



A Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption

Dina Temple-Raston

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On June 7, 1998, a trio of young white men chained a black man named James Byrd, Jr., to the bumper of a truck and dragged him three miles down a country road. From the initial investigation and through the trials and their aftermath, *A Death in Texas* follows the turns of events through the eyes of Sheriff Billy Rowles and other townspeople trying to come to grips with the killing. Drawing on extensive interviews with key players, Dina Temple-Raston brings to life a cast of remarkable characters: the unrepentant baby-faced killer, Bill King; Jasper's white patriarch and former Jack Ruby defense attorney, Joe Tonahill; the hard-drinking victim, James Byrd Jr.; the determined district attorney, Guy James Gray; and Sheriff Rowles, who held them together.

A Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption Details

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From Reader Review A Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption for online ebook

David Kuntschik says

it was a powerful story of modern-day racism in effect and how the town of Jasper sought to overcome.

Molly says

If I taught creative nonfiction, I think I would include this book, or one a great deal like it, in my course list. The story is well paced, with just enough flash-forwards and flash-backs, cleverly placed, to reveal the whole of the story--or the whole that any outsider can tell. Her use of other voices is also prime for class discussion.

Victoria says

A must read for every American. Frightening, and embarrassing, part of our history that could teach us all a lesson in some way.

Dan Chance says

I had heard of the murder of a black man by dragging him behind a pick up but I didn't know the details before reading this book. I was horrified to learn that the black man's head had popped off his body at one point. The town was complicit in the values that nurtured the inhumanity and casual violence that might have been passed off as roughhousing and forgotten if the black man had survived. As time passed the two (or was it more) convictions were forgotten and the town went back to sleep in a racial sewer.

April says

I was in the mood for a true crime book at the library the other day so I grabbed this one off the shelf as I thought I remembered hearing about this crime when it happened. It's the story of a small town in Texas where 3 white men dragged a black man to death not that long ago (just over 10 years ago now).

I finished reading this one feeling like it had just skimmed the surface. The story just didn't seem complete. I felt that I barely knew more about the case than what I had already known going in. It doesn't help that the author wasn't able to speak with the relatives of the deceased (they were already involved in some other project and couldn't speak with her). My biggest complaint is that I just felt that I got the "gist" of what went on, but when you read an entire book about one crime I think you should feel like you know a little more than the "gist." It just seems strange to me that a crime of this nature in 1998 didn't make a more compelling book. I'm not convinced that a better book that delved a little deeper couldn't have been written.

DAISY DISNEY says

The cover of this book was correct when it said that many people hadn't heard of Jasper, Texas until the Byrd killing. I had never heard of that town nor of this murder. It became one of the most gruesome murders I have ever read about.

It's hard for me to fathom that in this day and age racism of this kind still exists. It is very troubling and sad. There are no words to even try to excuse what these 3 men did to Mr. Byrd. I could not be a defense lawyer for any of the three. I didn't buy any of the "have sympathy for my client because he was brainwashed by white supremacist Mr. King", (who is described as being the mastermind behind the actual crime). I think the death penalty should have been handed down to all 3 of these men.

I read some follow up articles on the case and to date I don't believe that King has been executed. Which is surprising because Texas usually executes within 6 years of being given the death penalty.

LucidStyle says

After recently spending time learning about Emmett Till's murder in 1955, I stumbled by complete happenstance across this book and felt pulled to it. Till is referenced in the book more than once. One wonders, just how long is 43 years?

This work displays excellent objective and sensitive writing. The flowing narrative is pleasantly descriptive and when it needs to be, stark. The author focuses on the connection the townspeople have with their history and landscape in an attempt to reveal an underlying relationship between crime and cause, and answer the open question of society's position of blame. Of course people and communities are more complex than this implies, but seeking the "why" and "how" keeps the pages turning.

The journalistic style of a few too few commas makes for some ambiguous sentences that could have been easily clarified.

Brandelyn says

I found this very moving and scary.

Elizabeth C L says

Being from the area where this murder took place, I felt Ms. Temple-Raston's view a bit skewed. I found myself being annoyed at times by the martyrdom of the man who suffered a horrendous death at the hands of some ignorant racists. There is still a lot of hate both in Southeast Texas as well as most places in the 'bible belt' and it that was evident in the book. It was interesting to have an outsider's perspective.

Kathy says

I'm not a marshmallow or a snowflake. However, the brutality of the crime and the thought process of the citizens of Jasper Texas were appalling. This was a crime that was brutal in its content and disrupted an entire town. Disturbing to its core.

Andy says

A pretty even-handed account of the Jasper case. The author does a good job of detailing how various politicians used this event as a tool. I liked the parts of the book describing the people involved in the crime most of all, and wished the book had more of that.

Brian says

Just awful. Bad writing by someone who, it seemed, should never have flown down there to look around. Her outsider perspective did not help in the telling, and I wasn't convinced of her respect for her subject(s).

Catten says

I was living in Houston in 1998 when I heard about the dragging death in Jasper, 125 miles away in East Texas. That it was a race-related crime was clear, but the aftermath that Jasper's citizens went through rarely even made news in Houston. This book brings it all into sharp focus.

Early the morning of June 7, 1998, 49-year-old James Byrd, Jr. left a friend's house to walk home from a night of partying. "You watch. James Byrd, he's going out in style," Byrd said as he left the party. "The name James Byrd is going to be on everybody's lips."

