



Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle to End Segregation

Rawn James Jr.

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The riveting story of the two crusading lawyers who led the legal battle to end segregation, one case and one courtroom at a time. The Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* is widely considered a seminal point in the battle to end segregation, but it was in fact the culmination of a decades-long legal campaign. *Root and Branch* is the epic story of the two fiercely dedicated lawyers who led the fight from county courthouses to the marble halls of the Supreme Court, and, in the process, laid the legal foundations of the civil rights movement. Charles Hamilton Houston was the pioneer: After becoming the first African-American on the *Harvard Law Review*, he transformed the law school at all-black Howard University into a West Point for civil rights advocacy. One of Houston's students at Howard was a brash young man named Thurgood Marshall. Soon after Marshall's graduation, Houston and Marshall opened the NAACP's legal office. The abstemious, proper Houston and the folksy, easygoing Marshall made an unlikely duo, but together they faced down angry Southern mobs, negotiated with presidents and senators, and convinced even racist judges and juries that the Constitution demanded equal justice under law for all American citizens. Houston, tragically, would die before his strategy came to fruition in the *Brown* suit, but Marshall would argue the case victoriously and go on to become the first African-American Supreme Court justice--always crediting his mentor for teaching him everything he knew. Together, the two advocates changed the course of American history.

Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle to End Segregation Details

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From Reader Review Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle to End Segregation for online ebook

Elyssa says

I won this in the Goodreads book give-away. The story of the lives of Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall was interesting, especially when their lives intersected.

The author outlines their tireless efforts as they fought individual cases of unjust segregation in higher education and employment. All of this led to the historic Brown vs. The Board of Education suit. This is also my main criticism of the book. It seemed like the author wanted to quickly finish his book and did not spend enough time outlining the preparation for this case as well as the courtroom drama involved. Overall, if this book went a bit deeper, it would warrant a five star rating.

Steven Yenser says

The fascinating story of the lesser-known civil rights cases that led to Brown v. Board of Education, and the dedicated people who won (or occasionally lost) them.

Tim Elston says

This is a first-rate biography of Houston and Marshal, two leading civil rights attorneys whose efforts led the nation from the early days of the 1930s, when black Americans were still being lynched and were not allowed to sit on juries, to the moment in history when the "separate but equal" doctrine was overturned on the grounds that segregation was inherently unequal. The author takes the reader on a journey through the crucial legal cases of these men's careers, each of which is riveting on its own terms and offers a window into a recent American past that still held African Americans under systemic discrimination. I previously knew Marshal had been a former Supreme Court justice, but I had no knowledge of his career previous to that appointment. Due to the success of his and Houston's history changing efforts, our society can look back, not least through this biography, and, despite any other political differences, esteem them with great admiration for their work that freed millions of people from America's disgraceful Jim Crow legacy.

Sharyn L. says

Received my copy 1/14/10. Looking forward to starting it soon.

1/30/10 First few paragraphs are gripping. Should be an interesting non-fiction read after finishing "The Help."

2/20/10 I'm still reading reading this book. It is excellent, compelling writing. My only "complaint" is that there is so much detail, I can only read a few pages before I need to take a break to "process" it. I will definitely finish it; it will just take some time and occasionally a need to read some light fiction.

What amazes me about this account is the recounting of the meticulous, deliberate steps taken by those active in the Civil Rights movement. The intelligence and courage of the men and women is amazing. History books tend to gloss over the details of a court case and just report the outcome. But it is becoming clearer to me that each step along the road to the outcome is setting a firm foundation for future actions.

I highly recommend this book. My only reason for giving it 4 stars instead of 5 is that the details can be a bit overwhelming at times.

4/17/10 Officially putting this book aside. While I enjoyed it, I need some "escapist" literature. I hope to finish it at some point.

Kate says

I was the winner of this particular title from the first reads section of this site. Being a Baltimore native I thought I was pretty familiar with this portion of history especially since it dealt with Thurgood Marshall, one of our local heroes. This account of the struggle against segregation and the steps involved in that long and trying process grabbed me from the beginning. The account alternates between Thurgood and his Mentor as their lives come together and how they work toward the common goal of equal rights. The way in which this was written really make the characters and events come alive and make you impatient to turn the page and find out more. I was very impressed with this book and it will hold a permanent place on my shelves. I highly recommend it to anyone who thinks they know how these legal battles unfolded. You will be pleasantly surprised.

Nicolas Pernas says

Great historical narrative of the important NAACP legal work done by Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall

Gail says

Born in the late 1950's, I was impressed with what I didn't know about the history behind my country's racial struggles. I now have a long list of people to add to my ongoing knowledge. The only thing that prevents *Root and Branch* from being a 5-star read is that it is dry and tough going in some spots, but the information to be gleaned is well worth the effort.

Raven Moore says

This book reminds you that a very few but strong group of people fought all their lives in order to make the US a place where all people could walk, talk, and be freely. And, it makes you realize that the reason why we still have problems today is because we never actually implemented Brown vs. Board of education in every town or even in every state. We are still largely segregated and thus largely disconnected with what it means to be and love a human being.

J.D. says

Going into this, I have to admit my knowledge of Marshall, White and Houston was limited to what small amount would have been offered in any of my History classes. Needless to say, that did not amount to much and I being in my 20's I am of the age that has a hard time comprehending that the events in these books were so recent. I have certainly seen my share of racism in my life, but can not fathom a time where there could be such rampant discrimination(although that rabbit trail is not worth following here). Because of this, however, I find it encouraging and exciting to learn of the struggle that took place for folks that are not Caucasian males to overcome and begin to gain appropriate standards for all.

