

Spark a Conversation about

It's Time to Re-read *The Learning Tree*

Contributed by John Edgar Tidwell, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Kansas



John Edgar Tidwell

When Gordon Parks' novel *The Learning Tree* appeared in 1963, publicists touted it as a window into the world of African American life: more specifically, it purported to show how it feels to be Black in the white man's world. Although the novel fails to deliver on this extremely high expectation, it certainly provides an insightful picture of early 20th century Kansas. Set in Cherokee Flats, a small town not unlike the Fort Scott of Parks' birth, this "coming of age" novel follows its main character Newt Winger as his encounters with birth, death, race, religion, and love enable him to mature into early adulthood. Of the many characters who help to shape his development, a few are especially influential. There is his strong, rather silent father, Jack Winger; and Sarah Winger, the mother whose boundless love, compassion, and wisdom have won her respect from all the townspeople. And his uncle, Rob, blinded years ago, shares his philosophical perspective about the nature of interracial relations. As the novel moves from beginning to end, it provides more than a portrait of small-town life in southeast Kansas. It lays out Parks' vision of an ideal world, one freed from the orthodoxy of racial difference; and it celebrates those features that connect us as human beings.

Spark a conversation with *The Learning Tree*. Dr. Tidwell's questions offer opportunities for reflection and discussion, whether you are reading *The Learning Tree* as part of a book club or on your own.

1. When Uncle Rob takes Newt with him to sell brooms in an all-white neighborhood, Newt gets into a physical confrontation with a white woman and her son who have called him out of his name. Uncle Rob, the voice of reason, expresses this vaguely disguised statement of Parks' own vision: "Take the rest of your anger out on the piano" (p.60). What does this statement mean? Is Art a more effective tool in transforming society than riots and other forms of social resistance?
2. In one of their mother-to-son chats, Sarah imparts the wisdom that Cherokee Flats can be as instructive a site for learning about people as any other place in the world. She says: "Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad—just like the fruit on a tree. . . . No matter if you go or stay, think of Cherokee Flats like that till the day you die—let it be your learning tree" (p. 29). What does Sarah Winger's advice teach Newt? What does it purport to teach us readers? What is your opinion of Sarah's counsel? Is she wise, aspirational, naïve, or what?
3. Jack Winger is a model husband, who has an unshakeable commitment to his wife and family. While he generally has difficulty expressing his emotions, he is, without question, an astute observer of human nature and social circumstances. As Jack stands on top of the church, for example, surveying the damage to the steeple done by the tornado, the narrator tells us Jack's thoughts: "Cherokee Flats and the whole state was a plateau of uncertainty" (p. 20). What does Jack mean by "uncertainty"? How does his observation frame the way readers will see the remainder of the novel? Do you agree or disagree with his representation of Kansas? Does Jack's vision apply to Kansas today?
4. Because of his status as town policeman, Kirky rhetorically functions as a symbol for Kansas law. The narrator, focusing on Jack's thoughts, says: "Like all other Kansas towns, Cherokee Flats walled in the social complexities

The Learning Tree

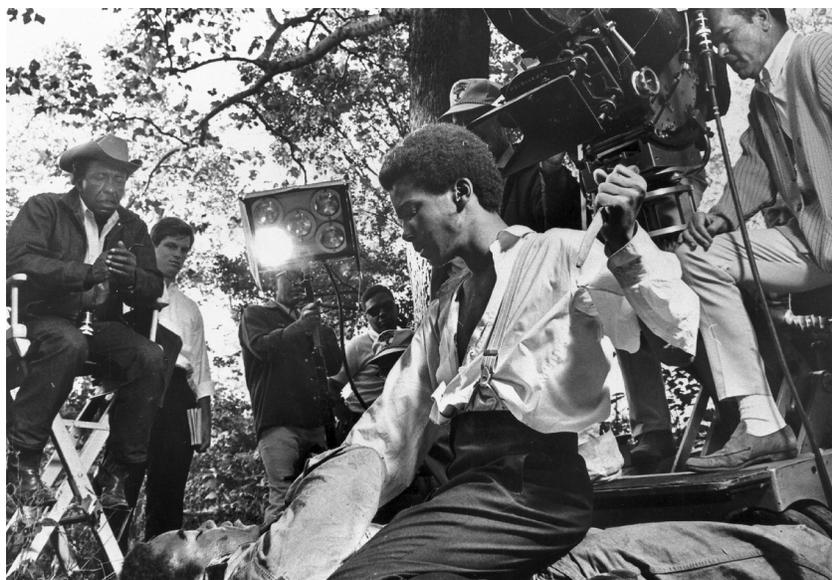
of a borderline state. Here, for the black man, freedom loosed one hand while custom restrained the other. The law books stood for equal rights, but the law (a two-pistol-toting, tobacco-chewing . . . cop called Kirky) never bothered to enforce such laws in books—'mainly 'cause I can't read,' he often bragged" (p.20). Here, Parks contrasts de facto and de jure social practices. What are the differences between the two? How do both contribute to Kansas as a plateau of uncertainty? Can Kansas be described in this same way today? Why or why not?

John Edgar Tidwell is a TALK book discussion leader and he presents the Speakers Bureau program, When Freedom Changed America. Learn more and read his Big Idea essay, Pandemic, Interracial Strife, and the Saving Grace of Humanities, at humanitieskansas.org. 

On Location: Revisiting *The Learning Tree* Sites in Fort Scott

When Gordon Parks brought his book *The Learning Tree* to the big screen, he returned to his hometown of Fort Scott to film on location in the town that inspired the fictional Cherokee Flats. Key scenes from the movie were filmed in and around Fort Scott and nearby Mound City, with over 100 southeast Kansas residents acting as extras in the film, some with speaking roles. Over 50 years later, the filming of this major studio motion picture – the first to be directed by a Black filmmaker – holds a special place in Fort Scott history.

The Gordon Parks Museum's "*The Learning Tree* Film Scene Location Trail" is a new series of 12 outdoor signs placed at *The Learning Tree* filming locations in Fort Scott. Each sign features information about the scene and a QR code that connects visitors with a virtual tour. The project is supported by an HK Humanities for All grant.



Gordon Parks (left) directs *The Learning Tree* in Fort Scott, 1968.

Image courtesy of kansasmemory.org, Kansas Historical Society. Rights and reuse restrictions apply.

"We can all learn from watching *The Learning Tree*," wrote Kirk Sharp, executive director of the Gordon Parks Museum in an article from the *Kansas Reflector* on February 16, 2021. "Along with Parks' other films, and his photography, books, music, poetry, and a long list of lifetime achievements, it provides an enduring legacy that should make all Kansans proud."

The grand opening for the signage trail will be October 7-9, 2021, as part of the Annual Gordon Parks Celebration. Learn more at www.gordonparkscenter.org.

Humanities for All grants supporting outdoor signage that shares stories exploring the human experience are available. Visit humanitieskansas.org or contact Leslie VonHolten, Director of Grants and Outreach, at LVH@humanitieskansas.org or 785-357-0359. 