

Carroll, Fred. Review of *Black Print with a White Carnation: Mildred Brown and the Omaha Star Newspaper, 1938-1989*, by Amy Helene Forss. *American Journalism* 31:3 (2014): 406-408.

Black Print with a White Carnation: Mildred Brown and the *Omaha Star* Newspaper, 1938-1989

By Amy Helene Forss. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 272 pp.

Reviewed by Fred Carroll

Norfolk State University

The white carnations worn daily by publisher Mildred Brown captured the spirit of her personal ambitions and purpose of her civic activism. Brown's flowers spoke to the precarious privilege of black middle-class existence in the mid-twentieth century and reflected her commitment to advancing the freedom struggle through self-improvement and respectability. In the *Omaha Star*, Brown urged other black Nebraskans to emulate the example she recommitted herself to each time she pinned on a corsage.

Amy Helene Forss dissects Brown's carefully crafted public persona in *Black Print with a White Carnation* to explain the life of a pioneering female publisher who co-founded one of the Midwest's more respected black newspapers. Forss interviewed more than 150 people, including family, friends, employees, allies, and adversaries. She conducted extensive archival research in Alabama (where Brown was born in 1905), Iowa (where Brown briefly lived in the 1930s), and Nebraska (where Brown made her name). Forss has written a wide-ranging biography that situates Brown's personal and professional life within the larger sweep of African American history and the particular history of race relations in Omaha.

Brown began her journalism career in earnest in 1937 after her husband's drugstore floundered. The couple moved from Iowa to Nebraska to work for hard-charging C.C. Galloway of the *Omaha Guide*, but editorial disputes prompted them to start a competing newspaper just eighteen months later. Brown took over as the *Star's* sole publisher in 1943 after divorcing her philandering husband. She ran the paper until her death in 1989. Brown relished the publishers' life. She devoted herself to hustling for news and

advertising, expanding her other business ventures, and cementing her reputation as a community leader. Forss contends that Brown viewed her journalism career as a "ministry" (p. 83) that allowed her to serve as "fictive kin to all of Omaha's black community" (p. 65). Brown lectured newsboys on the value of hard work and respect for authority. She published etiquette and fashion guides and ran feature stories promoting the positive attributes of famous black women. She reveled in being driven to appointments in her Fleetwood Cadillac, a status symbol that reaffirmed her business acumen and her community standing. For Brown, appearances mattered.

Brown hit her stride in the 1950s when her middle-class sensibilities perfectly aligned with her readers' broad support for waging boycotts and filing discrimination lawsuits against white-owned businesses that refused to serve black customers or hire black employees. Brown allied herself with the De Porres Club, an interracial student organization founded at Creighton University that later affiliated with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The students protested. Brown guided their actions and supported them editorially and financially. The partnership produced significant successes several years before Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. garnered national acclaim for similar actions in Montgomery, Alabama. The partners pressured a Coke-Cola bottling plant and a streetcar company to change their discriminatory hiring practices. They forced a bigoted owner to sell her laundry and compelled a high school to integrate its plays. While opponents denounced the students as communist agitators, they struggled to demonize Brown. She was a respected member of Omaha's business class, someone who had forged relationships with white officials and black professionals.

By the mid-1960s, though, Brown's approach toward protest – like her carnations – seemed outdated, more fussy than fashionable. Like others of her generation who advocated the politics of respectability, Brown did not identify with the youthful anger that infused the Black Power Movement. Committed to nonviolence, she minimized her paper's coverage of the urban uprisings that destroyed Omaha's black neighborhoods. She "chose to ignore" (p. 148) the protests and demands of local Black Power activists. In an era of polarization, Forss contends that Brown stuck to "her philosophy of printing only positive news" (p. 150), which a less charitable observer might characterize as willful ignorance.

Even so, Brown remained respected. Young militants, despite their disagreements with Brown, guarded her property during a 1969 riot.

Forss performs admirable work in uncovering a woman publisher who seems to have concealed her innermost thoughts to present an appearance of mannered impeccability as a means to refute racial and gender stereotypes and achieve communal acceptance. Her extensive interviews allow Forss to write knowingly, for example, about Brown's aggressive solicitation of advertisers and the importance of her fashion sense to her public stature. (Forss' thoroughness extends to interviewing the son of Brown's seamstress.) Those same interviews, though, conducted twenty years or so after Brown's death, tend to commemorate an icon's contributions and downplay her flaws and controversies. Journalism historians will likely want to know more about their particular field of interest. Forss offers few insights about Brown's interactions with other publishers and skims over her competition with the *Guide*. Regardless, Forss provides an important primer on the editorial outlook and community relevance of a regionally-significant publisher and the newspaper she made in her image.