



## The Room: A Racial Journey

**Russell E. Mullen**

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*The Room is a provocative memoir that addresses the complexities of racism in America in a deeply personal way.*

Russell Mullen's provocative and earnest memoir *The Room: A Racial Journey* recalls the author's pivotal—and forty years past—stint in the army, where he was the only white man among a group of black soldiers.

The book is divided into three parts. Early chapters describe the author's upbringing in central Florida and his lack of exposure to black people. The middle section explores his time in the army; he was posted in Germany in the late 1970s, and his living situation among primarily black soldiers, he believes, gave him a unique perspective on race.

His keen observations on the relationships between and among the various young men is portrayed convincingly. The third section depicts Mullen's life in the years after the army; it is the culmination of his deeply held beliefs, thoughts, and insights on the current state of racial communication in today's America and how those relationships can be positively altered.

Chapters that describe the very segregated environment of the author's youth are open, honest, and personal, full of candid and forthright details. Even more interesting are his adventures in Europe, where he arrives as a naïve private.

Mullen, who earned the nickname "Ruebob" because he reminded someone of rhubarb pie, was the newest soldier to reside in "the room," the cool gathering place where one's race appeared not to matter. His observations on the interactions between and among the soldiers, and the relationships he developed there, form the basis for the memoir's introspection, and include affecting portraits of his friendships with two soldiers in particular—Slim and Eightball.

From Eightball, whose actual name is John, Mullen learns to listen and change his behavior, first through the simple act of using John's given name. Such moments are powerful. Still, these characters—his mentors—are disappointingly absent from the later portions of the book, aside from an imagined letter to Slim.

In describing past interactions, Mullen displays a sharp and almost sacrosanct awareness of his roommates and their individual personalities; his take on army life is drolly humorous, despite its simultaneous awareness of the creeping insidiousness of the developing culture of drug abuse.

The last third of the book is more of a stream-of-conscious exercise. Mullen works to explain and share what he—a white man—learned from his black roommates. His perspectives are resolute and definitive, and invoke famous and infamous icons, including O. J. Simpson, Oprah Winfrey, and George Zimmerman.

This section is written in the same personal, one-on-one style of narration as the previous sections, offering up

Mullen's particular opinions on racism, often citing statistics as support. His opinions are strong as he recognizes that different rules have been instituted for white and black America. He argues that some of those rules have changed but that more need to be changed. This final section works to incorporate a breadth of information but loses some cohesion in the process.

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ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (June 20, 2018)

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