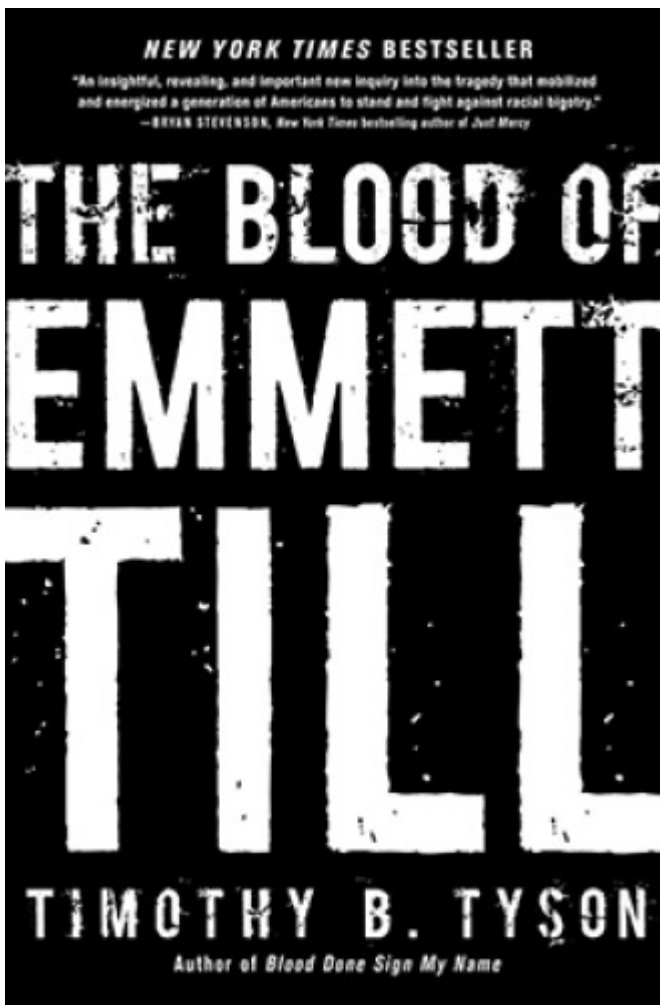


The Till family's agony

Carolyn Bryant changed her story. Does this change the meaning of Emmett Till's death?

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Blood of Emmett Till

By Timothy B. Tyson
Simon & Schuster

When Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago, was murdered for allegedly whistling at and touching a white woman in the Mississippi Delta in 1955, his story became a cornerstone of the civil rights movement. This was due in great part to his mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, who insisted that his hideously mutilated body be put in an open casket for all to see. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, more than 40,000 persons viewed the body.

In 2004, Till-Mobley's book about her son's murder, *Death of Innocence*, was published. A dozen others followed. Just last year, for example, Devery S. Anderson published *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*, which is now being turned into an HBO miniseries produced by Jay Z and Will Smith.

Timothy Tyson's *The Blood of Emmett Till* has been launched into the national spotlight for its revelation that the woman who accused Till of harassing her, Carolyn Bryant, admitted in an interview with the author that she had been lying.

This detail is a compelling reason to read Tyson's work, but it's not the only one. Tyson is the author of *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story*, a book that began with his memory of being ten years old in Oxford, North Carolina, when a black man was brutally murdered and his murderers acquitted. (A movie version of Tyson's account appeared in 2010.) In taking on another account of racial violence and another unjust trial, one that's "the most notorious racial incident in the world," Tyson hoped to offer a carefully researched version based on historically sound accounts. He has done that.

Tyson includes new research, yet manages to shape it all into a strong and readable narrative. At times, the amount of data and names feels exhausting, but the book will be valued for that—a trusted account and thorough resource. Tyson names those who were present at the trial, their background, and their extended families. He travels north to talk about Till's family, then returns to report on the impact of Till's death. He shows how news of the death exploded through the northern media and into already volatile black Chicago communities.

In the movement in Mississippi against segregation, three people played particularly significant roles: World War II veteran Amzie Moore, president of a Mississippi branch of the NAACP; Medgar Evers, field secretary for the NAACP; and Theodore Howard, head of surgery at Mound Bayou's Taborian Hospital. In 1951, these three men

founded what quickly became known as the Regional Council of Negro Leadership.

The number of local, regional, and state protests exploded. Says Tyson, “something new was afoot. In cities all across America citizens found Mississippi guilty as charged.” As Till’s death and the subsequent trial were shaping and accelerating a national civil rights movement, the negative attention cast a stinging blow to Mississippi, where it stimulated increased hatred, political and economic oppression, and ramped-up violence.

Granted, much of Mississippi’s segregationist momentum had picked up in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. (Till’s death came a year later.) Citizens’ Councils began to form regionally, spurred by the rhetoric of Thomas P. Brady, Mississippi’s infamous circuit court judge. Brady played on fears of integration by calling the doctrine of equality between the races “the reasoning which produces riots, raping and revolutions.” Southern writer Lillian Smith called the councils “a quiet, well-bred mob.”

The publisher touts Tyson’s book for including “the only interview ever given by Carolyn Bryant,” the white woman to whom Till supposedly made verbal and physical advances, and whose husband helped murder Till. In Tyson’s 2007 interview with then 72-year-old Bryant, she admitted that her testimony that Till had grabbed her around the waist and muttered obscenities was “not true.”

Unfortunately, Tyson did not think to tell members of the Till family about Bryant’s change in testimony. They didn’t hear the news until the book came out ten years later. In an interview with journalist Brandis Friedman at WTTW in Chicago, Till’s cousin Airickca Gordon said, “What really angered me was that, this man, Timothy Tyson, received this confession of sorts ten years ago, and he had just now released it . . . it could have been very essential to the reopening of the case at the time he received the information. It could have helped our family with our plight to get justice for Emmett.” Actually, reports Friedman, although the statute of limitations for perjury has run out, the interview has led the Justice Department to consider reopening the case.

Tyson says he regrets not telling the family sooner. In a statement shared with WTTW, he explains that he “did not bother Emmett Till’s family for interviews” because they had been interviewed so many times before. “I saw no reason to make them repeat these stories. . . . I see that they feel otherwise, and that in itself makes

me regret that I did not contact them, but from a scholarly standpoint I felt that I had all that I needed.”

Historical scholarship, Tyson contends, is different from the popular press:

To me, this was not anything like the morning news. Did anyone with any relationship to or familiarity with this story actually believe that Carolyn Bryant told the truth in court? I did not consider this a big revelation. . . . My burden of responsibility to this crucial American story was to comb through the massive pile of evidence and try to find the truth as best I could.

Another relative, Ollie Gordon, was a child when Till was murdered. When she heard about Tyson’s book, the pain of the 1955 events was reactivated:

Each time a book comes out or the story of a movie comes out, wounds are reopened in our family. Subconscious grief comes back. . . . Emmett’s mother was in Chicago, and I was in that house, and I grew up in that house. I don’t think a day went by that she didn’t cry.

The ongoing agony for the Till family is the result of violent injustice: a child was stolen from those who loved him. Because Emmett became public property—a symbol of injustice, the impetus for a necessary but unending movement against racist hatred—he is stolen again from his family with every update on the case and every new book about it. Neither the power of the story nor the good it’s done alleviates the tragedy of a life cut short.

A version of this article appears in the June 7 print edition under the title “The Till family’s agony.”