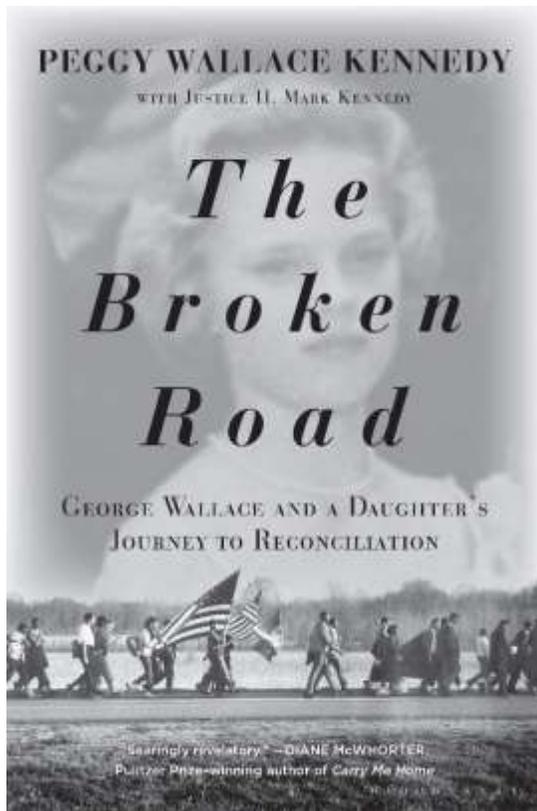


Allison's Book Corner November 2020

The Broken Road: George Wallace and a Daughter's Journey to Reconciliation by Peggy Wallace Kennedy with Justice H. Mark Kennedy

Whew, the reader really needs to take a deep breath before beginning to read this timely memoir. You are willingly taking a step back into the not-so-distant past that, chillingly, sounds a little like today.

Taking the journey with Peggy Wallace is worthwhile. I surprised myself by being in tears when I finished this book. I certainly was not crying for her late father George Wallace, who as the Governor of Alabama from 1963 to 1967 was a staunch segregationist and racist. He made the lives of the black citizens of his state practically unbearable. My tears were for Peggy herself. Sad tears for the young 12-year old girl who moved into the Governor's mansion in a season of hate created by her own father. Happy tears for the woman she has become. Peggy really dug deep in confronting who and what her father was and then discovering herself separate from the Wallace legacy. She takes us along on this sometimes-torturous personal path of discovery.



This is a very important book historically. Peggy Wallace is the daughter of *two* Governors of Alabama. Just recently I was watching a cable news show that opened with footage of George Wallace spewing hatred, and then his wife Lurleen (Peggy's mother) working the crowds when she ran to replace her husband. She won, and was the first female Governor of Alabama - though for a mere 15 months before dying of cancer. Our author was a high school senior. Peggy Wallace has known tragedy, loss and deep mourning, most of it lived in the public eye. All of these events took place before I was born, but like many of you I am very familiar with George Wallace's searing and painful legacy. This legacy lives on today. I need not recount all of the injustices that took place under his first reign as Governor of Alabama. They are well-documented history.

What I can tell you is that young Peggy had a front row seat. Her eyes were wide open to all that occurred. She loved her Daddy, but provides an unvarnished look

at the man he really was. Speaking about him, Peggy says, "He led a don't-blame-me kind of life. Daddy could justify anything. He was always blameless should things go wrong."

About his dogged pursuit of the office of Governor of Alabama, Peggy says, "...Daddy was willing to bend his moral universe toward power. As I would learn again and again in sometimes painful ways, he was ready to compromise not only himself but his family for the dream he had since he was a child - to be the Governor of Alabama." This insight explains how a young George Wallace went from being on the Board of the Tuskegee Institute (an all-Black university) to becoming the White supremacist we came to know throughout the United States.

What saves this book from being unbearably sad is Peggy's heartfelt writing style, the love of her maternal grandparents and her humor. Surprise! You will laugh at times reading this book. George Wallace's second wife came to the Governor's mansion with a mother named Big Ruby. I cannot repeat some of Big Ruby's words and actions here -- but she was a real character. George Wallace's third wife was also someone to be reckoned with. The book includes a scene where she actually climbs the gate to the Governor's mansion. I will not ruin the rest for you.

Sometimes, while reading this story, you can smell the camellias (the Alabama state flower) while being taken along on a slow Southern stroll. Peggy's Southern ways and politeness actually make parts of the book enjoyable. The title is a metaphor for both her and her father's lives, but also represents the actual "broken" road where her maternal grandparents lived. Their home was a place of solace and escape for Peggy and her mother.

Keep in mind that I have only skimmed here the surface of this historical memoir. George Wallace verbally abused his wife Lurleen whenever he was drinking and womanizing (which was often.) Young Peggy witnessed and internalized this behavior. Thus, we are not surprised when, many years after losing her mother and after the assassination attempt on her father, Peggy has a breakdown. She suffers from chronic depression. With the love and support of her strong husband and sons, Peggy fights back. She strives to change the Wallace legacy and leave something different behind for her sons and grandchild.

Civil rights advocate Peggy Wallace Kennedy has succeeded. Only someone without a heart cannot be moved when she marches with the late John Lewis across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where he had been beaten savagely by police deployed by her father. Or when she holds hands with Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. The two call each other sisters and have grown to truly love one another.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that George Wallace did live to repent and try to redress some of the damage he caused.

The Broken Road is not easy reading but it is **necessary** reading for both lovers of history and lovers of humanity.