

# **A Stronger Kinship**

**by Anna-Lisa Cox**

## About the Book

In the heartland of the United States 150 years ago, where racism and hatred were common, a community decided there could be a different America. Here schools and churches were completely integrated, blacks and whites intermarried, and power and wealth were shared by both races. But for this to happen, the town's citizens had to keep secrets, break the laws of the world outside, and sweep aside fear and embrace hope.

In a historical-detective feat, Anna-Lisa Cox uncovers the heartening story of this community that took the road untaken. Beginning in the 1860s, the people of Covert, Michigan, attempted to do what then seemed impossible: love one's neighbor—regardless of skin color—as oneself. Drawing on diaries, oral histories, and contemporary records, Cox gives us intimate glimpses of Covert's people, from William Conner, the Civil War veteran who went on to become Michigan's first black justice of the peace, to Elizabeth Gillard, who, shipwrecked and washed onto Covert's shores, ultimately came to love the unusual community she would call home. In bringing these and other stories of this small town to light, Cox presents a vision of what our nation might have been, and could be.

## Praise for the Book

“A gladdening, unsentimental chronicle of a Midwestern town that practiced racial equality against all late 19th-century odds.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Cox's optimism is infectious, and her recovery of Covert's nearly lost history admirable.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Books about race in America are often disturbing and sometimes downright searing. Still, so many exist that they sometimes tend to blend together, canceling one another out. *A Stronger Kinship* is such an unusual book about race in America that it is unlikely to blend with anything else.”

—Steve Weinberg, *Dallas Morning News*

*Courtesy of University of Nebraska Press*

## About the Author

Title: Anna-Lisa Cox  
American Historian

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## Personal Information

Married Michael Cox. **Education:** Hope College, B.A.; Cambridge University, M.Phil.; University of Illinois, Ph.D. **Avocational Interests:** Tutoring inner-city minority students for City Light's Partners. **Addresses:** Home: Chicago, IL. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Warner Books, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

## Career

Newberry Library, Chicago, IL, scholar in residence, 2001-06, fellow, 2002-03.

## Awards

Gilder Lehrman Foundation Fellowship; Pew Younger Scholars Fellowship; National Endowment for the Humanities Younger Scholars Award.

## Works

### Writings

- *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2006.

## “Sidelights”

Historian Anna-Lisa Cox was raised to care about the issues of racism and integration, influenced as she was by a mother who was active in the civil rights movement in Chicago. While a student at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, Cox learned about the nearby town of Covert, which had a remarkable history of racial equality and tolerance. After earning a master's

degree in social anthropology and a doctorate in American history, she made this town the subject of her first book, *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith*. Covert was founded shortly after the American Civil War by congregationalists and abolitionists who wanted to create a town of tolerance for all people. Cox traces the history of this remarkable village, which still thrives today and has an unusually balanced population of whites, blacks, and Hispanic people for a midwestern city of 2,600 people. Unfortunately, as Marta Salij pointed out in her *Detroit Free Press* review, a dearth of historical documentation meant that Cox resorts to considerable speculation when discussing the motives of the residents for creating an integrated community. "And though historian Anna-Lisa Cox tries ... to get to those answers behind the simple facts of Covert, Mich.," wrote Salij, "there just isn't enough in the historical record to answer the tantalizing questions." Salij concluded: "She tries so hard to render the settlers' stories vividly that she overwrites and confuses her narrative. But she succeeds in her main purpose," which is to elicit an emotional response from readers and encourage them to understand more about the people of Covert and the town's history. *Booklist* contributor Vanessa Bush added: "This is a revealing look at a small town whose accomplishments have been virtually forgotten."

## Further Readings About the Author

### Periodicals

- *Booklist*, February 1, 2006, Vanessa Bush, review of *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith*, p. 19.
- *Detroit Free Press*, February 5, 2006, Marta Salij, review of *A Stronger Kinship*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2005, review of *A Stronger Kinship*, p. 1308.
- *Library Journal*, February 15, 2006, Theresa McDevitt, review of *A Stronger Kinship*, p. 130.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 19, 2005, review of *A Stronger Kinship*, p. 57.

### Online

- *Hatchette Book Group USA Web site*, <http://www.twbookmark.com/> (July 22, 2006), biography of Anna-Lisa Cox.\*

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## Author Interview

### Author Q&A

#### An Interview with Anna-Lisa Cox

By Jonathan Tilove

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**Q:** To create an integrated community, Covert had to defy its times.

**A:** The Midwest had very harsh Black Codes, which made it very, very difficult for blacks to settle in Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. In the state of Michigan in 1820, if you were a free black migrating from someplace like South Carolina or Virginia and wanted to settle on the American frontier—which was your right—you would have to bring documented proof that you were free to the local justice of the peace and give them a bond of \$500, at that time an enormous sum of money.

**Q:** Were you surprised by the depth of anti-black sentiment on the Midwestern frontier?

**A:** What surprised me was that by the 1850s, most of all the indigenous people had been forcibly driven out, so this was largely an unpeopled land. And yet you would have these white settlers on the frontier absolutely unwilling to compromise on the notion that they should not have black neighbors.

