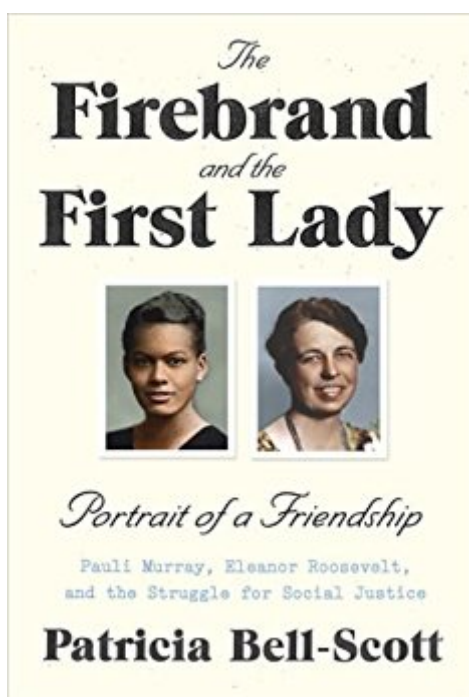


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The Firebrand And The First Lady: Portrait Of A Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, And The Struggle For Social Justice



Synopsis

A groundbreaking book that tells the story of how a brilliant writer-turned-activist, granddaughter of a mulatto slave, and the first lady of the United States, whose ancestry gave her membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution, forged an enduring friendship that changed each of their lives and helped to alter the course of race and racism in America. Pauli Murray first saw Eleanor Roosevelt in 1933, at the height of the Depression, at a government-sponsored, two-hundred-acre camp for unemployed women where Murray was living, something the first lady had pushed her husband to set up in her effort to do what she could for working women and the poor. The first lady appeared one day unannounced, behind the wheel of her car, her secretary and a Secret Service agent her passengers. To Murray, then aged twenty-three, Roosevelt's self-assurance was a symbol of women's independence, a symbol that endured throughout Murray's life. Five years later, Pauli Murray, a twenty-eight-year-old aspiring writer, wrote a letter to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt protesting racial segregation in the South. The president's staff forwarded Murray's letter to the federal Office of Education. The first lady wrote back. Murray's letter was prompted by a speech the president had given at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, praising the school for its commitment to social progress. Pauli Murray had been denied admission to the Chapel Hill graduate school because of her race. She wrote in her letter of 1938: "Does it mean that Negro students in the South will be allowed to sit down with white students and study a problem which is fundamental and mutual to both groups? Does it mean that the University of North Carolina is ready to open its doors to Negro students . . . ? Or does it mean, that everything you said has no meaning for us as Negroes, that again we are to be set aside and passed over . . . ?" Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Murray: "I have read the copy of the letter you sent me and I understand perfectly, but great changes come slowly . . . The South is changing, but don't push too fast." So began a friendship between Pauli Murray (poet, intellectual rebel, principal strategist in the fight to preserve Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, cofounder of the National Organization for Women, and the first African American female Episcopal priest) and Eleanor Roosevelt (first lady of the United States, later first chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women) that would last for a quarter of a century. Drawing on letters, journals, diaries, published and unpublished manuscripts, and interviews, Patricia Bell-Scott gives us the first close-up portrait of this evolving friendship and how it was sustained over time, what each gave to the other, and how their friendship changed the cause of American social justice.

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Customer Reviews

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt set a remarkable precedent as her role in the nation and world during her lifetime. Her friendship with Pauli Murray, an African American Lesbian lawyer and activist, was quite remarkable in itself. Both women were born named Anna but disliked the name. They both lost their parents and were raised by relatives. While Eleanor Roosevelt would grow up with wealth and prominence in American aristocracy, Pauli grew up in the segregated South. As a woman, Pauli had to fight her way to get to law school and one of the few female lawyers to graduate in a man's world. Eleanor was the grandest dame and a remarkable human being. Their friendship began by similar interests in the civil rights for African Americans and women as well during the Great Depression. Their friendship was finally written as a terrific non-fictional read about two women who were basically kindred spirits of sorts. Don't expect anything other than class when it comes to Eleanor Roosevelt, she was quite a mother figure and mentor to Pauli. In reading this book, the First Lady was quite a revolution. Imagine the First Lady in an apron serving hot dogs to the King of England. She was raised to be a debutante and a socialite. This book made me love Eleanor Roosevelt even more. Her humanity, compassion, and sincerity reached millions in the country and

worldwide. She touched others like Mother Theresa and fought for civil rights and injustices of all people when it was possible. As for Pauli Murray, she should be remembered for breaking down her own barriers as an African American female during difficult times. She was defiant and determined for social causes.

This is a hard book to put down. Patricia Bell-Scott meticulously portrays two very determined women and their combined fight for social justice. One happens to be the First Lady (who has her own personal struggles with her husband Franklin) and the other is a younger woman raised in the South, of mixed race, who happens to be fighting the stigma of being too boyish. A lot of issues are brought up early in this book that help develop a life-long friendship between these two women: racial discrimination, poll taxes that helped the wealthier white voters, a corrupt penal system that favored whites, the suppression of women's rights and their voices, all that while the country is at war. The chapters are short. Bell-Scott's story is dependent on much documentary evidence by both Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) and her correspondence to governors, university presidents, Congress and even her husband. ER has her own struggles, too. Her personal crusade to help the poor and disadvantaged helps her friendship and admiration for Pauli Murray, but as an outspoken First Lady, even ER's actions are scrutinized. Her husband Franklin is much more concerned about his image and his presidency (before the two-term limit was passed after his death in 1945). Franklin is a politician who is cautious to take on civil rights issues out of fear of aggravating his constituents. One sees how these two determined women were able to form a life-long friendship, a friendship that began with the trial and execution of a poor share cropper, Odell Waller, and which became even stronger after Franklin's death and the rise of civil rights in the 1950s. I am familiar with ER's close relationships with other women, and the repeated mention of her own sexual identity.

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