

Wilkerson explains style behind “The Warmth of Other Suns”

Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer prize winning journalist was at Southern Illinois University Carbondale to talk with students about her book, “The Warmth of Other Suns.” After a short discussion about being a journalist and her book, Wilkerson opened the room up for questions. One student raised his hand and asked her how her experience as a woman, not just a woman but a black woman, affected her and her work.

“I never really had the option to worry about that,” Wilkerson said. “I’m not saying there weren’t challenges, I just didn’t have time to think about it.”

Wilkerson certainly never let race or gender slow her down. In 1993, working for the New York Times out of Chicago, Wilkerson won the Pulitzer Prize award for feature writing. Her stories including a pair of stories about the Midwest floods that year and an examination of a young boy in Chicago who had to take care of his family at the age of 10.

The Pulitzer gave her the opportunity to write a book and her topic of choice was the great migration of blacks from the Jim Crow south to northern cities. “The Warmth of Other Suns” is that story. It focuses on the great migration north and gives a human face to it, relating the stories of three specific emigrants and their story (see book review of “The Warmth of Other Suns” for more a complete description of the story). The daughter of two refugees from the Jim Crow south, Wilkerson jumped into the story with a passion.

“I believe you need to write about things you have a passion about,” Wilkerson said. “I have a passion for this subject.”

It's a story that needs to be told and has not been documented by the media as much as one would expect.

"It's the biggest underreported story of the 20th century," Wilkerson said. "It needs to be restored to its proper place in American history. "This has been a misunderstood generation and there's so much more to write about them."

Wilkerson grew up with this story. Her mother emigrated north from Georgia, her father from Virginia. Both ended up in Washington D.C. Growing up, Wilkerson felt an affinity for the foreign-born students more than anyone else. That experience may have helped her form her frame for the story.

Wilkerson writes the story from the viewpoint that the refugees who escaped from the Jim Crow south were as much immigrants as those who came to America from eastern Europe, Asia or any of the other places that made this country such a melting pot.

"The people were from the earth," Wilkerson said. "They were escaping a caste system."

Wilkerson chronicles the Jim Crow south in a compassionately brutal way; compassion for the blacks living in a system that enslaved them as completely as slavery and brutally honest about the horrors of living in a world where lynching was a favorite pasttime. Those who escaped to the north started a new life, and eventually helped bring about a change in the political system. Those who made the trip never knew what was in store for them.

"People who have to go through the door first can't think about what's on the other side of that door, they just have to go through the door," Wilkerson said.

The words have as much to do with the immigrants who went through that door as with Wilkerson herself. After all, her work as a female black journalist was groundbreaking.

Wilkerson achieved her success by spending time with her subjects; more time than many other journalists spend with their subjects.

“I always preferred spending time with the people I covered,” Wilkerson said. “For me, it was just a matter of time and how you spend it. I preferred to spend more of my time at the front end of the story, taking time with the people I was interviewing than spend time at the back end of the story actually writing. I was lucky in that I was able to write fairly quickly.”

Wilkerson also found some other tricks while working as a journalist, among them when working with children, look for those around 9 or 10 years old.

“Truth is never better than when it’s being told by a 9-year old,” Wilkerson said.

Wilkerson also did well getting truth from an older generation. Most of those she interviewed for her book were older. But she went ahead with it, interviewing as many people as she could (around 1,200) in order to make her book as honest as possible. She believed she needed to speak to that many people.

“I needed to talk with a lot of people to provide a context in order to put the people in a place in history,” she said.