

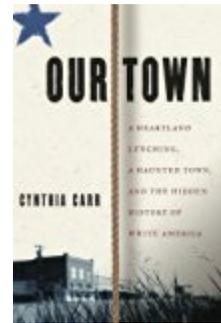
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia Carr. *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006. 512 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-517-70506-3.

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Confronting Unpleasant Truths

In this painstakingly researched, minutely detailed, and exceptionally personal account of the brutal 1930 Marion, Indiana lynching of two black teenagers suspected of murder and rape, Cynthia Carr indicates that the impetus for her study was *A Time of Terror* (1982), by the late James Cameron, the third and youngest of the suspects, whose life was spared by the mob for reasons still not entirely clear. Her own research led Carr to conclude that this first-hand account, as moving as it is, is a dubious source that must be used with caution. This is just one of the many ironies and contradictions revealed in this absorbing, agonizing book.

The book's greatest strength—and at times its most frustrating feature—is Carr's attempt to interweave together the story of the Marion lynching, its legacy within the community, and Marion's history. She gives particular attention to race relations, the contemporary Klan movement, and her personal quest to learn more about her family and its possible connections with the lynching. In her acknowledgement the author gives thanks to her "ultimate editor" for helping her to "give the book a narrative and emotional spine and to get an unwieldy manuscript to wield" (p. 488). One can only imagine how daunting, if not outright overwhelming, this task was. Yet the final product deserves our attention.

Carr's is the third book published on the Marion lynching. The first, Cameron's, took half a century to come to light. The next, *A Lynching in the Heartland*

(2002), by Indiana University historian James H. Madison, in contrast to Carr's highly subjective work, is succinct, tightly and logically organized, and attempts to render, as much as possible, objective conclusions concerning the confusing details surrounding the Marion lynching and its aftermath. In the end the two works complement each other, often reaching parallel conclusions despite their distinctive foci.

Carr was also spurred by the widely circulated garish photograph of the lynching, noteworthy not just for the spectacle of two bodies dangling from a tree, but by the crowd of ghoulish spectators beneath. This image, taken by local photographer Lawrence Beitler, has been reproduced in countless textbooks, magazines and films, perpetuating the memory of this sorry affair for subsequent generations. An icon of American racism, occasionally it has been misidentified as an example of Southern barbarism, when its obvious lesson is that racial brutality in America is not just a regional idiosyncrasy.

There was also a more private impulse behind this book. Marion was Carr's father's hometown, and the residence of her grandparents whom she frequently visited as a girl. Shortly after her grandfather's death Carr, at age 17, discovered that he had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization which during its peak in the 1920s had its strongest base in the Hoosier state. In this sense her own family seemed to be implicated in the racist fervor that led to the Marion lynching.

One cannot fault Carr for skimpy research. Following the publication of a 1994 article on the lynching for the *Village Voice*, where she worked as a journalist, she journeyed to Marion, intent on doing a deeper study. Returning after an absence of twenty-five years, her nostalgic recollections gave way to the sight of a grim, depressing town, suffering from obvious economic decline, and, in the eyes of many, still not recovered from the self-inflicted wounds associated with the lynching. She wound up staying a year, conducting interviews with her own family members as well those of lynching victims Tommy Shipp and Abe Smith and those of the murdered young man, Claude Deeter. After considerable effort she was even able to contact relatives of Deeter's companion that night, Mary Ball, whose alleged rape by Smith was a major force producing the frenzy that led to the lynching. Carr spoke with white and black Marion residents, some old enough to have had first-hand recollections of the lynching. She even met with current Klan members. Her journalistic experience served her well, and she judiciously and cautiously weighed frequently conflicting testimonies.

Carr also did extensive research in primary and secondary sources. She immersed herself in local press accounts. She utilized a number of archival sources, including the papers of Larry Conrad—the late former Indiana secretary of state who collected a wealth of material in the unrealized goal of eventually writing his own book on the lynching. She met with Cameron at the Black Holocaust Museum he had established in Milwaukee, Carr's hometown, and in Marion, and she communicated with James Madison. Ultimately she devoted a decade to the project.

Carr perhaps devotes excessive time tracing her family's genealogy and history, for example attempting to verify, with no success, family tales about Native American ancestry. Her findings, however, do serve to underscore the ironies that abound in this story—her Klan grandfather named her father after the Socialist leader, Eugene Debs; his wife was recalled as an advocate of racial equality, and both grandparents became sponsors of an Easter Pageant with the explicit purpose of unifying all races and creeds in the community.

Carr indicates that Marion and Grant County reflected these same ambiguities, a point Madison noted. The county's past included abolitionist Quakers, underground railroad stations, the establishment of the African American Weaver settlement that enjoyed cordial relations with its white neighbors. There were of course the

same manifestations of racism and discrimination that one found throughout the state, including de facto segregation of public facilities throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but compared to neighboring counties Grant (at least until the time of the lynching) might be considered "progressive" on race matters and the Klan movement of the twenties attracted substantially smaller proportions of its inhabitants than in many nearby counties.

