



Sign My Name to Freedom: A Memoir of a Pioneering Life

Betty Reid-Soskin

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In Betty Reid Soskin's 96 years of living, she has been a witness to a grand sweep of American history. When she was born in 1921, the lynching of African-Americans was a national epidemic, blackface minstrel shows were the most popular American form of entertainment, white women had only just won the right to vote, and most African-Americans in the Deep South could not vote at all. From her great-grandmother, who had been enslaved until her mid-20s, Betty heard stories of slavery and the times of terror and struggle for black folk that followed. In her lifetime, Betty has watched the nation begin to confront its race and gender biases when forced to come together in the World War II era; seen our differences nearly break us apart again in the upheavals of the civil rights and Black Power eras; and, finally, lived long enough to witness both the election of an African-American president and the re-emergence of a militant, racist far right.

The child of proud Louisiana Creole parents who refused to bow down to Southern discrimination, Betty was raised in the Bay Area black community before the great westward migration of World War II. After working in the civilian home front effort in the war years, she and her husband, Mel Reid, helped break down racial boundaries by moving into a previously all-white community east of the Oakland hills, where they raised four children while resisting the prejudices against the family that many of her neighbors held.

With Mel, she opened up one of the first Bay Area record stores in Berkeley both owned by African-Americans and dedicated to the distribution of African-American music. Her volunteer work in rehabilitating the community where the record shop began eventually led her to a paid position as a state legislative aide, helping to plan the innovative Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California, then to a "second" career as the oldest park ranger in the history of the National Park Service. In between, she used her talents as a singer and songwriter to interpret and chronicle the great American social upheavals that marked the 1960s.

In 2003, Betty displayed a new talent when she created the popular blog *CBreaux Speaks*, sharing the sometimes fierce, sometimes gently persuasive, but always brightly honest story of her long journey through an American and African-American life. Blending together selections from many of Betty's hundreds of blog entries with interviews, letters, and speeches, *Sign My Name to Freedom* invites you along on that journey, through the words and thoughts of a national treasure who has never stopped looking at herself, the nation, or the world with fresh eyes.

Sign My Name to Freedom: A Memoir of a Pioneering Life Details

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From Reader Review Sign My Name to Freedom: A Memoir of a Pioneering Life for online ebook

Dixie Howard says

Powerful memoir!

Stacy says

Such a fascinating read. BRS has lived through and witnessed so much history, and worked hard at a wide variety of endeavors, including activist, singer/songwriter, wife/mother, small business owner, blogger, and park ranger. She is a true role model for how to live a long life instead of, as she puts it, an "extended death."

Mills College Library says

Biog S715s 2018

Nicole says

Betty Reid Soskin is probably best known for being America's oldest park ranger, and is generally described as a real-life former Rosie the Riveter. But her park ranger work is probably the least interesting thing about Ms. Reid Soskin, and as for the Rosie the Riveter title? Well, Ms. Reid Soskin doesn't claim it for herself, and the reasons why make for very enlightening reading.

Betty Reid Soskin describes herself as Creole, having been born into a racially diverse New Orleans family in 1921. She lived most of her life in the San Francisco Bay Area. The changes she witnessed are fascinating and attest to how fast things changed in the 20th century. In the early 1950s, for example, she had to watch a minstrel show at her son's Walnut Creek elementary school. By the 1970s, she was marching with Black Panthers. Over the decades she's been an activist, a singer-songwriter, a wartime file clerk, a mother of four, a blogger and now, naturally, a park ranger. It's quite a life and Betty Reid Soskin's story is quite a read.

It's not quite a conventional autobiography, having been Frankensteined together from audio interviews and blog entries. Not everything gets covered. But how would you fit a whole 96-year (and counting) life into one book? The gaps and odd segues aren't a major problem. The book offers a very interesting perspective on American history. As Ms. Reid Soskin explains, she realized at some point that when it came to recording wartime stories, "What was being remembered was dependent upon who was doing the remembering." This book goes a long way toward making sure that the 20th century, working-class African-American experience gets remembered.

Lauren Hough says

So thankful to have been able to interview and meet BRS and even better now to read about her beautiful, extensive life.

Jen says

This was pieced together from interviews and blog posts, so by definition it's not going to completely succeed as a book. But it does succeed on a topical level if you are interested in WWII, East Bay and/or New Orleans history, the struggles of POC in America, and old ladies' cool stories of back in the day. (I think one should be interested in all of those things). I'm glad my neighbor Betty told her story! I hope my shit is that together when I'm 96! (or even 70)

Claudia Schumann says

Excellent story of her life. Some errors and bad editing but on the whole the book was enjoyable to read.

Constance Chevalier says

Betty Reid-Soskin is a truly remarkable woman! So many events throughout her life! What an extraordinary woman! She lives in Richmond, Ca.

Mimi says

I'm biased toward this book, partly as I've taken my grandchildren to hear Betty talk at the Rosie the Riveter museum and also because her daughter Dorrie is one of my students where I'm a volunteer ceramic teacher at NIAD on Richmond, but besides that, this is a very honest, humble and intelligent memoir from an extraordinary woman.

Ann says

I was fortunate enough to attend a book signing run by Betty's extended family at Geoffrey's Inner Circle in Oakland and hear about this amazing woman. Betty is now 96 years old and, in her own words, has lived several lives. She talks about her early life in New Orleans and her love for her Maman who was born a slave.

Her next life was in California, living as the only black family in the suburbs while raising 4 children and running a music store in south. Berkeley. She discovered her voice while fighting prejudice in Walnut Creek.

Then she segued to the white world as the wife of a Cal professor while trying to save the black music store. As she worked to improve her south Berkeley neighborhood, she got involved with politics and was employed as a state legislative aide. This led to her work on rehabilitating the Richmond waterfront and the creation of the Rosie the Riveter museum.

Betty is very adamant that the Rosies were all white women. During the war, she worked as a file clerk in a segregated unit making sure all black employees were labeled temporary.

Now that she is in her 90's, she is working as the most famous ranger in the country, telling the WWII story from the minority's side. She is a real institution and her book is a gem.

Mary says

What a beautiful person. I am embarrassed to not have known about her before my friend gave me this memoir.
