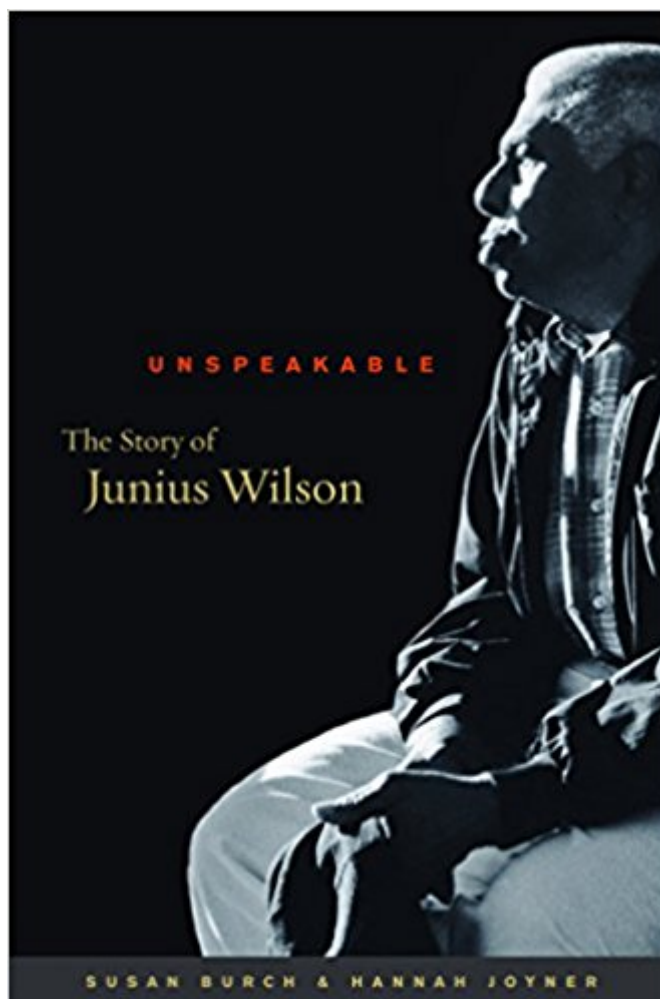


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Unspeakable: The Story Of Junius Wilson (Caravan Book)



Synopsis

Junius Wilson (1908-2001) spent seventy-six years at a state mental hospital in Goldsboro, North Carolina, including six in the criminal ward. He had never been declared insane by a medical professional or found guilty of any criminal charge. But he was deaf and black in the Jim Crow South. *Unspeakable* is the story of his life. Using legal records, institutional files, and extensive oral history interviews--some conducted in sign language--Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner piece together the story of a deaf man accused in 1925 of attempted rape, found insane at a lunacy hearing, committed to the criminal ward of the State Hospital for the Colored Insane, castrated, forced to labor for the institution, and held at the hospital for more than seven decades. Junius Wilson's life was shaped by some of the major developments of twentieth-century America: Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement, deinstitutionalization, the rise of professional social work, and the emergence of the deaf and disability rights movements. In addition to offering a bottom-up history of life in a segregated mental institution, Burch and Joyner's work also enriches the traditional interpretation of Jim Crow by highlighting the complicated intersections of race and disability as well as of community and language. This moving study expands the boundaries of what biography can and should be. There is much to learn and remember about Junius Wilson--and the countless others who have lived unspeakable histories.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Adroitly untangle[s] the twisted web of race, class, gender, and disability that ensnared Wilson for much of his life. . . . A significant contribution to African American history and the burgeoning fields of deaf and disability histories. . . . A remarkable and humane study.--H-Net Reviews

An engrossing and insightful look at changes in how race and disability have been viewed from the perspective of one man's life.--Booklist

Remarkable. . . . In large part, a history of the changing culture in North Carolina, the change in treatment of the deaf, and the political developments of the nation. . . . A fine and worthy book.--The Journal of American History

Extensively documented. . . . A well-researched history book that sensitively documents the life of one black, deaf man but seeks to instruct us all.--Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education

Highly recommended.--CHOICE[A] brisk and compelling narrative that proves surprisingly uplifting.--Star News

A heart-rending story of race and disability in the Jim Crow South.--American History

Riveting.--Journal of Blacks in Higher Education

With *Unspeakable*, Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner reveal a gruesome picture of official abuse and neglect. In simple, powerful language, they describe the life of Wilson, who spent 76 years in the State Hospital, apparently for no other reason than that he was deaf. . . . In understated language, Burch and Joyner describe his evolution from a confused, frightened, occasionally belligerent boy to a docile adult. . . . The overwhelming injustice done to [Wilson] is mind-boggling, and Burch and Joyner have told his story with thoroughness and passion.--Washington Post

