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Novel explores busing issue

By [Laurie Higgins](#)

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Thirty years ago, federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. ordered Boston's schools to be integrated and mandated cross-busing of students to achieve that goal. The mandate was like a spark to tinder in a city where racial tensions were already smoldering. In her new novel, "On The Bus" (Martin and Lawrence Press, 2004), Kimberly Scott offers a sometimes disturbing, but fascinating glimpse into what that decision meant to the real people who were most affected by it.

"On The Bus," is a thought-provoking page turner that deftly manages to show both sides of the issue by centering on two families - one a black family in Roxbury, the other a white family in Charlestown. Although the two families think of themselves as polar opposites, they are both coping with the same issues and fears.

Scott became fascinated with the subject in 1999 after reading about the 25th anniversary of busing in a newspaper. She was surprised by the intensity of the racial animosity and violence and wondered how she could have lived in Boston for 10 years without hearing anything about that time.

"I realized that people don't like to talk about it because it is very much this black eye on Boston's reputation that still exists today," she says. "I think that people in Boston and Massachusetts in general like to think of ourselves as a very liberal and tolerant society and these kinds of things don't happen around here. They happen in the South maybe, but not here. So I was fascinated by that dichotomy - the juxtaposition between Boston's ideal of herself and her reality."

Scott spent a year and a half doing research and interviewing dozens of both black and white people who had lived through the experience. "I had so much of the history and events that actually happened that I just placed my fictional characters into these true life events," she says.

Because Scott's novel so accurately depicts the racism and violence at the time and the consequences those events had on individual lives, she is often asked if she believes busing was a bad thing. It is a question with no simple answer.

"I would say every single person I spoke to, both black and white, felt that busing negatively impacted their own personal life. However, many, many in the black community felt then, and still feel now, that it was a worthy goal and it was worth making their own personal sacrifices," she notes. "In some ways it was almost a continuation of the ongoing Civil Rights struggle."

During the course of her research Scott found she had her own pre-conceived notions of the events that happened. "I kind of went in thinking these white people were just racist jerks, until I started talking with people and really got a handle on how torn they were and how often people didn't think they were racist before this was thrown at them," she reflects. "They had their hands tied behind their back and were forced to go along with it and basically sacrifice their kids for this greater good of society, which to their way of thinking, and let's face it, to most of us, is not the way we do things in this country. We don't generally sacrifice individual rights for the good of society. So in some ways they felt it was an un-American approach to a problem."

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