



One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and the Shattering of the Color Line in New York

Arthur Browne

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A history of African Americans in New York City from the 1910s to 1960, told through the life of Samuel Battle, the New York Police Department's first black officer.

When Samuel Battle broke the color line as New York City's first African American cop in the second decade of the twentieth century, he had to fear his racist colleagues as much as criminals. He had to be three times better than his white peers, and many times more resilient. His life was threatened. He was displayed like a circus animal. Yet, fearlessly claiming his rights, he prevailed in a four-decade odyssey that is both the story of one man's courageous dedication to racial progress and a harbinger of the divisions between police and the people they serve that plague twenty-first-century America.

By dint of brains, brawn, and an outsized personality, Battle rode the forward wave of African American history in New York. He circulated among renowned turn-of-the-century entertainers and writers. He weathered threatening hostility as a founding citizen of black Harlem. He served as "godfather" to the regiment of black soldiers that won glory in World War I as the "Hellfighters of Harlem." He befriended sports stars like Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Sugar Ray Robinson, and he bonded with legendary tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Along the way, he mentored an equally smart, equally tough young man in a still more brutal fight to integrate the New York Fire Department.

At the close of his career, Battle looked back proudly on the against-all-odd journey taken by a man who came of age as the son of former slaves in the South. He had navigated the corruption of Tammany Hall, the treachery of gangsters like Lucky Luciano and Dutch Schultz, the anything-goes era of Prohibition, the devastation of the Depression, and the race riots that erupted in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s. By then he was a trusted aide to Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and a friend to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

Realizing that his story was the story of race in New York across the first half of the century, Battle commissioned a biography to be written by none other than Langston Hughes, the preeminent voice of the Harlem Renaissance. But their eighty-thousand-word collaboration failed to find a publisher, and has remained unpublished since. Using Hughes's manuscript, which is quoted liberally throughout this book, as well as his own archival research and interviews with survivors, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Arthur Browne has created an important and compelling social history of New York, revealed a fascinating episode in the life of Langston Hughes, and delivered the riveting life and times of a remarkable and unjustly forgotten man, setting Samuel Battle where he belongs in the pantheon of American civil rights pioneers.

One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and the Shattering of the Color Line in New York Details

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From Reader Review One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and the Shattering of the Color Line in New York for online ebook

David Lucander says

I heard the author give a talk, he called Samuel Battle the Jackie Robinson of NYPD. Well said indeed. This is a fine book that is measured in its rhetoric, smart in its analysis, and lucid in its organization. A bit of a panegyric at times, it's clear the author thinks very highly of his subject. Would have been nice to get Browne's NYPD personnel file more involved (if it exists). I'm well versed in NYC and African American history so it was fine for me, but I could imagine a reader less familiar with the plethora of names that pop up might get lost from time to time. Browne finishes the work Langston Hughes started - read the book to know what I'm talking about.

SundayAtDusk says

If you want to know what this book is about, do read the description of the book on its Amazon page. It's quite possibly the best book description I have ever read, and I'm guessing it was the author who wrote it. Author Arthur Browne is a lifetime newspaper man, and knows how to write for the general public. In one way, he may be like Samuel Battle, too--it appears he might be a man who has not been promoted in his field as he should have been promoted. It took a long time for Mr. Battle to go up in the ranks of the New York City Police Department, and he was incredibly courageous to join the police department in the first place. That's what this story is truly about--courage and perseverance.

Justice also finally prevails with this book's publication. For in 1949, Mr. Battle hired writer Langston Hughes to write his biography for \$1,500. He wanted there to be a record of what blacks went through in the early 1900s to gain equality in the United States. He wanted the story told right. Unfortunately, Mr. Hughes only took the job for the money, his heart was not in it. This resulted in a book that was not publishable due to the poor writing, not due to the subject matter. Now, with the publication of *One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and the Shattering of the Color Line in New York* in June of 2015, Samuel Battle's story will finally be told and read and remembered.

(Note: I received a free ARC of this book from Amazon Vine.)

