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For many, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other male leaders are the face of the Civil Rights Movement; they represent the struggle of African Americans to end systemic discrimination based on race. Katherine Mellen Charron’s *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* seeks to redefine the role of women within the movement by showing the foundation for change laid by female-led efforts to educate African Americans. Septima Clark (1898-1987), born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, dedicated her life to fighting against racial oppression, as a teacher of children and adults, and as an activist involved in a variety of community, regional, and national organizations. Most famously, in the late 1950s she used her teaching and leadership experience to design Citizenship Schools that empowered African Americans in the South by teaching basic skills such as reading and writing and by promoting

voter registration. As Charron’s narrative demonstrates, Clark addressed the needs of individual communities in order to help people help themselves.

The story is arranged chronologically. While the first half of the book seems distant from Septima Clark personally, this could be, as discussed in the text, due to local, cultural norms emphasizing “The classic difference among Charlestonians…that you don’t air your concerns, you don’t tell people stuff” (110-111). Information about Clark in her early years is thus gathered from Clark’s two autobiographies, Echo in my Soul and Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement. In this section, and throughout the text, Charron compares Clark’s stories with records and interviews in order to gain clarification and sometimes more accurate readings of the events. As Charron discusses in her footnotes to the third chapter, some of Clark’s omissions were due to social and political concerns. For instance, Clark’s characterization of her husband (who died shortly after their marriage) is very different in an autobiography that was written during the Civil Rights Movement then it was decades later when there was not the same pressure to avoid perpetuating negative images of black males.

Charron’s discussions about the history of race in Charleston, from slavery to Reconstruction to the emergence of Jim Crow laws, while not personal tales, do help the reader appreciate how Clark’s experiences were influenced by the social climate of her surroundings. The history also shows why education for their children was so important to Clark’s parents; they saw to it that she did not long suffer in substandard, segregated public schools. Clark’s experience in private school was far from the norm due to prohibitive costs and selective admissions, giving Clark an advantage among her peers. However, even her education and teacher training did not give her license to work in her hometown, which did not employ African American teachers.

Her early experiences as a teacher in a rural island school show Clark reaching her students and the community by using practices that would prove important in her later work
in Citizenship Schools. In the classroom, she would use the students’ interests as a base for learning. Importantly, she started to rethink her prejudices about those who lived in poverty, and she worked to gain John’s Island residents’ trust by learning about and taking part in their community. Additionally, she helped to educate more than just the children of the island by engaging in adult literacy programs. She also became interested in public health education for all community members. The idea of meeting people where they are recurs throughout the book. Clark found that successful educational projects required taking the community’s needs into consideration.

The second half of the book, which spans from the post-World War II era through her passing, bridges the distance between Septima Clark and the broader history of the Civil Rights Movement. Though still mainly focused on her career and activism, Charron’s frequent inclusion of Clark’s own words, made available through letters and interviews, brings richness and authenticity to the narrative. Clark’s experiences within social and activist organizations show the unique position from which she had to navigate due to both her race and gender. Although active throughout her life, her political involvement escalated significantly once she moved back to Charleston in 1947. Likely a product of her own experiences, she increasingly saw the importance of empowering the women in the communities that she entered. Clark recognized that strong community ties could provide support where apathetic or hostile local, state, and federal agencies failed. Clark’s focus on providing education based on community needs served to create a strong foundation for such community relations.

Charron discusses Clark’s maturation as an activist by exploring the influence of leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Mary McLeod Bethune as well as Clark’s participation in clubs and organizations such as the NAACP, the black YWCA, and the National Council of Negro Women. Her work with the YWCA necessitated working with the white women who ran the white YWCA, and Charron draws in the history of race relations within the Y. Clark’s later relationship with the controversial federal court judge J.
Waties Waring and his outspoken wife, Elizabeth gave her a new perspective because, Clark explains, “Having been reared in an environment away from all white people it has been hard to feel comfortable just sitting and talking together” (198). Her friendship with the Warings allowed Clark to learn from them new ways to navigate politics. Clark’s work with the Highlander Folk School, beginning with a 1953 workshop and becoming more permanent when she joined the staff in 1955, started a new chapter of her life even as it drew upon the skills that decades of experience brought her. She helped create Citizenship Schools to teach literacy to African Americans so that they could meet requirements that stood in the way of their ability to vote.

Clark brought with her the practices that she had first employed nearly forty years earlier on John’s Island, including engaging in adult literacy and meeting members of the community where they were to address their needs beyond the initial act of getting the vote. Clark knew that they were not simply adding voters to the rolls, but they were also creating community leaders who would carry on the work of fighting for civil rights. Charron notes that by “Uniting practical, political, and economic literacy, Clark intended to guarantee that newly enfranchised African Americans made informed decisions and remained active citizens after leaving the voting booth” (248). Clark very much advocated for leadership positions for women and creating lessons that relied on the contextual experience of each individual community. Clark saw that, “One thing spreading out starts others. It’s like the pebble thrown in the mill pond” (259). Lessons that led a community toward self sufficiency would increase community members’ confidence, positively affecting future grassroots efforts to mobilize for rights. Though Highlander Folk School founder Myles Horton appreciated Clark’s experience and ability to connect with communities, he did not always value her judgment. Like in the broader Civil Rights Movement, male leadership was emphasized as Horton negotiated for the takeover of Citizenship School operations and made decisions about Clark’s future without consulting her. Septima Clark’s struggles to be heard led to frustration, as her contributions would often be dismissed in a male-dominated movement.
The role of female educators was undervalued, as Clark explains, because “direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotions...that most young people prefer demonstrations over genuine education” (319). Though unglamorous, the foundational education projects gave African Americans the confidence and the community support to participate in activities that actively opposed the dominant power structure. In spite of her differences with Horton, Clark’s second autobiography defended the school, because like her earlier work, she appreciated that her narrative carried social and political consequences. Charron seeks to strengthen her argument that Clark’s difficulties in being heard were due to her gender by incorporating into the text correspondence between Clark and Horton, as well as correspondence in which Horton works to undermine the credibility of Clark’s positions. Additionally, Charron uses Clark’s Ready from Within and interviews to show Clark’s take on how women were valued in the movement. Clark argued that “‘the way the men looked at the women’ [w]as ‘one of the weaknesses of the civil rights movement’” (342).

Charron’s story of Septima Clark and the African American struggle for rights is well researched. Charron brings life to the narrative by using a wide range of primary sources, such as interviews, newspaper articles, and census data. Charron also draws upon the work of others by referencing an impressive range of secondary sources about schooling, race, and the South.

Charron’s twelve years of research is evident in her ability to write such a coherently crafted story of Septima Clark. Charron’s portrait of Clark’s life and legacy is an important addition to the history of the Civil Rights Movement and the contribution of female educators within that movement. Charron successfully weaves Clark’s story with a narrative on the broader social and political issues, bringing to life both the history of the woman and the times. By using a broad range of sources and routinely including Septima Clark’s own words, Charron conveys a story rich with authenticity. The book is a testament to the hard work undertaken by Clark and others in an effort to use education in order to
empower African American communities to work toward overcoming discrimination and oppression. Clark devoted her life to education and activism, and her story remains relevant in an era where racial discrimination still exists, though more quietly, in poorly equipped, segregated schools.

About the Reviewer

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