



## **Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press**

*James McGrath Morris*

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Acclaimed biographer James McGrath Morris brings into focus the riveting life of one of the most significant yet least known figures of the civil rights era—pioneering journalist Ethel Payne, the “First Lady of the Black Press”—elevating her to her rightful place in history at last

For decades, Ethel Lois Payne has been hidden in the shadows of history. Now, James McGrath Morris skillfully illuminates this ambitious, influential, and groundbreaking woman's life, from her childhood growing up in South Chicago to her career as a journalist and network news commentator, reporting on some of the most crucial events in modern American history.

Morris draws on a rich and untapped collection of Payne's personal papers documenting her private and professional affairs. He combed through oral histories, FBI documents, and newspapers to fully capture Payne's life, her achievements, and her legacy. He introduces us to a journalist who covered such events as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, the service of black troops in Vietnam, and Henry Kissinger's 26,000-mile tour of Africa.

A self-proclaimed “instrument of change” for her people, Payne broke new ground as the Washington correspondent for the Chicago Defender. She publicly prodded President Dwight D. Eisenhower to support desegregation, and her reporting on legislative and judicial civil rights battles enlightened and activated black readers across the nation. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized Payne's seminal role by presenting her with a pen used in signing the Civil Rights Act. In 1972, she became the first female African American radio and television commentator on a national network, working for CBS. Her story mirrors the evolution of our own modern society.

Inspiring and instructive, moving and comprehensive, Eye on the Struggle illuminates this extraordinary woman and her achievements, and reminds us of the power one person has to transform our lives and our world.

## **Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press Details**

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James McGrath Morris**

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## **From Reader Review Eye on the Struggle: Ethel Payne, the First Lady of the Black Press for online ebook**

### **Judi Hendricks says**

I'm not sure how I want to describe this book. To say I found it fascinating is true, but too clinical for a book that moved me so emotionally.

As one television interviewer said, "Ethel Payne was one of the most important journalists you've never heard of." The main reason you've probably never heard of her is because she was African-American and she was a woman. And, as I realized a short way into the book, the title Eye on the Struggle has a double meaning. Struggle refers to the role the Black press played during the civil rights era, but just as surely it describes Ethel Payne's life and her trail-blazing career.

Born in 1911, she struggled against discrimination her entire life. Finding her desire to go to college thwarted and being ineligible for many jobs based on her race and gender, she nonetheless finally got hired as a reporter by the Chicago Defender, a prominent Black newspaper. Payne was a demon for work and for self improvement. She worked in Washington, even becoming a member of the White House Press Corps. She went to Japan during the occupation, reported on Black GIs' lives during the Korean War and Vietnam. She wrote extensively about the civil rights movement, even while she was active in it. As a writer, she said that she could not be objective about what she was covering, but she always strove to be fair. I found myself shocked by some of the conditions she endured and restrictions she overcame. The great gift McGrath Morris gives his readers is the way he brings Ethel Payne to life--not as simply an icon, an inspiring, crusading journalist--but as a very real woman whose struggle to achieve her dreams mirrored the struggles of people all over the world in the stories she wrote.

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### **Nancy says**

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Inspiring and instructive, moving and comprehensive, *Eye on the Struggle* illuminates this extraordinary woman and her achievements, and reminds us of the power one person has to transform our lives and our world. (less)

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BOOK CLUB didn't finish ok

### **Larry Kunz says**

Three and a half stars. While this is an informative biography of someone who was a major player in the Civil Rights movement, it disappoints in that it doesn't reveal the heart and mind of Ethel Payne: what motivated her, how she dealt with both her successes and her occasional missteps.

Of course, that might be inevitable. Writing more than 20 years after Payne's death, James McGrath Morris seems to have had little to go on except the remembrances of a few colleagues and, of course, Payne's own writings. As Morris points out, the lives of Payne and too many other Civil Rights figures have been all too soon forgotten. Perhaps this book will help rectify that injustice.

