in the hands of historian S. Jonathan Bass, Washington's ordeal and life are rescued from anonymity and become a moving parable of one man's survival and perseverance in a hellish system.

*He Calls Me by Lightning* is both a compelling legal drama and a fierce depiction of the Jim Crow South that forces us to take account of the lives cast away by systemic racism.

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## **From Reader Review He Calls Me By Lightning: The Life of Caliph Washington and the Forgotten Saga of Jim Crow, Southern Justice, and the Death Penalty for online ebook**

### **Michael says**

I am very glad I read this book. The author does a good, meticulous job, of telling the story of Caliph Washington's arrest in 1957 in Bessemer, Alabama for killing a police officer. It is a story that reveals the shame and racism of structures of injustice. Over and over throughout this story one sees not only the 50s through the early 2000s, but one sees our own day and age. I'm very grateful for the witness of this book.

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### **Krystina says**

Wow...what a story. One can only imagine the countless number of people who went through the same thing Mr. Washington went through but never got justice. Thank God for the various organizations, and good people who helped secure Mr. Washington's freedom, and those who continue to fight for justice today.

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### **Cecilia says**

A very thought-provoking book. It tells the story of a 17 year old black youth in Bessemer Alabama whose real life is a story of Greek tragedian proportions. It begins in 1957, a coal mining town as the name "Bessemer" alludes to, where the population is white and black and the division between the races runs wide and deep.

The wonder is that this young man endured three trials, sat on death row for over 5 years where his sentence was stayed more than a dozen times by no less a segregationist than the legendary George Wallace. Washington was finally convicted in 1970 but the decision was overturned and he finally went free although his case remained open until 2001 when it was finally dismissed. Caliph died on May 24, 2001 and the dismissal was signed June 21, 2001.

The law, law enforcers, politicians, judges and the white citizens of the State of Alabama all conspired actively and/or passively against Caliph Washington (and around the country thousands like him) but in the end he found God and turned to helping those like himself who came from the greatest ignorance and poverty.

If only we could say that the country has moved forward significantly from the "Jim Crow" era.

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### **Deb says**

I read two harsh books at the same time (via Kindle - City of Thorns) and via book He Calls Me Lightning. The unfairness, suffering, and torture was overwhelming. What horrible actions humans will take against each other often feeling justified; and without any pangs of remorse or ethical conscious. I kept wondering

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what kind of man Caliph would have grown to be if circumstances would have been different. I am also thankful for the bravery of the people that did help him. One o'clock in the morning is not a good time to finish a book like this, but I could not put the story down and will probably be thinking of it the rest of the night.

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### **Emily says**

I'm glad I read this--a story well worth telling, horrifying as it is. The material is almost too rich--the author can't help taking bird walks to describe every lady colorful character--and sometimes I was impatient with the lack of a stronger narrative through line. We'd lose track of Caliph for pages and pages while we learned about Bessemer elections and police corruption. And the author doesn't use past perfect when it's necessary, but that's a quibble. It's a fine book, the writing is usually very lively, and it tells a forgotten history worth remembering.

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### **Lulu says**

I feel like Caliph Johnson's story got lost in this book, just like his life and case got lost (not cared about) in the Alabama justice system. This book had way too much "other stuff" going on. I still don't get the connection between Caliph and the corpse of Hazel Farris. The author's note actually made me bump this up to 3 stars. He explained how hard it was to really go back and research Caliph Johnson, that all he really had to go by were court records. I'm glad we got a glimpse at Caliph's story, but that's all it was.

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### **Brian Tramuel says**

Heartbreaking struggle for freedom, looks as though it was a model for the injustices that plague our judicial system today.

This is written in such a way that will keep you engaged (& enraged) with vivid storytelling that brings the book to life.

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### **Stephanie says**

Ugh. I tried so hard to stay with this book. It just got to the point that the author was going way too far into detail about things that really had little to do with Washington's story. Like, do we really need minute details about a prison Washington never stayed at? Or the life story of the creator of Alabama's Electric Chair?? The narrative was much more interesting when the author stayed on topic.

I wanted to find out what happened but I just couldn't waste anymore time trying to get through the mundane parts.

