Book offers fullest account yet of Emmett Till story

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Like many Black folks in Chicago, Mamie Carthan Till did not want to lose touch with her ancestral home in Mississippi, even though it remained a land of ghosts and terror.

And so in the summer of 1955, she sent her 14-year-old son to visit his great-uncle, Moses Wright. Mamie warned Emmett to speak to White people only when spoken to, to agree with them should a dispute arise, and to avoid contact with White women. The boy assured her he would.

On Aug. 24, 1955, Emmett may have bragged to Mrs. Carolyn Bryant, the pretty young wife of the owner of a grocery store, about dating White girls, paid for gum by placing money in Bryant's hands (thus violating a Mississippi taboo), and whistled at her as he said "goodbye."

Within hours, Emmett was kidnapped, tortured and murdered; his body, with a wire hung around his neck, was thrown into the Tallahatchie River.

Names, faces, personalities

Mamie's decision to display her son's body in an open casket – and the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam – made the murder a cause célèbre of the civil rights movement.


Tyson's portraits of Carolyn Bryant (based in part on the only interview she has ever given), Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam give names, faces, and personalities to diehard segregationists.

And Tyson sets their behavior in the context of "Citizens' Councils," which in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education, spoke "for nearly all vested authority in Mississippi," launched a campaign of intimidation that forced thousands of Blacks to remove their names from voter registration lists, and lamented that Bryant and Milam had not slit open Till's stomach "so that his body would not have risen in the river."

Seeking justice

Most important, Tyson documents the courage of Mississippi Blacks in the 1950s, when the national news media (and, of course, the local press) "soft-pedaled" hate crimes. In court, Moses Wright identified the men who kidnapped Emmett Till.

Although he slept in a cemetery and other locations and carried a rifle, Wright later said: "I wasn't exactly brave and I wasn't scared. I just wanted to see justice done."

Eighteen-year-old Willie Reed risked his life by testifying that he heard the sounds of a beating, cries for mercy, and put Milam and Bryant at the scene of the crime. Fully aware that the defendants would be acquitted, Tyson reminds us, Black witnesses understood they would have to leave the state to escape retribution.

Race still an issue

The mass media and massive protests, Tyson indicates, helped make Till's murder the most notorious racial crime in history – and contributed mightily to the extraordinary achievements of the civil rights movement. That said, however, Tyson asks "whether America's predicament is really so different now."
The Charleston, South Carolina church shooting in 2014, and visual evidence of pervasive police brutality, he suggests, proves that legacies of the racial caste system “still end the lives of young African Americans for no reason other than the color of their American skin.”

‘Moral vision’ needed

Insisting that “America is still killing Emmett Till,” though often “by means less direct than bludgeons and bullets,” Tyson concludes with a stirring, serious and sobering challenge to all of us, as “imperfect people who have inherited a deeply tragic history.”

Americans must “develop a moral vision and political will to crush white supremacy – both the political program and the concealed assumptions,” he writes, establish social movements to confront head-on the racial chasm that divides us, and, at the same time, “find what Dr. King called ‘the strength to love.’”

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