

Let's Get WORKING Great People Histories CHICAGO CELEBRATES STUDS TER

Reading Studs Terkel's *"Good War: An Oral History of World War II"* was a revelation in 8th grade history class. For too long, I had been inundated by "Great Men History"—an obsession with white and male individuals who propelled history forward. I'm talking about the Abraham Lincolns, Theodore Roosevelt, and Winston Churchills of the world. Studs Terkel's book, on the other hand, placed importance on "ordinary" people, people who lived the history that I, as an 8th grader, only saw from the top down. This book changed my view of the practice of history. It would begin a lifetime love of the lived history of men and women at all levels of life.

Studs was interested in everybody. In his memoir, *Touch and Go*, he said, "'Ordinary' is a word I loathe. It has a patronizing air. I have come across ordinary people who have done extraordinary things." He has recorded the words of so many who have helped to change the world with small but important actions.

One of my favorite parts of Studs' work is his value of women's voices. Even today, we struggle to bring women's experiences into mainstream historical discussion. His oral narratives reveal how relatively unknown women from all parts of life helped change our everyday lives.

Florence Scala, for instance, tried to fight City Hall about the demolition of her beloved Near West Side Italian neighborhood and the Hull House settlement house. Studs also recorded women who accidentally found themselves in the position of activists, like Diane Romano, another housewife in the Near West Side neighborhood. In *Division Street*, she recalls, "And me, who'd've thought that me, a mother with six kids, would get up and speak at the city council? And I did, I made three speeches...I was surprised when I spoke up, my voice was so strong."

Studs also interviewed Eva Barnes who ended up starting a union at a meat packing plant. She remembers, "Nobody represented us. So the men were organized, but we women weren't. So, there was a fella, Bob Riley, he come up and he asked me, 'Eva, how would you like to organize your women?'" She seized this opportunity to organize and was so effective as an organizer that Bob Riley told her, "'Don't organize so fast.'" But she continued her work, trying to close the gender pay gap at

the plant. She recalls, "We're doing the same kind of work men are doing, trimming meat, sharp'ning our own knives, why don't we get paid the same like the men?... So I told him, I said, 'When we get union in, we're gonna get the same wages.'"

Studs Terkel also interviewed other women whose contributions are less obvious. In *Division Street*, Mrs. James Winslow of Evanston discussed her family's efforts at integrating Evanston. She recalls how her family faced social isolation after her husband, a real estate agent, showed a house to an African American family. But the Winslows had no regrets. She said, "From then on, we really knew where we stood." They believed that God's love should be extended to everyone, regardless of race. Government can make anti-discrimination laws and laws to allow integration, but we need pioneers like the Winslows, Terkel's book suggests, who are willing to fight for integration on a societal level.

In addition to these social pioneers, Studs Terkel recorded the efforts of women who made their mark in an even more personal ways. He interviewed Nancy Dickerson, an African American hospital aide and grandmother, who fought for her grandson's education. She explained to Terkel, "Let's face it. What counts is knowledge." Her grandson, Marvin Jackson, credits his grandmother for his career as a neurologist. Her specific contribution may have been limited to her grandson, but his patients are certainly grateful.

"Ordinary" people can do extraordinary things. The big figures of history may have been visible leaders of change but you need the Florence Scalas, and the Winslows to bring those changes out on the community level. Their efforts may have failed initially or succeeded on a small scale, but they make up the force that allows society to transform. Studs Terkel, too, brought about changes in how we think about people and history. By recording their words, he made sure "ordinary" people's contributions would be known. Studs provided an alternative to "Great Men History" by chronicling all these people's lives. I'm happy to call him a great man of history.

- by *Elisa Shoenberger*

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