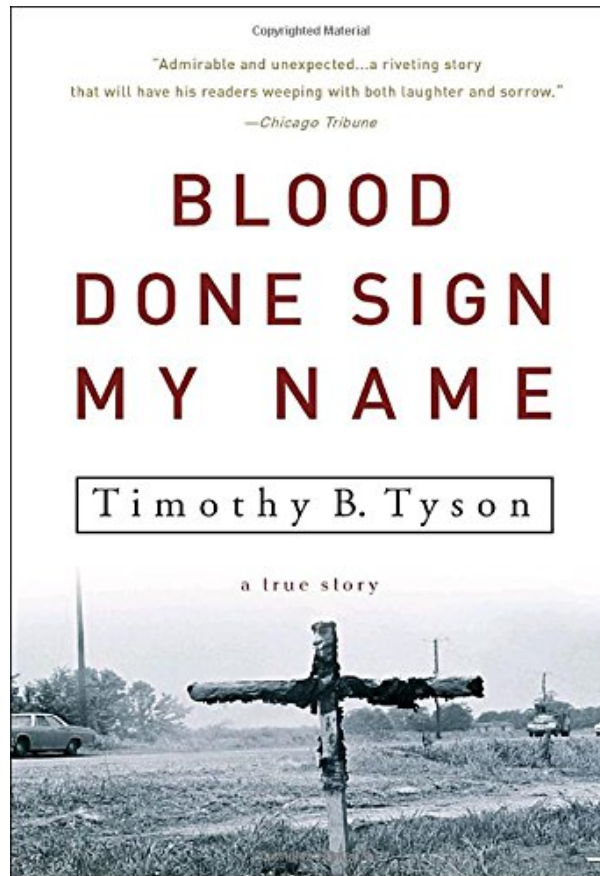


BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME: A TRUE STORY BY TIMOTHY B. TYSON



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—*Chicago Tribune*

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Timothy B. Tyson

a true story



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"Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger." Those words, whispered to ten-year-old Tim Tyson by a playmate, heralded a storm that would forever transform the tobacco market town of Oxford, North Carolina.

On May 11, 1970, Henry Marrow, a twenty-three-year-old black veteran, walked into a crossroads store owned by Robert Teel and came out running. Teel and two of his sons chased and beat Marrow, then killed him in public as he pleaded for his life.

Like many small Southern towns, Oxford had barely been touched by the civil rights movement. But in the wake of the killing, young African Americans took to the streets. While lawyers battled in the courthouse, the Klan raged in the shadows and black Vietnam veterans torched the town's tobacco warehouses. Tyson's father, the pastor of Oxford's all-white Methodist church, urged the town to come to terms with its bloody racial history. In the end, however, the Tyson family was forced to move away.

Tim Tyson's riveting narrative of that fiery summer brings gritty blues truth, soaring gospel vision, and down-home humor to a shocking episode of our history. Like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Blood Done Sign My Name* is a classic portrait of an unforgettable time and place.

- Sales Rank: #29659 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Broadway Books
- Published on: 2005-05-03
- Released on: 2005-05-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.97" h x .76" w x 5.15" l, .60 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 355 pages

Features

- Used Book in Good Condition

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6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Good read, brutally honest

By Sandra

This book is very interesting. It is honest and brutal about the historical nature of interactions between blacks and whites. Some of the content is very graphic and might not be suitable for everyone. I love this book because it is the first one I've ever read that gives a personal account of what interracial relationships were like (honestly) from a personal perspective. This book discusses things that many people aren't comfortable talking about. It is a good read for those who would like to know the truth about the nature of interracial relationships in the past and why they can be difficult to foster in today's society. This book was a requirement for one of my classes in school. It is the first assigned reading that I have actually enjoyed.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Eye opening and mind numbing

By Shawn M. Warswick

Timothy Tyson calls this work "both memoir and history." Likening the story to both the blues and the gospels, the author argues that the story he narrates is "an honest confrontation with our own history... urging us to confront our rage, contradictions, and failures and the painful history of race in America." Tyson details the 1970 murder of Henry Marrow in Oxford North Carolina (Tyson's home town), an act which brings to the surface the open wound of race relations in a small southern town. As the author notes, there is "no clean place in this story where anyone can sit down and congratulate themselves." Finally, the author says that while this is the story of a small boy in a small town, it is also the story of a nation torn apart by racial, political, social and cultural clashes so deep they continue to affect our lives today.

Tyson begins his narrative in Chapter One with the murder of young Henry Marrow (a Vietnam veteran), but the point of view is his as a ten year old boy, not fully understanding what was happening. The narrative is not told chronologically, and the author moves back and forward through time, discussing the case itself, southern history and his own family history, all of it interwoven through various themes (discussed below). Tyson notes, as have other authors of the era, the late 1880's was a time when white conservatives felt threatened by black freedom and had reacted by denouncing whites who voted with blacks as race traitors and finally moved (sometimes violently) to solidify their hold on power and disenfranchise blacks. By 1970, the year of the murder, Tyson notes Oxford was unaffected by the Civil Rights Movement. Schools were still segregated as were most, (if not all) aspects of life in the town. The murder would place Oxford at ground zero in the movement for Civil Rights as blacks finally had had enough. That summer blacks attacked the hierarchy of white supremacy in reaction to the murder and then, after the accused were acquitted the movement took it a step further. A boycott of all white businesses ensued (especially devastating as blacks accounted for 40% of all shoppers) and bombings of tobacco warehouses caused millions of dollars in damage. Finally, business leaders agreed to hire blacks in positions other than as janitors, the confederate soldier statue was moved to a less prominent position and schools were integrated (although many white parents moved their children to all white private "religious" schools). Finally, Tyson notes that this is the essence of the civil rights movement. The main stream narrative of the federal government riding to the rescue is false; the idea that a national movement brought about rights to black Americans is false. Instead, the fight for equality was a localized movement led by local people who simply wanted to be treated as human beings.

