

still take it—to find out for ourselves.

Anyone interested in developing a complex view of African-American life and thought should snap up Walt Harrington's absorbing "Crossings" (Harper Collins, \$25). The Washington Post writer traveled 25,000 miles across the country, from New York City to Darien, Ga., and from Minneapolis to Sacramento, to unearth the real voices of black America, noting how African-Americans feel about racism, their upbringings, the civil rights movement, and whether the situation has improved in recent decades.

Harrington, whose hometown is Crete, Ill., begins his travels with his black wife's family in Kentucky and from there moves to the South, where he is taken progressively more aback at the venomous racism that whites spit out: "I can count on one hand the number of times I've heard the word 'nigger' used by whites in, oh, the last 10 years," he writes. "After a few months in the South, I'd need a calculator to keep score."

Harrington speaks with a 96-year-old black Arkansan who remembers a local lynching in 1899, with former sharecroppers and their children, and with a former black-radical college classmate. He sits at a North Carolina Woolworth's lunch counter with one of the four young men who sparked the massive demonstrations by sitting at that same counter—then whites-only—in 1960.

Throughout the 466-page book,

"After a few months in the South, I'd need a calculator to keep score" of the number of times whites used the word "nigger."

the opinions throughout run the gamut: Some African-Americans claim to have suffered little or no discrimination at any point in their lives; others cite a genocidal conspiracy intended to wipe out black people.

"Crossings" shines when simply reporting; the only weak points come when Harrington attempts, infrequently, to distill the wildly divergent views and his observations into expansive lessons. And while beautiful verbal descriptions abound, only 14 mediocre photos, of the 1,500 he took, are present.

The book is highly personal and conflict-driven: Harrington deconstructs his and others' views and constantly challenges his own perceptions and snap judgments. At one point he visits Harriet Beecher Stowe's house and realizes he's used the term "Uncle Tom" his whole life without ever reading Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." So he "plops down \$2.95" and reads the book—after which he decides, "Never again will I derogatorily call anyone 'an Uncle Tom.'"

He questions groups of white and black Illinois college students about the tensions surrounding interracial (black man/white woman) relationships, talks with the owner of the Soft Sheen hair-care company, and discusses "corporate America" with the first African-American to join a Chicago country club and the first black classical musician to join the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Often, interviewees offer ample perspective. After describing an Ice-T concert (on the Lollapalooza tour) where the rapper poses for photos holding an automatic weapon, and exerts the mostly white crowd to chant "Cop Killer," Harrington talks with a former Crip who insists, "Ice-T was not no fucking gangbanger."

He also reveals, after hundreds of pages, that blacks' best economic choice during the Depression was bootlegging; no surprise, then, that he finds South-Central drug dealers offering the same argument.

Eventually, he finds his way to Oakland, where he talks with an Oakland A's executive and writer Ishmael Reed, and then to Sacramento.

At Pancake Circus on Broadway in Sacramento, Harrington meets 30-year-old Brenda. She's got two children, a husband in jail and no job. "She's proud she has never sunk to prostitution," he writes, noting the terrible service the two get from a surly waitress, and that Brenda, tentative and intimidated, speaks of feeling inferior to whites, of watching the "nice-lookin' people ... strokin' their pretty hair."

"Her speech has nearly brought me to tears," Harrington writes. "It's almost the year 2000, and blacks like Brenda still must live with this garbage polluting their heads, terrorizing them, tearing them down, making them unable to withstand fools as insignificant as a waitress in a pancake house. For all the progress, this continuing tragedy we must never forget."

—MATTHEW BUDMAN

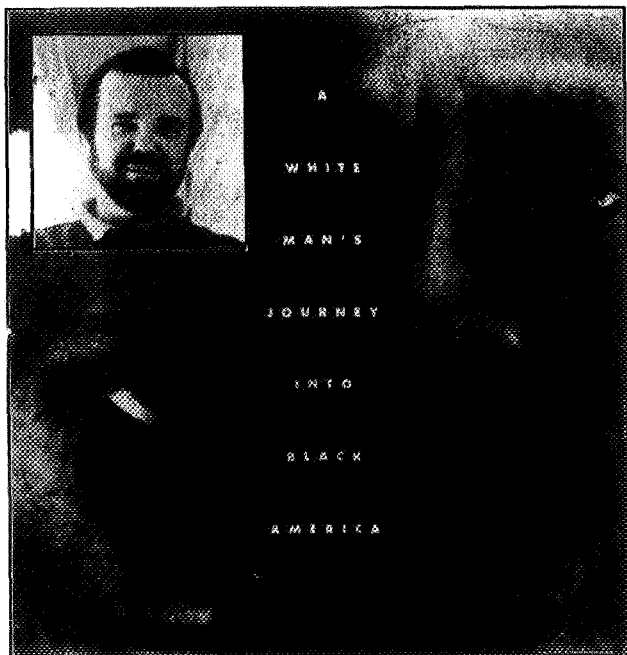
BOOK REVIEW

Shaking Hands With Jim Crow

'Crossings: A White Man's Journey Into Black America'

For years whites have struggled to understand the fundamental issues of race in America. Occasionally a writer ventures out to talk to real, live African-Americans, but the usual procedure involves non-blacks lamenting the self-destructive tendencies of gang-bangers in South-Central LA and Jew-haters in Brooklyn's Crown Heights.

Why are they the way they are? perplexed pundits wonder. But few of us have the opportunity—and fewer



Walt Harrington, author of "Crossings."