Rawn James Jr. ’01
Finding the narrative

RAWN JAMES JR. spent four years researching and writing Root and Branch: Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and the Struggle to End Segregation, during which time the attorneys at the center of the story became so deeply embedded in his mind that he sometimes dreamed about them. The experience, while exhausting, helped him develop an appreciation for Houston and Marshall’s considerable dedication and sacrifice.

“What I really came away with was how all-consuming the struggle was for each man. I look now as an attorney with some experience and as a husband and a father, and I can fully appreciate the enormous sacrifice that each man made in fighting these battles across the country,” James says. “They were on the road tens of thousands of miles every single year litigating these cases. It wasn’t a matter of just going out to Topeka, Kan. They were all over, at great personal risk to themselves. That really impressed me.”

Published in 2010 by Bloomsbury Press to rave reviews, Root and Branch tells the story of Houston and Marshall’s protracted legal battle to end segregation in public education that culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.

James explains that the duo’s decades-long effort began with a 1936 case challenging segregation at the University of Maryland Law School.

“They started with law schools for a number of reasons, the first of which is that the triers of fact at the trial level, the judges, had all been to law school,” James says. “The attorneys for the NAACP did not have to tell the judges or rely on an expert witness to tell a judge what separates a good law school from a bad law school.

“Even many attorneys have the false idea that Brown v. Board of Education was a decision that came out of nowhere and shocked America, when in fact many of the observers at the time saw that the Court was marching directly toward holding that segregation was unconstitutional in a public education setting,” James says. “The Texas attorney general at the time saw it, the governor of Texas saw it, and they said, ‘This is what is coming. This is what Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP and its lawyers are trying to do.’ Marshall and Houston set out, beginning in the 1930s, to desegregate the country.”

Hoping to reach legal and general audiences alike, James identifies a twofold intent for writing Root and Branch: to bring attention to Houston’s often overlooked contributions to the ongoing legal battle; and to examine how the relationship between the two attorneys “moved from professor and student to mentor and mentee to being very close friends.”

He conducted his research at the Library of Congress and Howard University, where Houston was dean of the Law School and Marshall a student. He used no research assistants. That meant long hours of work outside of his full-time job with the Office of General Counsel for the Department of the Navy, where he is a senior trial counsel, representing the Navy and the Marine Corps in civilian matters and contract disputes.

“It was a killer,” says James, who is married to Maureen James ’02 and has two young sons. “I set the alarm for 3 or 4 in the morning before work. I would stay up late at night, work on it on weekends.”

Although he signed with a literary agent at age 19, James says he spent more than a decade “shouting into the abyss,” with a handful of unpublished, full-length manuscripts and assorted magazine clippings serving as the primary evidence of his authorship.

“I wrote all through law school as well as all through college — just constantly writing. But then even when it happens, it’s still that overnight feeling to you,” he says of landing his contract with Bloomsbury. “One day you’re hoping to get an agent and the next day you’re sitting in an editor’s office in New York City and he’s trying to convince you to let him publish your book.”

Originally a fiction writer, James switched to nonfiction in 2005 when his freelance magazine work helped him discover that he enjoyed interviewing people, uncovering facts, and “finding the narrative.” He says his legal background helped him locate the most important elements of cases and identify strategies being utilized. It also made him a better writer.

“A lawyer, particularly a litigator, needs to know how to write well and clearly and to express a complex idea as simply as possible. That’s what a good writer should do,” James says. “The practice of law for me is very much the practice of writing and rewriting. I got much better at it in law school and over the years of practicing. Law is the study of words. At the end of the day that’s really what you do as a lawyer, and it’s what you do as a writer.”

James plans to continue writing about history and the law and will choose his next work from a short list of ideas he currently has in mind. The process is partly, he says, a matter of choosing which idea he can live with for years at a time. ■ — Matthew Taylor