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Book Review: The Blood of Emmett Till by Timothy B. Tyson

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Tyson, Timothy B. *The Blood of Emmett Till*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017. viii +291 pages. Paperback, \$17.00.

Many times, academic works fulfill the expectations of the reader as they provide relevant, current information. They are comprehensive within the field and topic they cover. They are also staid. The dry writing that is the bane of students (and many professors) seemingly is also one of the requirements for a serious work of academic significance. The monographs are informative, but they are rarely *exciting to read*.

There are a few authors, however, who have been able to write academic works that are also suitable for those outside of academia. Among historians, J. A. S. Evans, the Byzantinist, is a remarkable example. John Ferling, the Americanist, is another. Some would argue that Ron Chernow, with his works on Alexander Hamilton and Ulysses S. Grant, is certainly among those who can write history that is both informative and fun to read. We need to add Dr. Timothy B. Tyson to the list.

The Blood of Emmett Till does not read like an academic tome—instead, the lively language and the imagery remind one of Dan Brown rather than Robert Brown, the stuffy Byzantine historian. Tyson makes the historical characters, in all their imperfection, come alive in a way that most academics seemingly cannot. For those unfamiliar with the case of Emmett Till, he was a fourteen-year-old boy who was lynched for supposedly whistling and making sexual advances to a white woman in a Mississippi store. His death was the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement—even Rosa Parks supposedly reminded herself of Till’s cause as she sat at the front of the bus.

Tyson’s description of Carolyn Bryant, both in her youth and as she sat across from him during an interview, reminds the reader that she is not just a single dimensional character in one of the most notorious lynchings in American history, but that she is a real person; she is complex, beautiful, and, in her own mind, innocent. Tyson even writes of his own experiences while researching in the first person, adding to the reader’s connection to the story at hand: “. . . and then murmured, seeming to speak to herself more than to me, ‘They’re all dead now anyway.’” (p.1) By the sixth page, a new disclosure that was not known during the trial in 1955, nor by any other historian until his work, comes to light: the allegation that Emmett Till made sexual advances towards Carolyn Bryant, by her own admission, was never true. Tyson’s work, even before the end of the first surprisingly short chapter, changes the entirety of the charges against Till and proves, as Tyson points out through Till’s mother’s words: “Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him.” (p.7)

Timothy Tyson certainly seems to have made sure that not only would this work be informative, but it must also be riveting. He keeps the 18 chapters and the epilogue short; each can be completed in about a fifteen-minute sitting. While the whole of the book is almost 300 pages, the language never makes the reader feel as though they have read as much as they did. Yet, even if the language is more colloquial, the work is filled with pertinent information about the personalities of Carolyn Bryant, Mamie Till-Mobley, J. W. Milam, Roy Bryant, and even Emmett Till himself. None of these character descriptions are projections of how the author wants them to be, but rather as the characters were. The information about Emmett Till, for example, takes him from being the mauled victim of a horrific lynching that served as the impetus to the Civil Rights movement to being a 14-year-old survivor of polio who loved baseball and could be sassy and mischievous. He depicts Carolyn Bryant as a middle-class white woman who was naïve enough to believe her husband when he denied ever having been involved in the killing. He shows her husband as a follower, and J.W. Milam as the aggressive

Mississippian of the 1950s whose existence was seemingly threatened by the liberation of African Americans. In spite of this, not one person is forgiven for their role in the heinous crime.

While the book seems to be written to appeal to those outside of academia, the rigor of Tyson's research is more than evident throughout the book. For example, he went through Amzie Moore's cancelled checks to discover that Moore and T. R. M. Howard were financially connected through the Magnolia Mutual Life Insurance Company: this is the same company that Medgar Evers worked for after graduating from Alcorn State College. While at first one might wonder about the connections to the Till lynching, Tyson adroitly draws the connections between Moore, Howard, Evers, and Till as only the most skilled historians can. He discerns the passing connections from the substantial causal relationships. Tyson, for example, also proves that the Till lynching became famous because Till-Mobley had, and was willing to use, her connection to the African-American community and the media in Chicago. He uses the only transcripts of the trial still extant and interprets them critically. Tyson utilized extensive sources; this work has a sixteen-page bibliography. Each page is rife with superscript numbers referring the academic and the leisurely reader to endnotes.

In short, Timothy Tyson has proven that academic writing can be densely informative while also being engaging. His seminal work on Emmett Till's short life, his death, the trial, and the aftermath of the trial is foundational for any student of Civil Rights and the Jim Crow South. Do not let the conversational nature of this work fool you: this is a serious, academically rigorous book that is also mesmerizing to read.

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