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Little Rock Revisited

An iconic photo shows a black schoolgirl and her white tormentor. What became of them?

By Edward Kosner

October 5, 2011

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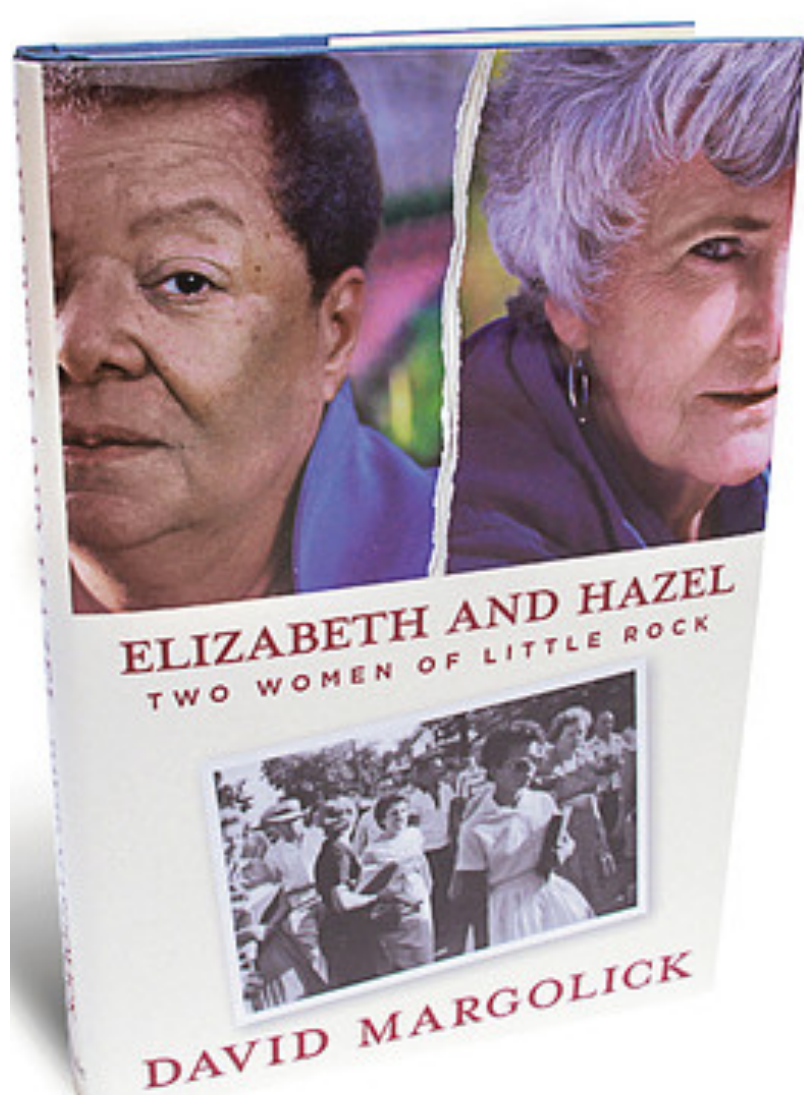
Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, as someone (but not Freud!) once said. Sometimes a photograph is just a photograph. And sometimes a magazine article is just a magazine article—despite an earnest author’s laborious efforts to inflate it into a compelling book.

David Margolick’s “Elizabeth and Hazel” grew out of an article he published on the Vanity Fair website about the protagonists of an iconic photo from the opening days of the civil-rights movement. Snapped by Will Counts more than a half-century ago—on Sept. 4, 1957—the picture shows a primly dressed young black girl walking down the street clutching a loose-leaf binder, her eyes shielded by dark glasses. She is trailed by a pack of sullen white people, including a teenager in a tight, belted dress who is shouting at the black girl, her face clenched in hate.

The 15-year-old black girl was Elizabeth Eckford, one of “The Little Rock Nine” who had just been turned away from Central High School on the first day of court-ordered integration. The white girl was Hazel Bryan, also 15. They had never met, nor would they meet for years, but their lives were forever changed and entwined by the “decisive moment,” as the great French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson might call it, that they shared that morning.

At the heart of Mr. Margolick’s tale is the fraught relationship that eventually developed between the two women as they participated in a cavalcade of interviews, educational forums, photo-ops and anniversary celebrations of the end of school segregation by law and custom in Little Rock and ultimately around the country. In a perfect world, their bonding would be a metaphor for racial reconciliation in America. But tidy endings are scarcer on the planet where real people live.

Elizabeth Eckford attended Central High School through senior year but never accumulated enough credits to earn a diploma. Her face never appeared in the class yearbook. Hazel Bryan spent a few early chaotic days at Central, then transferred to another school without ever taking a class. Elizabeth drifted through several small colleges and finally joined the Army as a clerk. At 16, Hazel married a pig farmer, became a no-drinking-smoking-dancing-swimming Christian fundamentalist and began having babies. Tormented by her conduct at Central, Hazel sought out Elizabeth five years later and apologized in a five-minute phone call. They did not talk again for another 35 years.



ELIZABETH AND HAZEL

By David Margolick

(Yale University Press, 310 pages, \$26)

One had to go to a psychiatric hospital as a youth and was later killed by police when he confronted them with a rifle and refused to put it down. “Suicide by cop,” Elizabeth called it.

Elizabeth and Hazel were finally brought together for a photograph marking the 40th anniversary of the taking of the original picture, and Hazel embarked on a campaign to make Elizabeth her friend. They not only participated in other commemorative events but visited flower shows, shared meals and went to a spa together. Hazel did the courting, Elizabeth the backpedaling. Hazel “had tried her damndest to make amends,” Mr. Margolick writes. “Maybe Elizabeth was more comfortable, or accustomed, to feeling embattled, or manipulated, or misled, or simply being by herself.”

The last quarter of the book is a painfully detailed recounting of how the relationship never really jelled. And how could it be otherwise? The women had shared nothing originally but a lucky exposure by a local newspaper photographer. Hazel’s endless apologies and Elizabeth’s diffident acceptance of them couldn’t bridge the gulf between two women who were essentially participants in an accident of history.

Like most good deeds, Hazel’s didn’t go unpunished. Many of her neighbors and even her own children suspected—wrongly, I’m sure—that her efforts were really designed to call attention to herself once again. Other members of the Little Rock Nine had no use for her. Elizabeth’s white classmates at Central High School resented the way publicity about Hazel resurrected the ugly long-ago episode at the school. Even Oprah Winfrey, that paragon of redemption, treated Hazel with frosty skepticism when the women took their act to her TV show.

To fill out his story, Mr. Margolick lards it with historical footnotes. He unearths a letter from President Dwight Eisenhower to Chief Justice Earl Warren, author of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, in which Ike wrote that he understood Southerners concerned “that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes.” And the author shows the usually genial Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong venting with fury about Little Rock.

But nothing can overcome the impression that readers could have learned all they needed or wanted to know about Elizabeth and Hazel from an old-school, well-researched and tightly written magazine piece.

Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, “It’s News to Me.”

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