



“Greg Bottoms is one of the most innovative and intriguing nonfiction writers at work, and this is his most powerful book to date, a crucial interrogation of whiteness, white supremacy, and the formation of one American lowest white boy.”

—Jeff Sharlet, author of  
*The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*

“Greg Bottoms takes readers on a journey through ignorance and enlightenment in this dazzling memoir about growing up white and working class in the slowly desegregating South. He treats his subjects with compassion as he explores the tangle of race relations in his childhood. *Lowest White Boy* should be read alongside *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, in that everyday experiences of racism are illuminated with rich and powerful meaning. A consummate storyteller, Bottoms brings to life a world that is rarely explored in contemporary conversations about racial strife. The result is a narrative that is as beautiful as it is instructive.”

—Emily Bernard, author of  
*Black Is the Body: Stories from My Grandmother’s Time, My Mother’s Time, and Mine*

West Virginia University Press

ISBN 978-1-946684-96-7

Publication Date: May 1, 2019

168pp | \$19.99

Contacts: Jeremy Wang-Iverson [jeremy@vestopr.com](mailto:jeremy@vestopr.com) • Abby Freeland [Abby.Freeland@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:Abby.Freeland@mail.wvu.edu)  
[wvupress.com](http://wvupress.com)

# Lowest White Boy

## By Greg Bottoms

**A**n innovative, hybrid work of literary nonfiction, *Lowest White Boy* takes its title from Lyndon Johnson’s observation during the civil rights era: “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket.”

Greg Bottoms writes about growing up white and working class in Tidewater, Virginia, during school desegregation in the 1970s. He offers brief stories that accumulate to reveal the everyday experience of living inside complex, systematic racism that is often invisible to economically and politically disenfranchised white southerners—people who have benefited from racism in material ways while being damaged by it, he suggests, psychologically and spiritually. Placing personal memories against a backdrop of documentary photography, social history, and cultural critique, *Lowest White Boy* explores normalized racial animus and reactionary white identity politics, particularly as these are collected and processed in the mind of a child.



Greg Bottoms is a professor of English at the University of Vermont. He is the author of many books, including *Angel-head: My Brother’s Descent into Madness*, *The Colorful Apocalypse: Journeys in Outsider Art*, and *Spiritual American Trash: Portraits from the Margins of Art and Faith*.

My mission is to link the personal life to the powerful shaping forces of history, politics, community, identity, and how white racism is a core current in American life in some obvious but many more hidden ways. Racism in the South, in particular, is at the cellular level.

# An Interview with Greg Bottoms

**What inspired you to write about racism from your boyhood experience?**

I've written a lot about the South and Virginia, and I've touched on racism many times and in different ways in other books, both fiction and nonfiction. I've thought about writing directly about white racism for a long time because it was so prominent in my childhood personal geography. But it is our political climate of rising racism and the pushing back on civil rights of all kinds that really made this feel urgent to me. Jeff Sessions was AG. Steve Bannon developed core ideas for the Republican candidate, now president. Stephen Miller is in the White House. Racism is the subtext and often the text of Trump's words. These men are white supremacist, first and foremost, and a solid minority of our country supports their ideas with votes. White ethno-nationalism is now a fundamental pillar of one of our two major American political parties and has a powerful media ecosystem that magnifies these views. I'm describing an objective, factual reality.

CONTINUES →



## An Interview with Greg Bottoms continued

### Was it difficult to write about the things that you did and thought at a very young age?

Part of what I do, I think, is write about the past and write about how memory works in a writing process, about authorship and the liminal nature of stories, big (social, historical, political) and small (personal, autobiographical, fragmentary). The core of each story is a powerful memory that has stuck with me, but the weaving of a tale to make sense of that memory in a personal and social sense is storytelling. I call the chapters memory-based stories in the prologue, intentionally and carefully using that phrase. Paul Auster says something along the lines of “memory is not truth; it is the way we experience the world.” That applies to collective memory, too. And my mission is to link the personal life to the powerful shaping forces of history, politics, community, identity, and how white racism is a core current in American life in some obvious but many more hidden ways. Racism in the South, in particular, is at the cellular level. The mythologizing of the Confederacy after the Civil War—in naming and statues and monuments, etc.—increased in intensity in relation to civil rights and more equality for black citizens. Personal, more enlightened feelings about race among white people do not ameliorate the structures of racism. I wanted creative writing practice to somehow carry all this. So, yeah, it was kind of difficult!

### How did you choose where to begin and where to end?

The opening and ending are essays, and those came late, as political/sociocultural framing. The interior stories move around in time. The first story is set in 1979, and I wrote that first. The last is set in 1976. I mean for the main story to be about the development of attitudes on race rather than episodic chronology.