Kimberly Cunningham says

Samuel Battle son of former slaves, truly amazing individual. His story is NY's story and how segregation existed way after slavery was abolished in NY. What he faced, the barriers he overcame and the people of the Harlem Renaissance he rubbed elbows with is astounding. Segregated police force, segregated fire departments, segregated housing, prejudice, brutality are all outlined in this book. Highly recommend this book.

Joseph says

One Righteous Man is a Bio that has been in the works for decades, starting with the first draft by none other than Langston Hughes. In this present incarnation, the first to actually be published, the slow integration of African Americans into New York's civil service ranks is closely inspected.

Being the first Black NYC police officer was no easy task, and Samuel Battle was up against many obstacles-all of which he hurdled with poise. This is an important book in many respects; in addition to race relations and equal rights, this story offers a social history of NYC in the first half of the 20th century. Highly recommended.

Read more in The Thugbrarian Review @ <https://thugbrarianreview.wordpress.c...>

Sarah says

This is not just a well written and fascinating read, but it is an important book that I hope will help a lot of people understand the race dynamics which are still very much in play in our nation today.

There are circumstances in this world that require a person to make difficult decisions, where there are no "right" options that the person can feel really good about. Samuel Battle met these situations repeatedly, and he did so with amazing courage. He set his face toward justice and truth, and in the process changed institutions, hearts, and minds.

I have heard the term "Righteousness" defined as the willingness to disadvantage yourself in order to advantage others (Bruce Waltke), and Battle shows us what this looks like in this messy world.

Lane Willson says

He was the victim of injustice. He understood the oppressive weight of poverty. He was demeaned by those with the power to do so. But Samuel J. Battle, the first African-American member of the New York Police Department, was never humiliated, because, from the moment he grasped the value of his dignity, he never relinquished it for a single second. *One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and The Shattering of The Color Line in New York* by Arthur Browne is a powerful telling not only of Battle's achievement, but also of the bumpy, sometimes absurd, and often tragically shameful path our nation has traveled towards racial equality.

Samuel J. Battle was a young man who became a strong Christian after he understood the bearings of his moral compass, and made a decision to follow where it pointed no matter what. But he was no saint. Arthur Browne's willingness to show the wrong turns and dangerous choices of Mr. Battle's early journey was vital to the story, as later Battle would have his beliefs challenged and tested. On the force, he was faced with decisions that offered no clear choices between right and wrong. At times Battle would even be vilified by the same predominantly black Harlem community that lauded him as a hero, and that he served and loved his entire life. The constant downpour of racism gave him perfect cover to focus on survival rather than principle, but he remained visible for all to see. The treatment he received at the hands of his fellow officers would have certainly made hatred an understandable destination, but Battle refused to listen to those dark directions.

As outstanding as Samuel J. Battle's achievements were, what I found the most impressive was that by choosing dignity and principle Battle offered a great unearned gift to the white folks in his world. Battle left open the door that allowed them a path to human dignity. Far too few chose to cross that threshold, but for those that did they discovered that recognizing the dignity created by God in all men, they could recognize

and claim their own. I highly recommend this book.

I'm very grateful to the folks at Beacon Press for sending me this book as part of the Librarything Early Reviewers program. It came just before the most recent bouts of racial tension in our country and offered a new perspective on the struggles that remain in healing the racial divide. You can check out Beacon Press at www.beacon.org

wade says

The biography of Samuel Battle, the first Black man on the New York City police department. It is a long troubled path full of mistreatment and persecution but through hard work he is able to succeed. The book also chronicles his son Wesley who is the first man to integrate the New York City fire department who suffers similar problems. One interesting sidelight is that the book takes place during the Harlem Renaissance and describes many of the interesting people of that era. A good book for history buffs.

Darryl says

Samuel Jesse Battle (1883-1966) was the eleventh child born to former slaves in New Bern, North Carolina. He was unusually large in size from birth, with a temperament that matched his physical stature. His dreams of a better life were also larger than life from a young age, thanks to the books that he read and the New York bound trains that regularly passed through town. However, New Bern and the post-Reconstruction South was no place for an aspiring African American boy to survive, nonetheless thrive, so he and his mother chose to travel to New York when he turned 15.