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### **Wendy Cosin says**

Ethel Payne's career as a reporter began in 1951 with the *Chicago Defender*, the preeminent African American newspaper. Although she had little training or experience, she had, as she told W.E.B. DuBois, "nerve, plenty of it". She covered all of the major civil rights actions in the 50's and 60's. She also covered presidential conventions, had White House press credentials, reported from Indonesia, Africa, China, and Viet Nam, and was the first female African American radio and television commentator on a national network.

Payne's experiences provide an important reminder of the details of segregation, as well as the ins and outs of passage and implementation of civil rights legislation. I was particularly interested in the wrangling over the 1957 Civil Rights Act, including LBJ's and JFK's roles in stalling it and then watering it down. LBJ, of course, came around after JFK's assassination when he strongly supported the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The biographer did extensive research on Payne's life, achievements, and legacy. Among the many notable moments: grilling President Eisenhower, Nixon's attendance at a party at her DC apartment, her experience as an "American Negro celebrity" at the first international conference of Asian and African leaders, and a personal encounter with Richard Wright. In *Eye on the Struggle*, the author gives us personal stories and insights from a very important time in American history.

Excerpts, including re: Selma: [www.eyeonthestruggle.blogspot.com](http://www.eyeonthestruggle.blogspot.com)

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### **Jessica says**

I was not familiar with Ethel Payne, although her byline was prominent in African-American papers in Chicago when I was a child. In an era when journalism was as segregated as anything else, Payne wrote about the civil rights movement and the struggles of African Americans in the middle part of the 20th century. Morris' straightforward prose chronicles her long and fascinating life and what Payne called "a box seat" to some of the pivotal events of the time. Payne's perspective as a black woman and journalist provides a fresh lens through which to view the era. Recommended. I have a copy if local people want to borrow it.

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### **Susan Beecher says**

Truly fascinating book about a woman who became a first rate journalist despite many obstacles. One of the most interesting things about this book is Ms. Payne's participation in so many of the interesting events that happened in her lifetime. Highly recommend this book.

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### **Sarah says**

This book is the epitome of why I'm reading through the biography list that I am - Ethel Payne is a woman whose name I'm not sure I've ever heard before, yet her contributions to history are phenomenal! Furthermore, her story of covering the civil rights movement naturally leads to learning more about the movement itself, and for me, this time it was done from the perspective of the black press (which is certainly not quite what the history textbooks present). There's also room within the story to think about what it does mean to be a good journalist, to have strong press coverage, to be informed about current events and international affairs - although these themes are forced on the reader, they're there and worth considering. Over and over, one sees where Payne stood on such issues...believing that she should not just report change or lack thereof, but be a part of creating it. Her activism and work ethic are inspiring on any level, especially given how few breaks she got in life, and it was legitimately sad to read of the lack of respect, attention, and remembrance she received towards the end of her life (made even more ironic by the outpouring of posthumous awards). Eye on the Struggle is an important contribution with an important subject - well worth reading!

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### **Katie/Doing Dewey says**

**Summary:** A nuanced, engaging portrayal of an amazing woman!

Ethel Payne was an incredible woman. She served as a journalist for one of the most influential papers of the civil rights era. She covered events including "the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, the service of black troops in Vietnam, and Henry Kissinger's 26,000-mile tour of Africa." (source) She also helped run a social club at a military base in Japan; took leadership roles in civil rights organizations; and met every president from some time in the 60's through the 80's.

Ethel Payne led an impressive and varied life. Her accomplishments would be impressive in any era, but are even more so given the sexism and racism she faced at the time. That's enough to make this an important read, but not necessarily an enjoyable one. Fortunately, the author did this great story justice by writing an engaging and enjoyable narrative. He used quotes extremely effectively to tell much of the story in Ethel's own words. And you can tell why she succeeded as a journalist - her words brought her story vividly to life.