### What was your process like as you wrote this book, or prepared for writing it?

Fits and starts. This is normal for me. I wrote a lot of short sections before I could see the whole. I pieced it all together along a line of argument about both the immorality of structural racism and how and why it remains unseen by so many white people. I write at the micro-level almost like a poet. But then at the macro-level I work more like a documentary filmmaker trying to edit and piece things together for clarity and maximum impact.

### How did you encounter and curate the photographs featured in your book?

The photographs are from the wonderful Valentine Museum of Virginia history in Richmond. I wanted the photographs to tell a story—another kind of essay—that focused on resistance to civil rights and integration. Photographs of Civil Rights in books mostly focus on the struggles of people of color as they fought for equal rights



## An Interview with Greg Bottoms continued

White  
ethno-  
nationalism  
is now a  
fundamental  
pillar of one of  
our two major  
American  
political parties  
and has a  
powerful  
media  
ecosystem  
that magnifies  
these views.  
I'm describing  
an objective,  
factual reality.

(fifty and sixty years after the first promises of equal rights after the Civil War and during Reconstruction). That is a positive story—and all villains (who are just people, like you and me) are often faceless and offstage. We still partially bury the story and the images about how average white people took part in such hate. But they took part in such hate—and lynchings before this—because they often didn't see it as hate. They rationalized all this through identity, politics, and culture. It was normalized. That psychological dynamic interests me most in *Lowest White Boy*.

**Were there chapters, images, or other details that you had to leave out of the finished work?**

Some things were left out. One photograph from 1958 in Norfolk, Virginia, was powerful but I left it out because it seemed so upsetting. It is an AP photograph of a white child, maybe ten, sitting on a bench, looking up at an effigy of a black man hanging from a tree outside of Maury High School. This school was maybe 15 miles from where I lived as a boy. Incidentally, this high school was near Eastern Virginia Medical School, where Virginia Democratic Governor Ralph Northam received his medical degree and was dressed in either black face or a KKK hood in 1984 in a yearbook photograph. That yearbook editors at EVMS published that in 1984, in a black city like Norfolk, says everything about the totalizing ideology of white supremacy and how it is utterly invisible to many whites even in 2019. That the deep legacy of racism is becoming less invisible now is causing ruptures daily, and at least parts of our political dysfunction.

**Did you learn anything new about your hometown by writing about its place in the history of segregation?**

I learned a lot about Virginia's deep history of racism. There is so much NOT in the book that I learned about Nat Turner, property rights laws, the KKK, etc.

**Who do you most wish would read *Lowest White Boy*?**

I'd like a broad, educated audience. Intellectuals of color have made these arguments going back to Frederick Douglass. I make no



## An Interview with Greg Bottoms continued

argument that DuBois or Baldwin didn't make long ago. But I wanted my lens on whiteness and white identity. White readers may encounter some of this as head-scratchingly new, or just upsetting. I'd like students to read it, honestly.

### **As you grew up, how did you learn to talk and write about race?**

I thought a lot about race all the time because it was so fraught and in view in Tidewater. I didn't learn how to think and talk about it until college, and even then only haltingly and with caution. You have to learn America's history of racism to understand our present moment and American social and political dynamics. You also need to flip the script, or "code switch," and think about why a white man killing almost 60 people in Las Vegas isn't a racial crime but it makes sense to have two blond, white women tape a Fox News show at the U.S.-Mexican border to talk about an invasion of not just potential but probable criminals when no one has been killed, and many of the brown people so feared are women and children.

### **Which books would you recommend for readers seeking honest representations of white privilege and racism?**

Some academic books helped me understand things. I recommend these: *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Odd Tribes* by John Hartigan, Jr., *Racism without Racists* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and *The History of White People* by Nell Irvin Painter.

There are many textbooks I'd also recommend: *Racism: A Short History*, by George Fredrickson and Albert Camarillo, *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches*, by John Hartigan, *Critical Race Theory*, edited by Kimberly Crenshaw.

In terms of creative nonfiction on race, a few of my favorites at the moment are *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, *The Dead Do Not Die* by Sven Lindqvist, *My Traitor's Heart* by Riann Milan, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehesi Coates, *Black Is the Body* by Emily Bernard, and *The Other* by Ryszard Kapuscinski. Brent Staples's *Parallel Time* is a great memoir that deserves a reprint. I really admire that book.

### **Can you say what your next project will be about?**

I'm working on a similar book, written in a similar vein, about white working-class attitudes as I experienced them around notions of education, vocation, and work.

