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A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till (book review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. New York: The Free Press, 1988. xiv, 193 pp. \$19.95.

The lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 is one of the most celebrated examples of racial violence in the twentieth century. At his death Emmett Till was a fifteen-year-old black boy who was killed for giving offense to the barriers of race and sex that have always defined the American South. Till was thought to have whistled at a white woman on a hot summer day in Money, Mississippi. For this deed, which Till may not in fact have committed, Till was kidnaped, tortured, and killed by two white men who may not have been alone in their deed. They were protected by their neighbors in Mississippi, by reason of a need to erect a common defense of white rule, and by means of a jury verdict in the killer's favor by an all-white jury. Yet these men, who later admitted the killing, were, by means of social ostracism, rejected by these same neighbors. Moreover, Emmett Till's lynching and subsequent developments were the subject of national and even international condemnation, and together formed a beginning punctuation mark to the modern civil rights movement.

Perhaps the fact and the manner of Till's killing made such an impact because of the horror inherent in the murder of a child or because of the viciousness with which Southern whites were willing to defend the privileges of Jim Crow and segregation. The impact of the murder was intensified because it took place in the eye of television, whose images need not be translated to the brain through print, but instead can be transferred viscerally, to the gut.¹ It is that horror, that viciousness, those same images, that Stephen J. Whitfield evokes in *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. Even as he recounts Till's killing, Whitfield explains it as a metaphor for the psycho-social barriers that the killing recognized and was meant to maintain. Through the telling, Whitfield brings home a story that is stark in its clarity and clear despite its factual uncertainty.

Because the Till murder had been conducted in secret by only a few men rather than a widespread conspiracy, Professor Whitfield has less in the way of first-person descriptions on which to depend than other authors of recent major works examining isolated racial lynchings.² Yet, because Whitfield writes with the benefit of a complete police investigation and the revelations of the trial, he is able to write with power, strength, and persuasion as he recounts the life of the victim, recreates the events that led to the victim's death, and describes societal reaction—local, regional, and national—in terms both of opinion and political consequence.

1. The power of these television images is presented in "Awakenings (1954-56)," *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (PBS television broadcast, January 21, 1986).

2. See H. Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (1986) and J. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (1982).

Whitfield analyzes the context in which "Judge Lynch" was both an integral part of and a useful tool for defending the "Southern way of life." In these aspects, Whitfield is at his strongest.

More problematic but also more provocative is the author's attempt to place the killing of Emmett Till within a unified sociological perspective of sex and race. Whitfield suggests a conflict between feminism and black liberation. Juxtaposed to Susan Brownmiller's suggestion that the wolf whistle that Till may have uttered is the moral equivalent of rape,³ is former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver's onetime contention that the rape of a white woman is a revolutionary act.⁴ A liberal white woman in one of Alice Walker's books⁵ is described as having protected her black rapist, for fear of exposing him to the same fate as Emmett Till. The Joan Little incident is recounted, wherein a black woman prisoner may well have lured a white jailer to his death with sexual promises, only to escape punishment by a jury that was half white, half black.

Professor Whitfield recounts these episodes and others without resolving them. The resolution is easy. Both Brownmiller and Cleaver are wrong. Wolf whistling is *not* rape, and while whistling may be offensive, it is not punishable by law, and the implication is not acceptable that the vigilante killing of Till was justified by reason of a whistle. Rape is both offensive and punishable by law, and for a black to inflict the humiliation of rape on a white woman in no way unravels the oppression of blacks by whites. Alice Walker's character in no way furthered the path of the freedom of blacks by acceding to the invasion of her own. If the Joan Little jury ignored an inter-racial murder in favor of the sexual privacy of female prisoners, then it stands condemned equally with the jury in Till's case, who ignored inter-racial murder in favor of the sexual inviolacy of white women from blacks.

A Death in the Delta speaks both of law and lawlessness. The book says much of the nexus between law and the social norms that the law is meant to enforce, for it suggests that when law is perceived as incapable of enforcing those norms there is either the need to change the law or to operate outside of its confines. But *A Death in the Delta* suggests too that if law is limited by a people's willingness to accept it, it is also limited by the willingness of authority to enforce it.

The changing relationship between law and lynching is a proxy for the legal and extralegal position of blacks in the American South. By accepting the lynching of Emmett Till and yet rejecting his killers, white Mississippians marked the beginnings of a transformation in their attitudes respecting the basic civil rights of blacks. In recounting this change, *A Death in the Delta* stands of value to students of the emergence of the modern civil rights movement.

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3. S. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975).

4. E. Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968).

5. A. Walker, "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* at 85-104 (1981).