Carr's effort to determine the precise circumstances surrounding the lynching and the crime that led to it yields only partial results. She, like Madison, finds there is substantial reason to doubt Mary Ball had actually been raped, and, like Madison, Carr has difficulty accepting the complete accuracy of Cameron's account. She comments that Cameron had not been in a position to observe directly all the events surrounding the lynching that he describes—he, too, had to depend on others' testimony—and she has special difficulty with his description of how, after a noose had been placed around his neck, a mysterious female voice (which he subsequently identified as the Virgin Mary's) dramatically called out, declaring his innocence, and how the spellbound crowd spared his life. No other eyewitnesses had heard this voice. In her investigations Carr found that many in the African-American community to this day have totally discounted Cameron's story, denying that he had any involvement in the Deeter crime and even questioning that he was ever the target of the lynching despite the substantial evidence and the eventual trial whereby he was convicted in 1931 as an accessory to murder and served a prison term of four years. To these individuals, Cameron was neither victim nor hero, but simply a money-seeking opportunist.

Carr probes many of the other rumors and sensational claims surrounding the lynching. She finds no proof that Sheriff Jake Campbell, despite his clear negligence and possible collusion with the lynch mob, actually threw the jail keys to the crowd. Despite claims made by Cameron and others, she agrees with Madison that there is no evidence that the Ku Klux Klan as an organization played any significant role in the lynching, although she feels that the Marion Klan might not have been quite as moribund in 1930 as some believe. As the result of extensive probing, she breaks new ground through the discovery of convincing evidence that there had been considerable planning and collaboration before the lynching, which has often been portrayed as a largely spontaneous outburst. Her interviews with surviving members of the Deeter family reveal that it had strenuously opposed the

lynching and even tried, to no avail, to prevent it. Carr is also told that Claude's mother had persuaded her dying son to forgive Shipp and Smith, and visited their mothers to relay this. For Carr this gives additional hope that some degree of racial reconciliation in Marion might not be beyond the realm of possibility.

Guilt-ridden by what happened in Marion, Carr devotes much attention to the issue of communal healing. An especially sore point is that no one was ever convicted for the lynching, despite the persistent prodding by Flossie Bailey, wife of a local physician and state president of the NAACP, and despite the indictment of some white residents. There still persists the sentiment, among blacks as well as whites, that the lynching best be forgotten. There was some measure of justice as Cameron's story won national attention: through his book, media interviews, and documentaries. He received a pardon from Governor Evan Bayh in 1993 and a key to the city of Marion. In 1998 Grant became the first county in the state to elect an African American, Oatess Archey, sheriff. Yet there were many who could still remember the racial tensions and violence that had beset the city in the late sixties and early seventies, and Marion's effort in 2003 to organize a "day of forgiveness" encountered one setback after another, with blacks as well as whites rejecting plans to place a plaque on a courthouse wall that would acknowledge the scars created by hatred and violence—although there would be no direct reference to the lynching itself—and professing a commitment to pursue "healing, unity, and peace" (p. 457). In the end there was only a service organized by black and white ministers attended by several hundred people. For Carr this still represented an advance, in that there was at least a public, truthful acknowledgment of the pain felt in the community.

Carr has no illusions that racism is dead, and this was starkly reaffirmed in her interviews with current Klan leaders and members. She was relieved that today's various Klan groups are infinitesimal compared to the great Invisible Empire of the twenties with its membership of millions, and horrified nonetheless by their rhetoric, twisted logic, and potential for violence. She attended their rallies, demonstrations, and "cross lightings" (the politically correct term in Klan circles for what outsiders commonly refer to as cross burnings), and endured as much as she could of obscene denunciations of blacks, Hispanics, Jews, immigrants, and gays. She astutely ob-

serves, however, that these extremist movements serve as a kind of cultural lightning rod or scapegoat that permit the rest of us to look away from the less explicit forms of bigotry and hatred that pervade our society.

The author attempts to cover so much that the reader may have difficulty in assimilating it all. The book's organizational framework is often unapparent as she weaves back and forth in time and in subject. As the lengthy book comes to a close, however, Carr strives to work towards a thematic climax and to provide a touch of symmetry. In these final passages she exposes her evidence that the lynching was plotted in advance. On the very last page Carr relates how, as she was concluding her work on the project, she came across an enlarged reproduction of the famous Marion lynching photo and discovered what appeared to be, in the background, the blurry image of her grandfather. Some may find this to be rather contrived, especially given the succinct possibility that the spotted figure might not have been her grandfather at all, but Carr uses this "revelation" to demonstrate the persistent illusion among white Americans that "we're not connected to anything terrible," (p. 462) even when the truth is there, staring us in the face.

Those seeking a straightforward analysis of what transpired in Marion before, during and after the lynching might find themselves better served by James Madison's more concise examination (although Madison, too, is highly aware of the complexities involved). But for those who are not afraid to dig beneath the surface, who are not deterred by a more personal, subjective and emotional approach that might be labeled "immersion journalism," Carr's book offers many rewards.[1] *Our Town*, bulky and meandering as it may be, reflects an admirable determination to uncover the truth, regardless of how uncomfortable, elusive and ambiguous it might prove.

Readers will find the index, end notes, and bibliography quite helpful. The illustrations include not only the infamous Beitler lynching photograph, but scenes of Klan activities from the 1920s and more recent times, shots of James Cameron, the author as an infant with her grandfather, as well as two photos of Mary Ball, one from the 1930s, and one from the 1950s.

Note

[1]. See the review by David Bradley, "Anatomy of a Murder," *The Nation*, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060612/bradley/2>, posted May 24, 2006.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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