Whenever a state brought up the idea that maybe they get rid of the Black Codes or allow black suffrage. . . . these white frontiersmen and women, who may never have seen a black person before—and that may have been part of the problem—would vote against allowing any civil rights.

**Q:** What made Covert possible?

**A:** While what happened in Covert initially began with some strongly held beliefs and some very strong and big decisions by both the African-Americans and whites in the township, after the first big push this culture of equality really kept going through small, daily decisions that people made.

Particularly in the post-1960 civil rights era, there's a sense that the only reason things change is if you bring in the federal government or if a major federal law is enacted. What happened in Covert was more a groundswell thing, more of a lot of personal decisions.

It wasn't a group of paternalistic whites patting African-American persons on the head and saying, "we'll let you do this." The African-American community was constantly pushing the boundaries.

Even after they created this unusual culture by running for and winning office and integrating the schools, they took a further step. They not only wanted to be integrated, they also wanted to be celebrated, they wanted their unique heritage to be recognized.

**Q:** The black community in Covert did not simply amalgamate with the white majority and disappear.

**A:** That actually was the thing that intrigued me the most about Covert. As an academic, I always had the theoretical question running around in my head: If you have a minority group that is almost completely integrated into a community and equal across economic, religious, educational, political and social realms, can they still retain a unique identity?

What moved me was watching the African-Americans in Covert struggling with that very problem and coming up with answers, and seeing them in the late 1870s creating an all-black Masonic lodge, and starting the Emancipation Festival, which was remembered as one of the major holidays that the entire town shut down for.

**Q:** You write, “Our puzzlement over Covert reveals a hidden assumption that racism is the norm.”

**A:** When people say, “Why did Covert happen?” I ask, in a very serious way, “Why not?” It is a very sad question to ask, of course. What many people feel after reading the book is a sense of hope and being inspired. After living with it all these years, one of the things I feel is a very, very deep sense of sorrow for the very fact that this was a possibility but so many people chose a different path, and it was a choice, it was absolutely a choice. That makes in some ways, the story of Covert very bittersweet.

**Q:** Why the name, Covert?

**A:** Originally it was called Deerfield, but there were so many Deerfields that they were asked to change their name. By the time they changed the name in 1876, Covert was a very established integrated community that in 1875 had elected the state of Michigan’s first black justice of the peace. There are myriad stories about why it was renamed Covert. There are some beautiful passages in the Old Testament, “I shall be a covert from the storm for my people”—the idea of “covert” being a safe hiding place from the tempest.

**Q:** Was Covert covert?

**A:** Starting in the 1870s, Covert was not particularly secretive about what it did. It would advertise its Emancipation festival in the South Haven paper, and its integrated Grand Army of the Republic Union veteran’s organization would travel down to the encampments in Indiana and Ohio. I think they did very little to hide what they were doing. I think they were very proud of what they were doing.

**Q:** You credit your parents with influencing your ideas about race and integration. How?

**A:** My mother was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago in the late '60s and early '70s and both of my parents are deeply rooted in that movement and made us constantly aware of some of the more subtle examples of racism. And they also always made sure that we attended an integrated church growing up, which wasn't always easy in Michigan.

**Q:** What denomination?

**A:** It really didn't matter as long as they felt the church had its heart in the right place, so I think they switched denominations three or four times in their adult life. It was always whether they were going to find a diverse community there.

**Q:** What is your take on Black History Month?

**A:** At first I was really worried about my book being released during Black History Month because I'm a firm believer that African-American history is American history and there is something a little bit segregated about having this month that is set apart as if it's not generally part of American history.

But, you know, it would be one thing if we still had emancipation festivals as a way of celebrating this unique group with their unique heritage. Then, I think, we wouldn't need Black History Month. But we don't live in a perfect world and in some odd ways we have slid backwards.

February 22, 2006

University of Nebraska Press. *Digital Media Kit*. Retrieved 12/11/2009, from [http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/supplements/press\\_kits/UNP\\_Cox\\_StrongerKinship\\_PressKit.pdf](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/supplements/press_kits/UNP_Cox_StrongerKinship_PressKit.pdf)

## Discussion Questions

### Current Events & Politics Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. What did you know about the subject prior to reading this book? How has this book changed or enhanced your view of the subject?
3. Did the book seem adequately researched? Why or why not?
4. What did you find to be the most interesting events in this book? What, if anything, surprised you?
5. What impact do you think the central figure (or figures) portrayed in this book will have on history? Can you see this book being discussed in later years?
6. With omnipresent media influences around us all day—cable television, talk radio and blogs, as well as traditional media outlets like print and broadcast—do you look for books in this genre (current events & politics) to deliver a different perspective to you? Did this book do that?
7. If the subject is political and is not in line with your personal political beliefs, how did you feel about reading it? Has it changed your opinion at all? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
9. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read other works by this author? Are you inclined to read more books on the topic? Why or why not?

*Courtesy Reading Group Guides*