

Books by the Stack



The Blood of Emmett Till by Timothy B. Tyson

Historian Timothy Tyson's new history freshly illuminates the trial of Till's murderers. He analyzes the trial transcript, which had been missing since 1955, interviews the key witness (now 80 years old) to Till's allegedly inappropriate behavior, and provides details from a recent FBI investigation. This riveting account immerses readers in the case and offers the definitive summary of its impact on subsequent history.

Why you'll like it: *True crime. Sobering. Richly detailed.*

About the Author: Timothy B. Tyson is an American writer and historian from North Carolina who specializes in the issues of culture, religion and race associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century. He has joint appointments at Duke University and the University of North Carolina. His books have won many awards, including Frederick Jackson Turner Award and the James A. Rawley Prize. (Wikipedia).

Questions for Discussion

1. Did anyone really believe Carolyn Bryant was telling the truth when she testified, though not in front of the jury, at the trial of her husband and brother-in-law for the murder of Emmett Till in September 1955? In what sense did her testimony matter? Do we know the level of her culpability in Emmett's death? In what ways is it significant and/or less so that she admitted to having distorted and fabricated some of what happened between her and Emmett Till at the Bryant Grocery on August 24, 1955?
2. Emmett Till was from Chicago, not Mississippi. How did his hometown affect the way that the story of his lynching plays out?
3. The story of Emmett Till inspired novels, plays, poems, songs, documentary and feature films, memoirs, and episode of Rod Serling's legendary 1959-1964 science fiction/psychological horror TV series, "The Twilight Zone." High school textbooks often tell the story. (Surprisingly, there are only two full histories of the case.) Sixty-something years later, this 14-year-old boy sparks remarkable public recognition, far more than any of the prominent historical figures of the 1950s. What is it that makes Emmett Till's story persist in the imaginations and psyches of several generations of Americans?
4. The author contends that Americans remember Emmett Till's story as a horror movie starring "the redneck monsters of the South" and congratulate ourselves for not being one of them. How does the story he tells differ in its historical and moral focus?
5. Assessing this period of history, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people." Looking at 1950s Chicago, Mississippi, and the country at large through the lens of this story, is King's critique fair and sufficient? What about today?
6. What characters in this story do you identify with the most? Which ones baffle you, appall you, make you want to know more? Do we learn enough about any of the human beings who inhabit this story to assess them? Within the limits of writing history, as opposed to writing a novel, how might the author have done

better at drawing these characters?

- 7.** What did the international reaction to the Emmett Till story tell you about the world in which these events take place? Are the international dynamics of this story important enough to deserve a whole chapter, “16: The Verdict of the World,” or is that a narrowly academic issue? Did these dynamics affect the civil rights movement? The federal government? Does world opinion carry more or less weight today?
- 8.** Why did the lynching of Emmett Till attract so much more attention than the assassinations of Mississippi voting rights activists like Rev. George Lee, assassinated in Belzoni four months before the Till lynching and Lamar Smith, gunned down in front of the courthouse in Brookhaven, in the presence of the local sheriff, only two weeks earlier?
- 9.** Why do you think Rev. Moses Wright, 18-year-old Willie Reed, his grandfather, Add Reed, and neighbor Amanda Bradley – the black witnesses located by the “Mississippi underground”, with the help of black and white newspaper reporters – chose to testify in court, given that they had to leave their homes and families immediately to do so?
- 10.** Why did the young people who organized the sit-ins of the early 1960s come to see themselves as “the Emmett Till generation?” Why do Black Lives Matter activists today often chant Emmett Till’s name at protest demonstrations?
- 11.** Having explored this story more deeply, do you feel called to think or act any differently? Or is this mostly a matter of understanding a past that seems remote from your own historical moment?

(Questions provided by booksamillion.com)



www.grpl.org/BookClub