

★ **Merida, Kevin & Michael A. Fletcher**

SUPREME DISCOMFORT:
The Divided Soul of Clarence Thomas

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An engrossing biography of a conflicted man who, as the second African-American to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, has become a hero to conservatives and a pariah to the black community at large.

Associate editor Merida and journalist Fletcher, both of the *Washington Post*, have done a superb job with this both harsh and sympathetic life of Clarence Thomas, best known for the battle over his confirmation 16 years ago, tinged not a little by the Anita Hill scandal. Drawing on many interviews with friends, colleagues and others (Thomas did not cooperate), the authors describe a sensitive dark-skinned Georgian who was raised by his beloved grandfather. Thomas attended parochial schools, Holy Cross and Yale Law, and he rose through Reagan-era federal posts to join the high court. In vivid scenes, the authors show how race defined Thomas: He was taunted in schoolyards for his blackness; wounded on hearing a white seminarian cry, "I hope the S.O.B. dies," on the day Martin Luther King Jr. was shot; and embittered when he received no offers from major law firms upon graduating from Yale Law. (He keeps the rejection letters in a shoebox.) The authors note the irony of his opposition to affirmative action: He attended Holy Cross on a new scholarship for black students and entered law school under affirmative action. "Race is the central fact of his meteoric rise, and Thomas has alternately denied it and resented it—all the way to the top," they write. He is presented as someone who could be charming, famously engaging people in long conversations. But what lingers is an image of an isolated loner.

An unflinching look at success and race in America. (*Agent: Andrew Blauner/Blauner Books Literary Agency*)