His discussion of the beginning stages of Howard Law School are among the most fascinating in the book. In fact, it almost seems as if this was one of the main events that seemed to get proper attention given towards it in such a small book. It seeks to cover what appears to be an insurmountable amount of events and time and fails to hone in on what seems to be the true focus. While everyone moves forward into the climax of these big court cases being won, we are given excess information of what precedes it as opposed to the final moments which are unfortunately rushed to an abrupt end.

All this said, however, the story is extremely fascinating, but I would just rather have read separate books on each part so I could get more detail about each. The book is extremely well researched and includes a large bibliography which can point to many other different resources that might be better suited for each part. While it did not always flow fluidly, there was still enough in it that made it very worthwhile to read.

Violinknitter says

I had almost no idea of the long legal wars fought in the decades before Brown vs. the Board of Education to even make the decision possible.

The book covers a great deal of historical territory in an engaging and succinct manner. I listened to the Audible version, which was engrossing. I'm assuming the experience of reading it on the page would be similar.

I can't recommend this title highly enough.

Jeffrey says

I won this book in a First Reads Giveaway

In an all too brief book, Rawn James Jr. manages to simultaneously educate and frustrate the reader with excellent prose that does not delve deeply enough into the subject matter.

In dividing his limited page count, 235 pages of text plus footnotes & index, between profiling Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, and illustrating their attempts to end segregation, James fails to really do service to either.

James covers the basic premise of each trial and indicates their outcome but doesn't really dive into courtroom events. Similarly he attempts to depict the relationship between Houston and Marshall but somehow can't get beyond generalizations about their personalities.

It's not that the volume does bad job of listing the events leading up to *Brown vs Board of Education*, but it constantly leaves the reader expecting more and doesn't deliver.

In the end, it serves as sort of a history-lite volume: better than you got in school, but probably not well suited to the dedicated history buff.

Tommy says

An uninformed reader would think this is a book strictly about *Brown v. Board of Education*, but a couple of things quickly become apparent. First, the Brown case does not come until the very end of the book. Rawn James, Jr. rightly demonstrates that it is only the climax of a decades-long series of legal battles over segregation. In the twenty years before Brown, there was a lot of tension to get through and a lot of groundwork to be laid through court cases that established precedents--usually risking lives and careers in the process.

The other focus of this book is the friendly, mentoring relationship between Charles Houston, Dean of Howard University's School of Law, and his younger protege Thurgood Marshall. The lesser-known Houston turns out to be a dynamic figure who transforms Howard's law school from a night school into the prestigious program it is today. His leadership appears stubborn and elitist, but is borne out of an abiding concern for the African-American community and a refusal to lower his standards for anybody. Root and Branch is an engaging, swiftly moving introduction to the legal side of the civil rights movement that will fill in the (big) gaps most people have between *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown*.

Jessica says

I never thought that a book about historical law could be so fascinating and compelling. Even though I knew the history, reading about it from this perspective made it new to me, and I couldn't turn the pages fast enough.

Robert Owen says

Rawn James' "Root and Branch" is an interesting deep dive into the pre-Brown v. Board of Education life of Thurgood Marshall and a fascinating review of the long-term strategy devised by Marshall's mentor, Charles Hamilton Houston, to achieve the landmark Supreme Court decision. The Civil Rights Movement, for all its passion and conflict, did not just spring from the soles of Rosa Parks' tired feet one day when she decided she'd had enough and would not relinquish her seat on a Montgomery bus. It was the culmination of decades of tireless work by a generation of reformers such as W.E.B. DuBoise, A. Philip Randolph and Walter White (just to name a few) who each, in their own way, contributed to the political, legal and moral groundswell that captured conscience of the nation in the mid-1950's and 1960's. Charles Hamilton Houston and his protégée, Thurgood Marshall belong to this group of inspired pre-Brown activists whose work made the Civil Rights Movement possible.

The book briefly sketches Houston's early life (including his military service in WWI), and begins in earnest with his appointment as dean of Howard's School of Law. At the time of his appointment the school was really little more than an unaccredited adjunct program. Houston, however, recognizing that the civil rights cause would require top flight lawyers, set about to transform Howard's program into a fully accredited institution which, when he was done, became one of the premier law schools in the nation. One of the accredited program's first, and ultimately, most famous graduates was Thurgood Marshall.

Working for the NAACP, it was Houston who outlined the strategy aimed to overturn the Supreme Court's 1896 Plessey v. Ferguson decision that established "separate but equal" as the law of the land under which racial segregation was constitutionally justified. The strategy was to take Plessey at its word and embark upon a program of litigation designed to compel states to live up to their impossible obligation to provide "equal" accommodations with respect, specifically, to education. The book goes on to recount the principal cases fought by Houston and Marshall through the NAACP in furtherance of Houston's strategy.

In addition to the many tactical battles fought on the road to Brown, the book also works well as a dual-intimate portrait of two brilliant lawyers, civil rights legends and friends. Any story of the Civil Rights Movement inevitably turns to the internal battles for primacy among competing egos. The story of Marshall and Houston, however, is the rare exception. Throughout their lives and regardless of their individual accomplishments, the two men maintained a bond of mutual respect, trust and loyalty towards each other. James' book does a great job bringing this close relationship to life.

"Root and Branch" a well-written book that is well worth the time.

Karl Worsham says

A truly excellent (and digestible) account of the legal campaign to end segregation, especially school desegregation. Also, everyone should know (much) more about Charles Hamilton Houston.
