

Waste: One Woman's Fight Against America's Dirty Secret

Catherine Coleman Flowers

Bryan Stevenson, Contributor

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Catherine Coleman Flowers returned to Alabama's Cotton Belt, a place she loves "despite its tortured history," to continue her career in community and economic development; *Waste* is her motivational memoir of that homecoming.

In the 1970s, as a high school student battling inept, sexist, and racist administrators, Flowers organized civil rights marches and protests. She spent years teaching, too. Back in Alabama in her adulthood, Flowers didn't expect that her focus would move to sewage treatment, but repeated calls from poor, most often Black residents about failing cesspools and septic tanks, coupled with threats of fines and other enforcement from government officials who didn't want to run proper sewer lines to the marginalized communities, motivated Flowers to become a powerful advocate. Her efforts to document and publicize rural Alabama's high rates of hookworm, insect- and mold-borne diseases, and other wastewater-linked illnesses were tireless.

Flowers, a prominent voice in the environmental justice movement and a 2020 MacArthur Fellow, demonstrates the links between structural poverty, racism, and environmental issues throughout. Her rural clients bear the brunt of regional climate change, as local clay soils don't percolate well, and warmer, rainier weather patterns exacerbate those issues; the text reveals this, but without discussing alternative wastewater technologies.

With tenacity, the strength of her conviction, faith, and impressive networking skills, Flowers has worked to bring environmental and social justice issues to the fore in media and policymakers' agendas. She mentions meeting and allying with televangelists, conservative philanthropist Bob Woodson, Coretta Scott King, and Jane Fonda; her text is energetic in describing these figures and experiences.

Functioning as an inspiring case study of effective community activism, *Waste* is the intriguing memoir of Catherine Coleman Flowers, an environmental justice powerhouse.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2021)

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