



THE LITERARY HILL

A Compendium of Readers, Writers, Books, & Events

BY
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An Officer and a Gentleman

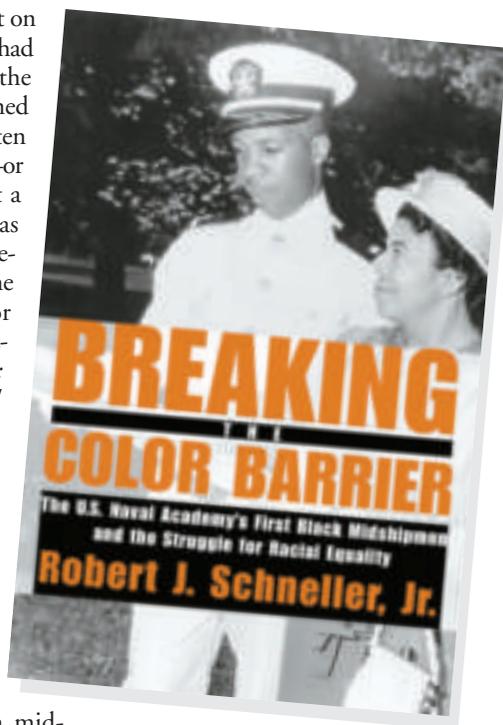
Historian Robert Schneller of the Naval Historical Center tells the story of the native Washingtonian who was the first African American to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy in *Breaking the Color Barrier: The U.S. Naval Academy's First Black Midshipmen and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. "There was a time in America when most collegiate and professional teams would rather lose than play with someone like Michael Jordan or Jerry Rice," he says. "That kind of attitude permeated the armed services. It mystifies me." So mystified was Schneller that he veered off from a research project he had begun in 1995 on the Navy's post-World War II personnel policies to explore the subject of integration in more depth. That's when he met Wesley Brown.

"Since he was the first African American Naval Academy graduate, I thought it logical to ask him for an interview," he recalls. "That interview lasted for six hours. I found Commander Brown's story much more interesting than the subject I was working on." He wrote a pamphlet on Brown's experience, but felt that he had barely scratched the surface. In the course of his research, he had learned not only that little had been written about integration of the Academy—or of the Navy as a whole—but that a rich lode of resource material was waiting to be mined. Schneller's careful study of those resources led to the publication of *Breaking the Color Barrier*, and will be followed by a second book, *Blue, Gold, and Black: Racial Integration of the U.S. Naval Academy*.

Schneller's initial purpose was to answer the question, "Why did it take until 1949 for the Naval Academy to graduate an African American?" Eventually, he expanded his focus to cover the entire evolution of the Academy's racial policy through the end of the 20th century, as well as the experiences of African American mid-

shipmen through the Class of 1999. He notes that many young midshipmen today have not experienced the kind of discrimination that Wesley Brown faced when he entered the Academy in 1945, "so they are both saddened by the attitudes Brown had to face and heartened by his triumph." Brown himself, who retired in 1969 and still lives in D.C., reflects on the changes. "You look back and, sure, it was pretty tough in 1945," he recalls, "because the senior officers didn't feel that there was a place for black officers, that they couldn't command white enlisted men."

Brown is also quick to put the book into its larger context. "Even though there's a picture of me and my mother on the dust cover, it's not a biography of me," he maintains. "This is a textbook on civil rights that parallels the country's racial relations. It's one thing for the Commander-in-Chief to put out an order, another for the civilian population to accept it." Schneller acknowledges that, as important as Brown's accomplishment was, the breaking of the color barrier in 1949 was only the beginning of integration at the Academy. "While we've come a long way since World War II, prejudice is not dead," he notes, "which makes it imperative that the military continue to emphasize that all people deserve equal opportunity, regardless of race, religion, or sex."



But it's clear that, for its author, the heart of the book remains Wesley Brown. "Despite growing up under legal segregation, he never lost his grip on the fact that bigots were simply wrong about black people," Schneller says. "I came to admire him a great deal. I merely write history. He made history."

Making the Grade

As a callow youth of 19, Kevin Kosar bragged to a girlfriend that, once he figured out what was wrong with education in America, he was going to write a book about it. Just the year before, at the age of 18, he had applied for an open seat on the school board of his hometown in Ohio. "Weird, right?" he says. "But my mother hammered into my hard head the importance of education." Last month, he made good on his promise with the publication of *Failing Grades: The Federal Politics of Education Standards*.

Kosar says that parents and teachers might be interested in his chapters on testing, standards, and the state of U.S. schools, and that "history buffs and

tending schools where they are being fed a dumbed-down curriculum," he says. "Unless public schools are required to teach children rigorous curricula, we will continue to see huge numbers of young people spend 12 or 13 years in school and emerge semi-literate, semi-skilled, and unable to find good jobs and live healthy lives."

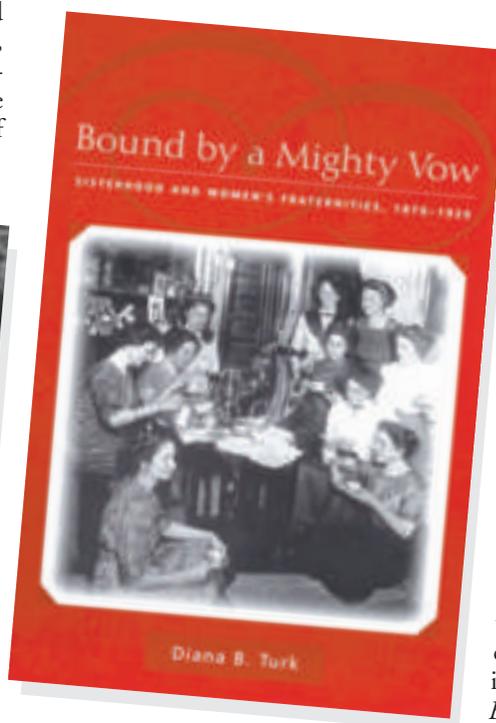
He is especially dismayed by the "notoriously bureaucratized" school system in the District. "Until the superintendent is empowered to clean out the incompetents and downsize the bureaucracy," he warns, "we'll continue to see young affluent parents refuse to set down roots in D.C.," opting instead to settle in areas with better schools. "We'll also continue to see large numbers of poor and non-white children, whose parents can't afford to move out of D.C., graduating unprepared for adult life or, worse yet, dropping out and living lives of crime and poverty."

While Kosar decries the D.C. public schools, there's much about Washington he admires. He came to the Hill in 2003, when he was offered a job as an analyst with the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress. "It gave me a chance to be in an academic environment, but one that is tightly tethered to the real world of politics, policy, and governance" he says. "I couldn't resist the opportunity." It was hard for him to leave New York, where he had attended graduate school, but he now enjoys life on the Hill. "I love the architecture and the sense that I'm living just a short walk from the seat of government. The Hill just oozes history."

Sisterhood is Powerful

When Diana Turk began teaching as a graduate student at the University of Maryland, she found herself confronted by a sea of deltas, kappas, and phis. "It seemed like half the students belonged to Greek organizations and wore the letters on their chests," she recalls. "I became intrigued." Her curiosity led to the publication this spring of *Bound by a Mighty Vow: Sisterhood and Women's Fraternities, 1870-1920*.

Initially, Turk planned to do an ethnographic study of female fraternities ("the term 'sorority' wasn't coined until 1882, well after many of these organizations were founded," she notes). She in-



Hill-watchers may find the description of the brawls in Congress over school policy eye-opening." But the bottom line of the book is a call for tougher federal education standards. "Huge numbers of children are at-