

The Blood of Emmett Till

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* Longlisted for the National Book Award * A New York Times Notable Book * A Washington Post Notable Book * An NPR Best Book of 2017 * A Los Angeles Times Best Book of 2017 * An Atlanta Journal-Constitution Best Southern Book of 2017 *

This extraordinary New York Times bestseller reexamines a pivotal event of the civil rights movement—the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till—and demands that we do the one vital thing we aren't often enough asked to do with history: learn from it" (The Atlantic).

In 1955, white men in the Mississippi Delta lynched a fourteen-year-old from Chicago named Emmett Till. His murder was part of a wave of white terrorism in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision that declared public school segregation unconstitutional. Only weeks later, Rosa Parks thought about young Emmett as she refused to move to the back of a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Five years later, Black students who called themselves "the Emmett Till generation" launched sit-in campaigns that turned the struggle for civil rights into a mass movement. Till's lynching became the most notorious hate crime in American history.

But what actually happened to Emmett Till—not the icon of injustice, but the flesh-and-blood boy? Part detective story, part political history, *The Blood of Emmett Till* "unfolds like a movie" (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution), drawing on a wealth of new evidence, including a shocking admission of Till's innocence from the woman in whose name he was killed. "Jolting and powerful" (The Washington Post), the book "provides fresh insight into the way race has informed and deformed our democratic institutions" (Diane McWhorter, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Carry Me Home*) and "calls us to the cause of justice today" (Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, president of the North Carolina NAACP).

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NOTHING THAT BOY DID

The older woman sipped her coffee. "I have thought and thought about everything about Emmett Till, the killing and the trial, telling who did what to who," she said.¹ Back when she was twenty-one and her name was Carolyn Bryant, the French newspaper *Aurore* dubbed the dark-haired young woman from the Mississippi Delta "a crossroads Marilyn Monroe."² News reporters from Detroit to Dakar never failed to sprinkle their stories about l'affaire Till

with words like "comely" and "fetching" to describe her. William Bradford Huie, the Southern journalist and dealer in tales of the Till lynching, called her "one of the prettiest black-haired Irish women I ever saw in my life."³ Almost eighty and still handsome, her hair now silver, the former Mrs. Roy Bryant served me a slice of pound cake, hesitated a little, and then murmured, seeming to speak to herself more than to me, "They're all dead now anyway." She placed her cup on the low glass table between us, and I waited.

For one epic moment half a century earlier, Carolyn Bryant's face had been familiar across the globe, forever attached to a crime of historic notoriety and symbolic power. The murder of Emmett Till was reported in one of the very first banner headlines of the civil rights era and launched the national coalition that fueled the modern civil rights movement. But she had never opened her door to a journalist or historian, let alone invited one for cake and coffee. Now she looked me in the eyes, trying hard to distinguish between fact and remembrance, and told me a story that I did not know.

The story I thought I knew began in 1955, fifty years earlier, when Carolyn Bryant was twenty-one and a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago walked into the Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market in a rural Mississippi Delta hamlet and offended her. Perhaps on a dare, the boy touched or even squeezed her hand when he exchanged money for candy, asked her for a date, and said goodbye when he left the store, tugged along by an older cousin. Few news writers who told the story of the black boy and the backwoods beauty failed to mention the "wolf whistle" that came next: when an angry Carolyn walked out to a car to retrieve the pistol under the seat, Till supposedly whistled at her.

The world knew this story only because of what happened a few days later: Carolyn's kinsmen, allegedly just her husband and brother-in-law, kidnapped and killed the boy and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. That was supposed to be the end of it. Lesson taught. But a young fisherman found Till's corpse in the water, and a month later the world watched Roy Bryant and J. W. "Big" Milam stand trial for his murder.