Although the author clearly admired Ethel and left me admiring her too, he still managed to present a nuanced portrayal of her life. Her agreements and disagreements with civil rights leaders were particularly interesting. She also chose to mix activism with journalism because that was what she believed was the ethical decision. This question of a journalist's responsibilities to uphold both professional obligations and human rights struck me as still very relevant today.

*I read this book for Platypire's Diversity Challenge.*

This review was originally posted on Doing Dewey

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### **Frank Ogden says**

Wonderful biography about the first African-American reporter.

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### **Ari says**

IQ N/A

I knew I needed to read this biography of Ethel Payne after this book/her name was referenced in the recently released book, *The Defender*, which chronicles the history of the Chicago Defender. I was displeased to discover I'd never heard of Ethel Payne even though I'd been to the Newseum (I probably just forgot her name but that won't happen again!) and I was transfixed by this legendary woman who had connections to Chicago and DC much like I did. The difference being that when she's in Chicago she aches to be in DC and when I'm in Washington all I want is to be home in Chicago (maybe if I was an accomplished journalist I too would prefer DC but I'm skeptical). She has an exhilarating story, managing to witness a variety of historical occasions and forging a path for other female and Black journalists.

There's a great attention to detail in this biography, almost every historical moment is finely dissected. We not only learn about how Ethel felt about the story of the day but also how that story came about and a bit of personal history surrounding the players involved. I found it fascinating that Ethel was so taken with Richard Nixon and that she wasn't the only Black leader who liked him (Jackie Robinson did too at first as I recently read), it was a more nuanced look at the disgraced president than I expected. He wasn't a crucial part of the book but the author still took time to set the scene and provide context as to why Ethel felt Nixon could be trusted and then why she later turned on him. Ethel is also a major proponent not of being objective in journalism, but of being fair. She openly acknowledges that she cannot write about race in an unemotional or detached way but that will not deter her from telling these stories. She does not want to criticize Black leaders which I get although I don't agree with it but her biographer does a good job of explaining why Ethel viewed that as a betrayal. And Ethel was refreshingly human in this biography, she is not sanitized or portrayed as saintly. There were times where I definitely felt she overreacted (she was petty in her later years!) and was too hard on people and other times she was agonizingly relatable such as when she reflected

on her lack of romantic relationships throughout her life. Ethel managed to truly be in the eye of every major historical storm and she traveled all over the world, she personified a life well lived and I am so glad her story is now being told. I hope it gets more attention, it broke my heart to hear a scholarship in her name given by NABJ no longer exists due to lack of funding. A finely told story and richly written which makes it easy to fly through its pages.

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### **Naomi says**

Very well written and easy to follow. This woman was amazing.

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### **BMR, LCSW says**

What a great biography of an absolute legend of journalism. I had never heard of Ms. Payne before this year, which is a crying shame!

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### **Nyasha Junior says**

See my review for the Washington Independent Review of Books [here](#).

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### **Julie says**

Biography of the journalist Ethel Payne, one of the first African-American women to work as a Washington correspondent, who was on the forefront of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and a leader and role model in advancing the rights of women and minorities worldwide. She met and interviewed so many people who were cornerstones of 20th century history, including every U.S. president from Eisenhower to Reagan, and many heads of state from other nations. Inspiring, fascinating, and comprehensive in scope - her vantage in terms of important political events was impressive. The author concludes that she is not well-remembered today, but there is an exhibit about her life at Washington's "Newseum," which I hope to visit at some point. A riveting read for students of journalism, women's studies, and African-American studies.

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### **Jill Ortner says**

Good biography. For readers' who want to know what it was like to cover the civil rights movement from the perspective of a black woman reporter working for one of the most important Black Press publications, The Chicago Defender, this book is the answer. Ethel Payne was in the Supreme Court press gallery when the Brown vs. Board of Education decision was read; she was in Montgomery listening to Martin Luther King before anyone from the New York Times or the Washington Post knew who he was. She marched in Selma and was with the VIP's at the Lincoln Memorial to hear MLK's "I have a dream" speech. The writing is engaging and the stories are memorable. Highly recommended.

