
While she was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, Susan Griffin was placed on the FBI's "Security Index." Griffin was active in "Slate," a precursor of "The Free Speech Movement," wrote movie reviews for *The People's World*, picketed Woolworth's in sympathy with sit-ins in the South, and attended a few meetings of a class on Marxism. Her file got thicker when she marched down Market Street in a bathing suit to protest the embargo on Cuba and was crowned "Miss Right to Travel."

Forty years later Griffin's politics haven't changed all that much. A poet and the author of nineteen books, she has spoken out on eco-feminism, terrorism, and discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. In *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy*, Griffin tries to illuminate the interior life—the inner light—of democracy. Taking her title from an old slave song, she maintains that "democracy requires the equality it promises." More than a system of governance or the means for making improvements in the condition of individual lives, democracy feeds on and fosters a revolution in consciousness, with a commitment to reciprocity and mutuality at its core.

To examine democracy as a state of mind, Griffin juxtaposes autobiography, history, and political commentary. *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* jumps back and forth between a narrative of Griffin's often turbulent personal journey, criticism of the Bush Administration, and the words and deeds of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Rose Schneiderman, Jelly Roll Morton, and Rosa Parks. Through acts of brave defiance, the alchemies of empathy and influence, and "the light cast by even the smallest victory," she writes, Americans unchained themselves from conventions they found empty, "began to awaken bit by
bit to the dimensions of racism”—and found new solutions to suffering, including safety laws, Social Security, minimum wages, and Medicare. This "more inclusive and more ingenious vision of American democracy" can and should be applied to the "secret sores" that remain—"the land itself, the manner of production, the air we breathe, the quality of light."

*Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* can be charming and even lyrical, especially when Griffin revisits her childhood. When her parents divorced, she reveals, Griffin resided with her grandparents, and at age ten, demanded that the "Queen" and "Vice-King" grant her basic rights, like the freedom to stay after school for extracurricular activities.

The book's whole, however, is not greater than the sum of its parts. Griffin never wrestles with her own political principles. Nor does she shed much light on the tensions within democracy. When the Senate passes a bill authorizing spending for the war in Iraq but requiring that soldiers leave by the end of March 2008, Griffin rejoices "that the will of the people is being heard." When polls indicate that the public no longer approves of President Bush's performance in office, she concludes that "perhaps democracy is reviving now." A selective majoritarian, Griffin seems interested in the will of the people only when they agree with her.

Even more important, Griffin does not solve the mystery of the alchemies of empathy and influence. Although we are capable of lying to ourselves about others, she suggests, "some strange justice exists in the mind, the psychological propensity to answer one's lies with an inward disquiet." So, "when the timing is right, prejudices easily evaporate into thin air." And yet, people don't always react sympathetically to the sights and sounds of suffering. Inner deafness, hatred, and tribalism, Griffin insists, are not innate; they have to be taught. She may not be right.
"In the end," Griffin concludes, less hopefully, democracy may be neither more nor less than "a meeting." The main topic, we can guess, now and in the future, will probably be why we can't all get along.

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