American deaf history is steeped with the presence of African American deaf people, but there is precious little written about them, or about black deaf schools and the sign language of black deaf communities. This book tells the story of one African American deaf man who was born in the early twentieth century, at a time when segregated black deaf schools were found in every state in the South, and when ignorance about sign languages and deaf people was deeply institutionalized. Through a blend of scholarship and skillful narrative, the authors guide the reader through a history of the twentieth century as it was lived by one man whose skin color and condition of deafness made him a victim of many institutional failures, condemning him to spend his entire adult life in a mental institution.--Carol Padden, University of California, San Diego

Unspeakable is to be commended for embracing the complexity of Junius Wilson's story and for a sensitive but unflinchingly honest portrait of his life. What emerges is a revelatory piece of historical writing and biography that gets at Mr. Wilson's life and the social forces of his era from many different points of view, none of them predictable, all of them thought-provoking, many of them unsettling. This is an extraordinarily important book.--David Cecelski, coeditor of *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*

Susan Burch and Hannah Joyner deserve appreciation from deaf

people and other advocates for their highly successful description about the importance of diversity among human groups. The authors' honest and well-balanced description of Junius Wilson's life and the different views of professionals will certainly turn a new page in the professional perspectives of health and social studies.--Yerker Andersson, Ph.D., LL.D.; Former Chair, Deaf Studies Department, Gallaudet University

Well thought out, literate discussion of conditions two generations ago. Well researched and eye opening. This is a detailed, heavily referenced book. I wish the type was bigger, as I have difficulty reading small type.

I am currently reading this book for a class and I have really realized how naive I am about the history of our nations mental and criminal systems. The book provides an excellent account of Junius Wilson (a deaf blind black man) and his struggles as both during the time of the Jim Crow laws and strong racial tensions in the US. It provides the right amount of background history in order to fully understand the story while also give details about Wilsons experience in the system. This book delves into important issues and has sparked a lot of really interesting and intense conversation within my classroom. Overall, it is a book I would recommend to anyone who is looking for an eyeopening read.

Unspeakable was a good book, but I found myself disappointed by it. While it was well-written and well-researched, I had a lot of trouble with a couple of things. First, I feel that the book starts out focusing on Junius Wilson as a deaf Black man, but ends up just focusing on his deafness. There are whole parts of his story that could have benefitted from a more comprehensive look at the intersection of oppressions. I also wanted the book to place Mr. Wilson in a larger context and use the individual as a springboard into the societal, but it didn't happen. Still, this book tells a moving story, and could be a recreational read as well as for a class. Despite my issues, I still enjoyed it.

This was one of the most difficult reads for me, I had to put it down many times because it was so upsetting. But I believe is important for people to read this and understand what our history is like and how we have been known to treat people.

This remarkable book tells the true story of a deaf man who was wrongfully imprisoned for most of his life. It is a must read for anyone interested in social justice. It also provides insights into the

challenges faced by members of the deaf community that are insightful and important.

This book has much to teach us about cruelty, intolerance, and the mindset of those who perpetuate cruelty and intolerance. Every high school student in North Carolina should read this book -- as well as high school students in other states. While reading this book I picked up a copy of the New York Times and saw this headline: "Psychiatry Giant Sorry for Backing Gay `Cure'" When will we ever learn? Why do we not teach and talk about human cruelty in schools? Why is our collective aspiration for tolerance so feeble? As someone who works at a public library, I was curious to see if the public library in Wilmington, North Carolina, carries this book. The New Hanover County Public Library carries two copies of this 2007 book. The library's web site indicates how many times this book has been signed out. Three times. We've got to do better than that.

Unspeakable unveils a part of American history that has been largely locked away and forgotten--the story of the many deaf African-Americans who suffered from cultural, language, and often times, physical isolation as a result of being warehoused in federal institutions. Using the story of Junius Wilson, a black, deaf man made famous for having been unjustly incarcerated for over seven decades of his life, Burch and Joyner provide the reader with a glimpse into the unimaginable life of isolation and pain experienced by the countless deaf men and women of color who fell victim to a flawed, bureaucratic, and racist system. The authors have taken a subject for which records are scarce and sometimes inconsistent and constructed an impressively cohesive narrative.

Unfortunately, due to the sheer lack of evidence and record keeping the book is at times very dependent on the subjective assumptions made by the authors about Junius Wilson's experience. Nevertheless, Unspeakable provides valuable insight into the untold stories of the African-American and larger deaf community as a whole throughout the 20th century. Overall, the book is powerfully written, well-researched, and also very important in our understanding of our society as a whole. However, regardless of its broader implications, the story of Junius Wilson is one that must be told, not only as a tribute to Junius, but as a tribute to the many deaf men and women for whom our educational, medical, and social systems have failed.

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