His size (6 feet 3 inches, 280 pounds), intelligence and fierce drive to succeed allowed him to find work easily, although the crushing and ever present racism in the late 19th and early 20th century severely limited his ability to advance to a respectable and well paying job. After a series of dead end jobs he was employed as a train porter at Grand Central Terminal, where he encountered numerous celebrities of all races, including the great Jack Johnson, the first African American to win the world heavyweight boxing championship in 1908, who Battle met at the station upon Johnson's triumphant return to the city.

Battle's salary and visibility as a porter permitted him access to the highest level of black society in NYC in the early 1900s, and he was positively influenced by the leading civil rights activists of the day. However, his porter's salary barely allowed him to make ends meet, as he was newly married and the father of a young son. Discrimination against blacks was still rampant in the city, particularly at the hands of officers of the New York Police Department (NYPD), which remained firmly segregated even though pre-unification Brooklyn and other cities in the Northeast did have some African Americans in their forces. After minimal encouragement Battle decided to apply for the NYPD, and after encountering numerous hurdles and roadblocks he was eventually installed as the city's first African American officer in 1911, and he served with distinction for the next 40 years.

In 1949 the famed Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes was commissioned by Battle to write a book about his life, based on interviews with the soon to be retired sergeant. An 80,000 word manuscript titled Battle of Harlem was the result, but it was never published. The author of this book, Arthur Browne, learned

of this manuscript, and in working with Battle's grandson and his own research he relied on it to write this superb biography of Battle, which also serves as a history of African Americans in New York City during the first half of the 20th century. Battle's public visibility in the black community allowed him access and friendship to a wide variety of well known people, including Eleanor Roosevelt, the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, and the composer Duke Ellington, and through his connections the reader learns about them as well.

I found *One Righteous Man* to be an engrossing and entertaining read, and I enjoyed the inclusion of other famous and historically important figures, which added to this excellent book. ()

Kathy Heare Watts says

I won a copy of this book during a Goodreads giveaway. I am under no obligation to leave a review or rating and do so voluntarily. I am paying it forward by passing this book along to a business organization that offers business skills, hope, and dreams to be used in their ministry.

Roxanne says

This awesome book is a history of African Americans in New York City from the 1910's to 1960, told through the life of Samuel Battle, the New York Police Dept first black officer. He broke the color line but he still had to fear his racist colleagues as much as the criminals. But he was fearless as he tackled corruption, the gangsters, the Prohibition, the Depression and the race riots in Harlem. He became an aide to Mayor La Guardia and received several promotions. He hired Langston Hughes to write his biography but they could not get it published. So Battle was largely forgotten. Then Author Brown came along and he used his own research to write this book. He puts Samuel Battle where he belongs, an American civil rights pioneer.

Michael says

The Heat From Harlem

One Righteous Man, the story of Samuel Battle, the first African-American to penetrate the thick white wall of New York's finest, is the history of race relations in the Big Apple, most specifically the neighborhood of Harlem; it's a shameful history, as one might have guessed, laying bare the insecurity, hubris, and ignorance of the non-black citizenry of New York from the fin-de-siecle through the decade of Civil Rights.

(some spoilers below)

Though its author, Arthur Browne, a veteran NYC journalist (a Pulitzer winner who co-authored *I, Koch*), presents a microcosm of the wider world, an America of the Jim Crow South and Northern urban instability in cities like Chicago and Detroit. It is also the history of prohibition; the birth of organized crime, and the slow death of Tammany Hall. It's the tale of racism in Sport as well as the reawakening of African-American culture in literature, art, and music. Battle's story is as much an emblem of his times as the badge he wore was an emblem of protection.

With this publication, Browne completes what was originally started by poet Langston Hughes. In 1952 Hughes would finally finish the draft of a biography of Battle's life which he had been commissioned to

write many years earlier. But the biography never saw the light of day. Battle of Harlem was no more than a series of "vignettes" describing the highlights of the police officer's life. As Browne notes, "People enter and leave the story briefly without context. Important events are half realized". Publishers of the time would also find it difficult to market a book that told dirty truths about the contemporary prevalent racism.