Tyson focuses on numerous themes throughout the work, including race and sexuality (the one way sign in the South's interracial sex life), Christianity and race, paternalism, Black Power and Civil Rights and history and memory (to name a few). As for his sources, Tyson used not only family memory and diaries, he also used the criminal court records from Granville County and the Francis B. Hays Collection at the Richard H. Thornton Library in Oxford, NC. He also used the NAACP Papers at the Library of Congress and collections at various places throughout North Carolina, including the University of North Carolina. His primary sources

also included the Raleigh News and Observer and he attempted to use the Oxford Public Ledger (although the latter is missing for most of 1970). He also used numerous secondary sources too numerous to mention.

This is a well written and well researched book and it is very difficult to put down. It is told from a first person point of view, quite rare in historical research. The strengths of the story as in its powerful arguments that the Civil Rights Movement was not successful until African Americans finally resorted to economic protest and violence as well as in the background story discussing such topics as sexuality and history and memory. The only weakness is the lack of footnotes/endnotes and the use of a bibliographical essay organized by chapter rather than a bibliography. But these criticisms do not, in any way, take away from the quality of the book or the power of the argument.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

A Fascinating Combination of Memoir and Civil Rights History

By RDD

In "Blood Done Sign My Name", Timothy B. Tyson examines the murder of Henry Marrow, a twenty-three year old black man, in Oxford, South Carolina, on 11 May 1970. The book combines both historical research about race relations during the late 1960s, in which Tyson attempts to dispel popular myths of civil rights, with Tyson's own memory of growing up in Oxford and the racial caste system in the town. Tyson concludes of the period and its legacy, "Everyone in this struggle, adversaries and advocates alike, grew up steeped in a poisonous white supremacy that distorted their understandings of history and one another. That history is not distant" (pg. 320). He argues that Americans cannot gloss over the more complex parts of this history in favor of a simplified narrative as this does an injustice to history and those who lived it.

Marrow, a veteran, demonstrated the betrayal that veterans felt after fighting on behalf of the United States' ideals. Tyson writes, "Like generations of black veterans before them, who had come home from France or the Philippines insisting that their sacrifices had bought them full citizenship, the Vietnam generation demanded justice. Though they had paid the price, more would be required" (pg. 9). Like Eugene Genovese's "Roll, Jordan, Roll", Tyson uses paternalism to explain the race relations of the mid-twentieth century. He writes, "Paternalism was like a dance whose steps required my grandmother to provide charity to black people, as long as they followed the prescribed routine – that is, coming to the back door, hat in hand; accepting whatever largesse was offered; furnishing effusive expressions of gratitude; and at least pretending to accept their subordinate position in the social hierarchy" (pg. 25). While whites that subscribed to this system believed it represented harmony, it prevented any real connections from forming between Oxford's white and black residents.

Like Gail Bederman and others, Tyson links race with gender, writing, "Segregation...existed to protect white womanhood from the abomination of contact with uncontrollable black men. Whites who questioned segregation confronted the inevitable and, for most people, conclusive cross-examination: Would you want your daughter to marry one?" (pg. 37). This played a key role in Marrow's death as his murderers accused him of saying something flirtatious to a white woman. In grounding the civil rights struggle in the backdrop of the Cold War, Tyson writes, "The Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union offered African Americans the unique leverage to redeem or repudiate American democracy in the eyes of the world. The demonstrations in the streets of the civil rights-era South were carefully staged dramas that forced the contradictions of American democracy to the surface" (pg. 67). This forced this issue to a head since it embarrassed the American government on the international stage.

In contradicting the traditional narrative of civil rights, Tyson writes, "Polling data revealed that the majority of white Americans in 1963, prior to the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, believed that the movement for racial equality had already proceeded 'too far and too fast'" (pg. 106). Rather than accept change, white Americans were compelled by the federal government in 1964 and even then still attempted to avoid government coercion. To this end, Tyson writes, "Those who tell themselves that white people of goodwill voluntarily handed over first-class citizenship to their fellow citizens of color find comfort in selective

memory and wishful thinking” (pg. 249). In addition to overturning the popular narrative of civil rights, Tyson works to combat the popular narrative of the Civil War in the South. He writes, “White supremacists and neo-Confederates have made enthusiasm for the Confederacy posthumously unanimous. Some of them will even try to tell you that the slaves loyally supported the Confederacy, which is just a damn lie” (pg. 172). Despite this lie, it demonstrates the lingering need in the South to justify the racial hierarchy established after Reconstruction.

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