

WHITE BLIGHT

National Book Award–winner Edward Ball tackles familial, and national, legacies of white supremacy in his latest

By SARA ECKEL



While reporting his sixth book, *Life of a Klansman* (FSG, Aug.), Edward Ball put himself in a deeply uncomfortable position. He met three descendants of Black Creole men who were badly beaten at a massacre that killed 200 people in New Orleans in 1866. He says he had to explain to them that one of his ancestors was a member of a white militia in the city at the time and probably took part in the atrocities.

“It was stressful,” Ball says via Skype from his home in New Haven, Conn. “I had to share with this family that my people may have been part of the group that carried out a massacre in which some of their people were affected.”

Ball believes conversations like this are difficult but essential, and he has devoted much of his career to shining daylight on history many would rather forget. For his first book, 1998’s

National Book Award–winning *Slaves in the Family*, he sought out and met the descendants of slaves from his ancestors’ South Carolina plantation.

Ball’s subsequent books, all works of narrative nonfiction, also tackle large historical subjects through the prism of individual actors. In *The Inventor and the Tycoon*, Ball displays the virtues and vices of the American West through the partnership of the murderer who invented motion pictures and the robber-baron who built the railroads. In *Peninsula of Lies*, he describes the life of an English writer who in 1967 underwent one of the early transgender surgeries.

“In *Life of a Klansman*, I wanted to write an origin story for white supremacy,” Ball says. “Where did it come from? How did it mature? What does whiteness look like over time? Can we recognize the Ku Klux in the police and vigilante killings of today?”

Author Profile

The book is centered on Constant Lecorgne, Ball's great-great-grandfather—an unremarkable man who struggled professionally and financially in the shadow of more successful siblings and cousins. He was also a foot soldier in the movement that reestablished white domination in New Orleans after the Civil War and whose members were, up until the mid-1960s, venerated in public ceremonies and monuments.

As a child, Ball heard about Lecorgne, but the stories were swaddled in the gauze of family lore. In *Life of a Klansman*, he seeks to correct these apocryphal stories. “The kernel of the whole project is claiming white supremacy as mine and ours,” he explains. “My people are capable of terrific violence on behalf of their tribe.”

Throughout the interview, Ball never refers to Lecorgne by name. Instead, he calls him “our Klansman”; his racist ancestors are “my people.” He clearly wants to claim this shameful legacy.

The son of an Episcopal minister, Ball grew up in the Deep South, moving around as his father took up new church posts every few years. Now, however, he speaks without any trace of a Southern accent. Instead, he has the clipped elocution of a New Englander and the straight-backed poise of an Ivy League professor. (He used to teach at Yale.)

When asked how his family feels about *Life of a Klansman*, Ball replies, “The poet Czeslaw Milosz has a funny observation that when a writer is born into a family, the family is lost. It's condemned to exposure, embarrassment, and disclosure.”

And then Ball says, yes, he doubts his people are pleased about *Life of a Klansman*. “It depends on whom you ask. I don't think anyone in our family really wants to have the story of our Klansmen aired.”

For much of his life, Ball didn't care to go there either. For years, he tried to get as far from his roots as he could. At 17, he moved north for the first time to enroll in Brown University; after graduating, he moved to New York City to become a journalist. He didn't start writing *Slaves in the Family* until he was in his mid-30s, after a family reunion at the former plantation got him thinking about the descendants of the slaves who worked the land. In 1998, when the book was published, numerous relatives opposed it, though since then many have said they understand why he wrote it.

Lecorgne's lack of distinction has made him easier to evade. “There's a kind of a disavowal: ‘We're the good white people,

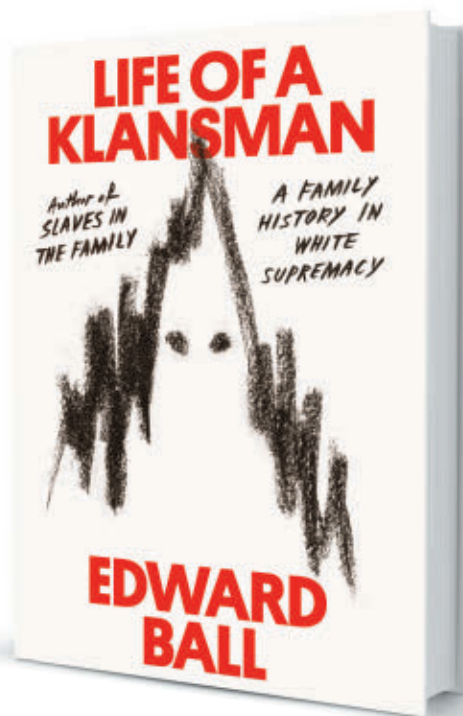
and this particular man was an extremist,’” Ball says. “That's actually a common response on the subject of the Ku Klux Klan in general for all of the United States. We project our worst antipathies onto the Klan. They are those people over there; those are the real racists.”

The project originated with the journals of Ball's aunt Maud, Lecorgne's granddaughter. In 2003, Ball inherited Maud's notebooks, which told uplifting tales of people who migrated, married, and prospered. To Aunt Maud, Lecorgne was a redeemer who brought Louisiana back under the control of white people and protected family wealth. But there was a lot of silence in the pages—what exactly did his great-great-grandfather do?

Relying on public records and cultural artifacts, Ball builds a circumstantial narrative of Lecorgne's life, deeds, and psyche in the book. Alexander Star, Ball's editor at FSG, says that when he first read the manuscript, he was struck by how vividly Ball rendered the inner lives of reconstruction-era Louisianans. “He has a rare gift for breathing palpable life into his characters—while remaining scrupulously faithful to the documentary record,” Star says.

Ball also keeps the historical narrative in a 21st-century context. “The Ku Klux saw themselves as vigilantes—policemen, in other words—assigned to keep the racial order by killing if necessary,” he says. “The targeting of Black people by law enforcement is not the exception in history but the rule. White supremacy is the unacknowledged power wheel of our national life. As the majority ethnic group, I think we get a lot of personal nourishment from this sense that we belong in command of others with our hands on the levers of power.”

But Ball does see hopeful signs—the many universities undertaking self-study about their relationship to slavery; the *New York Times*' 1619 Project, an unflinching history of slavery in the United States; and the recent broad support for Black Lives Matter, which suggests that many white Americans are experiencing a new level of race awareness. “It's a paradoxical time,” he says. “On the one hand we have white supremacy that's reinvigorated, but we also have a vigorous counter-movement. It's undeniable that the countervoices will prevail, but it's a rough time right now, isn't it?” ■



Sara Eckel is the author of *It's Not You: 27 (Wrong) Reasons You're Single* (TarcherPerigee).