I knew the painful territory well because when I was eleven years old in the small tobacco market town of Oxford, North Carolina, a friend's father and brothers beat and shot a young black man to death. His name was Henry Marrow, and the events leading up to his death had something in common with Till's. My father, a white Methodist minister, got mixed up in efforts to bring peace and justice to the community. We moved away that summer. But Oxford burned on in my memory, and I later went back and interviewed the man most responsible for Marrow's death. He told me, "That nigger committed suicide, coming in my store and wanting to four-letter-word my daughter-in-law." I also talked with many of those who had protested the murder by setting fire to the huge tobacco warehouses in downtown Oxford, as well as witnesses to the killing, townspeople, attorneys, and others. Seeking to understand what had happened in my own hometown made me a historian. I researched the case for years, on my way to a PhD in American history, and in 2004 published a book about Marrow's murder, what it meant for my hometown and my family, and how it revealed the workings of race in American history.⁴ Carolyn Bryant Donham had read the book, which was why she decided to contact me and talk with me about the lynching of Emmett Till.

The killing of Henry Marrow occurred in 1970, fifteen years after the Till lynching, but unlike the Till case it never entered national or international awareness, even though many of the same themes were present. Like Till, Marrow had allegedly made a flirtatious remark to a young white woman at her family's small rural store. In Oxford, though, the town erupted into arson and violence, the fires visible for miles. An all-white jury, acting on what they doubtless perceived to be the values of the white community, acquitted both of the men charged in the case, even though the murder had occurred in public. What happened in Oxford in 1970 was a late-model lynching, in which white men killed a black man in the service of white supremacy. The all-white jury ratified the murder as a gesture of protest against public school integration, which had finally begun in Oxford, and underlying much of the white protest was fear and rage at the prospect of white and black children going to school together, which whites feared would lead to other forms of "race-mixing," even "miscegenation."

As in the Marrow case, many white people believed Till had violated this race-and-sex taboo and therefore had it coming. Many news reports asserted that Till had erred in judgment, in behavior, in deed, and perhaps in thought. Without justifying the murder, a number of Southern newspapers argued that the boy was at least partially at fault. The most influential account of the lynching, Huie's 1956 presumptive tell-all, depicted a black boy who virtually committed suicide with his arrogant responses to his assailants. "Boastful, brash," Huie described Till. He "had a white girl's picture in his pocket and boasted of having screwed her," not just to friends, not just to Carolyn Bryant, but also to his killers: "That is why they took him out and killed him."⁵ The story was told and retold in many ways, but a great many of them, from the virulently defensive accounts of Mississippi and its customs to the self-righteous screeds of Northern critics, noted that Till had been at the wrong place at the wrong time and made the wrong choices.

Until recently historians did not even have a transcript of the 1955 trial. It went missing soon after the trial ended, turning up briefly in the early 1960s but then destroyed in a basement flood. In September 2004 FBI agents located a faded "copy of a copy of a copy" in a private home in Biloxi, Mississippi. It took weeks for two clerks to transcribe the entire document, except for one missing page.⁶ The transcript, finally released in 2007, allows us to compare the later recollections of witnesses and defendants with what they said fifty years earlier. It also reveals that Carolyn Bryant told an even harder-edged story in the courtroom, one that was difficult to square with the gentle woman sitting across from me at the coffee table.

Half a century earlier, above the witness stand in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse, two ceiling fans slowly churned the cigarette smoke. This was the stage on which the winner of beauty contests at two high schools starred as the fairest flower of Southern womanhood. She testified that Till had grabbed her hand forcefully across the candy counter, letting go only when she snatched it away. He asked her for a date, she said, chased her down the counter, blocked her path, and clutched her narrow waist tightly with both hands.

She told the court he said, "You needn't be afraid of me. [I've], well, --with white women

before." According to the transcript, the delicate young woman refused to utter the verb or even tell the court what letter of the alphabet it started with. She escaped Till's forceful grasp only with great difficulty, she said.⁷ A month later one Mississippi newspaper insisted that the case should never have been called the "wolf whistle case." Instead, said the editors, it should have been called "an 'attempted rape' case."⁸

"Then this other nigger came in from the store and got him by the arm," Carolyn testified. "And he told him to come on and let's go. He had him by the arm and led him out." Then came an odd note in her tale, a note discordant with the claim of aborted assault: Till stopped in the doorway, "turned around and said, 'Goodbye.'"⁹