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### **Sam Motes says**

Justice delayed is justice denied. Caliph was found guilty of murder of a racially motivated Police Officer that certainly sounded like self-defense or man slaughter at the worse. The Window even had a second trial that found the incident an accident so that she could get the insurance money from her husband's death. The author builds the long drawn out emotional story of Jim Crow South intimidation of Caliph who the law system saw as an inferior black man without full rights who struggled through hopelessness and despair forgotten by his legal council locked up as a victim to the system and the times as he awaited his appeal and retrials over decades. Even after he finally got out of prison, the real possibility of getting pulled back into prison due to his open case always hung over his head and weighed on his soul. His case wasn't ever fully settled until after his death when his case was officially dismissed shortly after his death.

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### **Kate says**

Very eye opening book. Gives a real picture of race injustices and the issues that surround segregation. How slow the wheels of justice turn but not always with the best intentions. This is a true story that is well documented and well written. I recommend to anyone who feels we have come a long way toward mending racial bias - because we have not- we have only begun to acknowledge the issues. Now is time to do something.

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### **Jessica says**

This book felt like it could have been accomplished in a long-form magazine article. So much was unnecessary and felt like it was just being included to make the book longer. The one thing that kept me reading was to find out was how Caliph finally made it out, and then that part was just glossed over at the very end. Sadly, this book just goes to show how little has changed, both in the criminal justice system and with regards to police brutality.

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### **Brady says**

My rating is probably about 2.5 stars. Took me forever to read because I never really found it compelling enough to really dig into. If you are the least bit familiar with the Jim Crow South, this book doesn't break any new ground. On top of that, I didn't find Caliph Washington all that sympathetic of a character. Yeah, he got the shaft from the judicial system, and the police initiated the precipitating event. But I never felt it was clear cut that Caliph Washington didn't commit the crime of which he was accused. With that sort of doubt hanging over my thinking, it dulled the impact of the legal chicanery. I think it's vitally important--now more than ever--that we continue to unearth the stories of racism and systematic oppression that are the foundation of incidents like Charlottesville and the rise of our current president\* so people might understand and empathize with the plight of racial and ethnic minorities. I just don't think this story is the one to do it.

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### **Cheryl says**

The story itself wrenched my heart out of my chest, that we could treat other human beings in this manner and yet, I couldn't help but notice the parallels from the late 50's to the early 60's with today's climate. The only issue I had with the book was that sometimes there was more history or explanation than there was story, particularly the story of trying to integrate the jails. The only thing that had to do with Caliph Washington was that his "brand" was used to further the fight, but integration didn't come about as expected and did nothing for Mr. Washington, himself. And it bogged down the book with all the explanation. Every time I read one of these books, I am literally shocked that white folks cannot seem to understand the terror the black folks felt when police were near. It just boggles my mind that they would expect black folks to have the same sort of relationship they enjoy with the police and then be all bent out of shape when someone says, yeah....no. Even in 2017, some white folks say, well if he had just stopped or followed the law or whatever...seriously? If you have been persecuted all your life by the actions and words of white folks, would you seriously not think twice about stopping for a white cop? Even if you did nothing wrong?

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### **Jerry Smith says**

As a resident of Birmingham and a devoted history fan I loved this book. Bass is an excellent writer. I agree with some other commenters that I am uncertain on whether Caliph is actually guilty or not. But honestly that's neither here nor there. The lawlessness of the police in the Jim Crow South is staggering. My only criticism is when introducing new characters (for lack of a better term) Bass sometimes tells us too much about them. But he is a History professor and that's the nature of the profession. Let me reiterate his prose is simply beautiful.

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### **Lauren says**

It took me multiple tries to get through this book. Essentially it tries to do too much with too little. Caliph Washington is a passive character in his own story, which, while not his fault as he's trapped in jail, is made even more boring and slow by the narrative's meandering from one topic to another. There are too many points of focus, too many characters great and small, and just not enough heart and soul in any of it. I'm pretty disappointed, considering this book is very timely, as we watch Alabama once more try to implode itself (this time by choosing a pedophile) rather than allow progress. Overall slow, disjointed, and too wide a focus with far too much detail into legalese that is probably an interesting read to a law student but left this reader bored and skimming. Not a book on civil rights issues that I could recommend to anyone, which is disappointing because I think underneath the drudgery is a good study of ugly history and abuse.

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