John William King and Shawn Berry, both age 23, and Lawrence Brewer Jr., age 31, picked up Byrd as he walked and offered to drive him home. They beat him, slit his throat, and chained him behind a pickup truck, dragging him by his heels along a dark, empty road called Martin Luther King Boulevard.

News clips showed a crime scene that stretched for three miles, with bright circles spray-painted around each item. Investigators found Byrd's head and right arm more than a mile from where his torso was dumped in front of a little cemetery.

Investigators established ties between the three white attackers and racist organizations. Byrd was African American. What most of us in Houston didn't know, was that the Black Panthers and the KKK were appearing in Jasper and a town that had remained racially segregated even in the '90s was now trying to appear whole and integrated for the benefit of outsiders.

Temple-Raston, a talented journalist, does an excellent job of keeping to the facts and remaining neutral

throughout the book. She covers everything from events up to the killing and through the trial to Bill King's arrival on death row, and leaves no stone unturned in her quest for truth. The book is well written and brings up the issue of what qualifies as racism. She explores how shocked the rest of us were to learn how unshocked Jasper was to hear about the murder, and she skillfully balances the perspectives of black and white neighbors. In addition, her digressions into local history aren't painful or disruptive, as in other books, because she makes the reader want to know even more.

By the way, King and Brewer were sentenced to death; Berry received a life sentence. Texas has only executed one white person for killing an African American. That was in 1854.

Abigail says

Another of my favorite true crime books. Extensively researched, very well-written about the highly-publicized dragging death of a black man by 3 white men in Texas. This book delves into the problem of gangs (especially white supremacist gangs) in prison, and is extremely provocative in terms of race relations. The town where this happened still had (has?) segregated cemetaries in 2000!

Kirsti says

An account of the horrific dragging death of James Byrd Jr. The author is an NPR reporter who has worked as a foreign correspondent and for *Bloomberg Business News*. Not surprisingly, she is earnest and sincere in reporting this story, rather than overemotional and self-aggrandizing, as many reporters would have been in her place. She also treats the piney woods of East Texas as if they were a foreign country.

"Death has a way of making even slow people hurry. It scares them into seeing things the way they are, instead of the way they wish them to be." --Dina Temple-Raston

"Truth is, it was kind of a white people's place. . . . It didn't say it on the door, but we knew. Some folks thought that whites got up in the morning and decided about how they could hurt us. But that isn't true. They don't think about us. Period. They've found a way to make it so we're as good as not being there. Signs on the door aren't necessary." --Rev. Kenneth Lyons, explaining why he rarely ate in a certain restaurant

"This town has pulled together and needs to heal. The facts are that within twenty-four hours of the murder three men were charged with capital murder. This isn't southern justice, this is just plain justice, and you need to tell these people so." --Walter Diggles, a leader in the African-American community, urging Jesse Jackson not to make inflammatory remarks at Byrd's funeral. Jackson took Diggles's advice.

"Not really black, if you know what I mean." --a white Jasperite, explaining how Diggles's education, wealth, status, and style of speaking made him easier to communicate with than other African Americans

"It was so hot we couldn't have burned a cross in Jasper even if we wanted to. . . . There was a state burn ban on right after the Byrd murder, and we abide by things like that." --the appropriately named Michael Lowe, grand dragon of the Knights of the Klu Klux Klan, explaining his concern about forest fires in East Texas

"Over Alexander's shoulder Mohammed could see the Klansmen hustling from a truck that would not start to

a small Yugo. Six or seven of them were piled into the car in a tangled mass of bodies. Some feet were sticking out the front window. Hooded faces were pressed up against the glass. As they drove away, the car bumper was sitting so low under the weight that it dragged along the pavement, shooting up sparks.' --Dina Temple-Raston

"The accused men failed to see the irony in counting on a black man to help them pass notes to concoct a story that could help them wriggle out of a racially motivated murder." --Dina Temple-Raston

"Give me an easy one, an insurance case." --a young prospective juror, asking the judge to excuse her from the trial; the judge called her "a delightful young lady . . . very refreshing" and excused her

"The story the black community had pieced together over the intervening months revolved around the Klan. They were certain [defendants:] King and Berry were members, had organized the murder, and had planned others. . . . Conversely, the white community had decided the whole episode was a drug deal gone awry. Byrd was no angel, and this was no hate crime, they said. He wasn't killed because he was black or because Jasper was a racist town. 'Just shows what alcohol can do,' Shawn Berry's mother told reporters." --Dina Temple-Raston

"We hate that it happened here. But my little town stood up." --prosecutor Guy James Gray

"The blacks really took advantage of us. . . . They knew we felt bad about what had happened, so they tried to convince us that we had somehow done them wrong. They got uppity, demanding things like jobs and special treatment. The real world doesn't work that way. The real world doesn't give anyone special treatment." --a person Temple-Raston describes as "a prominent white citizen"

"Jasper's white community was saved by Jasper's black community. We sat next to them on podiums and took turns at microphones and said that this wasn't a racist town. . . . We should have known better. . . . all those public meetings, well, they were for show." --beauty-shop owner Unav Wade

"We integrate in Jasper when people are watching. Now that the story is over, a year has gone by, we segregate, just like we was." --Christine Carter
