

Carol Polsgrove

Professor of Journalism

As the daughter of American missionaries to Nigeria, Carol Polsgrove grew up knowing what it was like to be on the outside looking in. Home-schooled, she early on made books her constant companions, finding in the words of others a refuge for her sense of isolation and an outlet for her increasingly curious and restless mind. Books swept her into the very center of unknown realities, and years later, a stranger in the United States, she grew convinced that those with the capacity to cross social barriers and see what others have not seen can, and indeed should, work to illuminate those unseen worlds. Writers, she came to believe, can matter, not just to individuals, but also to entire communities and cultures. It is a conviction that drove her work as a journalist covering hidden social injustices and the often slow degradation of the environment. It is a conviction that later motivated much of her academic work on politically and culturally significant writers and editors, and one that she passed on to generations of aspiring journalists and academics in her classes.

An affinity for crossing and recrossing boundaries, particularly those often erected between the academy and the more freewheeling worlds of politics and journalism, revealed itself in the late 1960s as Carol worked on her doctorate in English literature from the University of Louisville. At the same time she began her teaching life, she worked for the Associated Press and the *Lexington Herald-Leader* and freelanced for magazines and newspapers. Four years later, promoted to associate professor at Eastern Kentucky University, she took a year's leave of absence to freelance, mostly for the political magazine, *The Progressive*, from a rented apartment in the shadow of an oil refinery in Point Richmond, California. For the next dozen years, she devised ways to work as an editor and writer and a lecturer in journalism, based largely in the San Francisco Bay area, a region she embraced for its diversity and political verve and came to call "home." She wrote reviews and articles for a variety of magazines during this time and later, including *The Progressive*, *Sierra*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and the *American Prospect*, and she served as an editor for both *Mother Jones* and *The Progressive*.

Finally, in 1989, pressed to find secure employment to support herself and her young daughter, Cora, Carol found a permanent academic home in Indiana University's School of Journalism. It was here that she knit together the richly textured threads of her professional life, finding a strong academic focus writing histories of communities of editors and writers living through and contributing, in ways large and sometimes disappointingly small, to momentous periods of political and cultural change. Uninterested in traditional academic prose, she applied her considerable gifts as a writer and editor to fashion artful historical narratives derived from extensive archival research and in-depth interviews.

Carol's first book, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, But Didn't We Have Fun?: Esquire in the Sixties* (W. W. Norton, 1995) told the riveting story of the community of journalists who, under the creative leadership of editor Harold Hayes, produced a magazine that revealed the currents and undercurrents of the profound cultural shifts that marked the 1960s in this

country. The book was reissued in paperback by RDR Books (2001) under the title, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, But Didn't We have Fun?: Surviving the '60s with Esquire's Harold Hayes*.

A second book, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (W. W. Norton 2005), explored the boundary-crossing work of public intellectuals during the civil rights era, revealing the important gatekeeping roles of book and magazine editors and the often disquieting influence of the Cold War on intellectuals' public discourse. The book led to work on the advisory committee for *Reporting Civil Rights*, a two-volume anthology published by the Library of America.

A third book, nearing completion, returns Carol to her African roots. Tentatively titled *Writers in a Common Cause: Ending British Rule in Africa*, this book explores the work of West Indian and African writers who engaged in a publishing campaign against British rule in Africa from a base in London.

As a teacher, Carol was twice awarded the school's Gretchen Kemp Award for outstanding teaching. She created many new courses, including the Partisan Press, Journalism for Social Change, Magazines in the Sixties, the Media and the Civil Rights Movement, and Literary Journalism, which became a permanent course in the curriculum and a student favorite. Always interested in expanding her students' horizons (they have "insufficient primary reality," she once told a colleague), she took students on field trips to jails, courtrooms, city council meetings, the French Lick casino, and other places off the manicured campus path. She even took one group of graduate students to the Gulf, to cover the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi and Louisiana.

As a university citizen, Carol served on a variety of school and university committees where she could raise her voice for diversity and work to ensure that the voices of others were heard. She chaired the Bloomington Faculty Council mediation committee and served as a member of both the Commission on Recruitment and Retention of Non-White and Women Faculty and the statewide advisory committee of the Division of Labor Studies. Many younger faculty members, especially women, found in her a mentor who encouraged them without glossing over the challenges of academic life.

Now, on the verge of retirement, Carol describes herself as an Unreconstructed Californian who has somehow managed to find happiness in this slow-moving college town in the Midwest. But though she has found a hard-won personal contentment here, it is doubtful that she will shut her eyes to the discontents of the world around her. There are too many stories to be told, even in the heartland, and if Carol holds true to pattern, she will write some of these stories, proving once again that writers can matter.

S. Holly Stocking