The defendants sat on the court's cane-bottom chairs in a room packed with more than two hundred white men and fifty or sixty African Americans who had been crowded into the last two rows and the small, segregated black press table. In his closing statement, John W. Whitten, counsel for the defendants, told the all-white, all-male jury, "I'm sure that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men, despite this [outside] pressure."¹⁰

Mamie Bradley, Till's mother, was responsible for a good deal of that outside pressure on Mississippi's court system. Her brave decision to hold an open-casket funeral for her battered son touched off news stories across the globe. The resultant international outrage compelled the U.S. State Department to lament "the real and continuing damage to American foreign policy from such tragedies as the Emmett Till case."¹¹ Her willingness to travel anywhere to speak about the tragedy helped to fuel a huge protest movement that pulled together the elements of a national civil rights movement, beginning with the political and cultural power of black Chicago. The movement became the most important legacy of the story.¹² Her memoir of the case, *Death of Innocence*, published almost fifty years after her son's murder, lets us see him as a human being, not merely the victim of one of the most notorious hate crimes in history.¹³

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As I sat drinking her coffee and eating her pound cake, Carolyn Bryant Donham handed me a copy of the trial transcript and the manuscript of her unpublished memoir, "More than a Wolf Whistle: The Story of Carolyn Bryant Donham." I promised to deliver our interview and these documents to the appropriate archive, where future scholars would be able to use them. In her memoir she recounts the story she told at the trial using imagery from the classic Southern racist horror movie of the "Black Beast" rapist.¹⁴ But about her testimony that Till had grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities, she now told me, "That part's not true."

A son of the South and the son of a minister, I have sat in countless such living rooms that had been cleaned for guests, Sunday clothes on, an unspoken deference running young to old, men to women, and, very often, dark skin to light. As a historian I have collected a lot of oral histories in the South and across all manner of social lines. Manners matter a great deal, and the personal questions that oral history requires are sometimes delicate. I was

comfortable with the setting but rattled by her revelation, and I struggled to phrase my next question. If that part was not true, I asked, what did happen that evening decades earlier?

"I want to tell you," she said. "Honestly, I just don't remember. It was fifty years ago. You tell these stories for so long that they seem true, but that part is not true." Historians have long known about the complex reliability of oral history-of virtually all historical sources, for that matter-and the malleability of human memory, and her confession was in part a reflection of that. What does it mean when you remember something that you know never happened? She had pondered that question for many years, but never aloud in public or in an interview. When she finally told me the story of her life and starkly different and much larger tales of Emmett Till's death, it was the first time in half a century that she had uttered his name outside her family.

Not long afterward I had lunch in Jackson, Mississippi, with Jerry Mitchell, the brilliant journalist at the Clarion-Ledger whose sleuthing has solved several cold case civil rights-era murders. I talked with him about my efforts to write about the Till case, and he shared some thoughts of his own. A few days after our lunch a manila envelope with a Mississippi return address brought hard proof that "that part," as Carolyn had called the alleged assault, had never been true.

Mitchell had sent me copies of the handwritten notes of what Carolyn Bryant told her attorney on the day after Roy and J.W. were arrested in 1955. In this earliest recorded version of events, she charged only that Till had "insulted" her, not grabbed her, and certainly not attempted to rape her. The documents prove that there was a time when she did seem to know what had happened, and a time soon afterward when she became the mouthpiece of a monstrous lie.¹⁵

Now, half a century later, Carolyn offered up another truth, an unyielding truth about which her tragic counterpart, Mamie, was also adamant: "Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him."

I. Mamie Carthan became Mamie Till after her marriage to Louis Till in 1940, which ended with his death in 1945. Mamie Till became Mamie Mallory after a brief remarriage in 1946. Her name changed to Bradley after another marriage in 1951. She was Mamie Bradley during most of the years covered by this book. She married one last time in 1957, becoming Mamie Till-Mobley, under which name she published her 2004 memoir. To avoid confusion, and also to depict her as a human being rather than an icon, I generally refer to her by her first name. No disrespect is intended. The same is true of Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant.

Other Books

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