In *One Righteous Man: Samuel Battle and the Shattering of the Color Line in New York*, the author seamlessly knits the experiences of Battle, who only succeeds through much perseverance and sacrifice, with the success and tribulations of many other Black pioneers. One of the more closely related tales is that of Wesley Williams, the first New York City Fireman of color. Considered a protege of Battle's, Williams was known for his tremendous physical strength and performed many heroic rescues in his time on the NYFD. He fought through imposed segregation, dangerous assignments, and constant humiliation to finally rise to the rank of Battalion Chief, overseeing a group of Captains.

On his first day on the job as a New York cop in 1911, no one talked to or ever acknowledged Battle's presence. He was called "that n***** cop" by kids on the street, he was assigned to a station house that took two hours by subway to arrive on time to work everyday. Months passed before any colleague even said a curt "good morning" to him. Little by little he broke down the barriers by not complaining and doing his job commendably. In Harlem, where he lived for many years on "Striver's Row", Battle was close with such notables as Bill "Bo Jangles" Robinson, "Sugar" Ray Robinson, and W.C. Handy.

Aside from his days on the beat, Battle worked tirelessly with fellow Equity Congress members J. Frank Wheaton and Bert Williams to create the first African-American Army regiment. The "Fifteenth", the regiment of which Battle was dubbed "The Godfather", was formed in 1917. It spawned the future heroes Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts: two black Privates who single-handedly repelled a regiment of 24 Germans in 1918, during the Great War; this was under the flag of the French government (both were awarded the Croix de Guerre by France only to go unrecognized by the American government until Johnson was finally awarded the distinguished Service Cross in 2002).

In light of recent reports of police violence-- the flashing lights and blaring sirens of 'black and whites' with the ugly hulk of racism riding shotgun etched upon our collective consciousness-- this book is a timely one. It is indeed one that needed to be written, and cried out to be penned properly many years ago. Instead Samuel J. Battle, like the title of the last chapter in *One Righteous Man*, had been ruefully 'forgotten' for many years. I'm happy to report that, thanks to Arthur Browne's diligence and perspicacity, I have learned a hell of a lot more about my home town of New York, Harlem in particular, and I've been able to get to know the esteemed Samuel J. Battle (Lieut. NYPD (ret)) pretty well; as a favor, I would enjoy you all to do the same.

Jerry Morris says

Langston Hughes wrote Samuel Battle's biography, *Battle of Harlem*, more than fifty years ago. It was about the life of the first black policeman in New York City. But no one wanted to publish it. So Battle had another friend revise the manuscript, and Eleanor Roosevelt wrote the Forward. Still, no one wanted to publish it.

Now, Arthur Browne, who has probably written more about New York and prominent New Yorkers than anyone else, has gotten Beacon Press to publish his book on Samuel Battle. Arthur Browne has taken the revised manuscript, interviewed Battle's surviving friends and relatives, researched more, even changed the title, and presented his book on Samuel Battle, not in color, but in black and white—and sometimes black versus white. Because when you pull the shade up and look out the window on race relations in America, it's not a pretty picture. I am, of course, referring to Black and White America as it was from the early 1900s to

the 1950s. Or am I? There will be those who will adamantly refuse to read this book, yet will still sing God Bless America. Are you one of them?

Wendy says

The history behind this book is just astonishing. To realize what the black man suffered at the hands of white man, not so long ago, is disgusting and inhumane. I am glad to be more educated about our history as a nation and to be inspired by Battle, who lived an exemplary life of remarkable courage.

I have to say though, that this was a very tedious read for me. It felt exactly like a history textbook and I had a hard time staying focused and getting through. The author went down so many rabbit trails in this book that it felt like he was just trying to fill the number of pages he was required to write.

Michael Jones says

Really enjoyed this. Very gritty and shows a different side of life than we are used to today. There is much wisdom for some of today's issues. The man was very gifted and had a really tough uphill struggle but continued to be winsome and actually kind in the midst of very difficult trials that would cause most to give up.

Tim says

I found this to be an eye opening biography with both triumphant and tragic episodes. It illuminates the great struggle Battle faced and how his courageous efforts led him to usually come through, but not unscathed. It offers a great look at the history of our nation and does not avert the reader from some of the more horrific deeds & practices of the times.

I would like to see this made into a long form TV documentary such as what can be found in the several streaming services (I doubt a movie could tell the tale adequately given time constraints).
