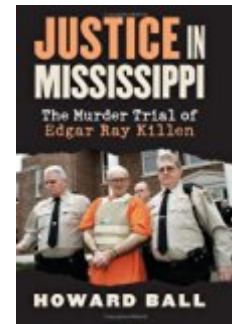


Howard Ball. *Justice in Mississippi: The Murder Trial of Edgar Ray Killen*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006. 254 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1461-5.

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## Truth and Reconciliation: Confronting Historic and Contemporary Racism

In *Justice in Mississippi*, Howard Ball tells the story of the June 2005 trial and conviction of Edgar Ray “Preacher” Killen for the well-known murder of civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County, Mississippi, in June 1964. Mickey Schwerner and his wife Rita were white New York natives working for CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) in nearby Meridian; James Chaney was a black Mississippian who worked with the Schwerners as a volunteer before joining the CORE staff; and Andy Goodman was a white New York native who had just come to Mississippi as part of the 1964 Freedom Summer project sponsored by CORE, SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and others in COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations). Many are familiar with the story of how, after investigating the burning of Mt. Zion United Methodist church near Philadelphia, Mississippi, the three civil rights workers were arrested, held briefly, and then turned over to the Klan. With the nation’s attention firmly focused on Mississippi, the FBI initiated a massive investigation and in August 1964 found the three men’s bodies buried under an earthen dam. In October 1967, eighteen Klansmen, including Preacher Killen, were tried for federal conspiracy to deny Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman their civil rights; seven were found guilty; seven were acquitted; charges were dropped against one; and there were three mistrials. Until Killen’s indictment in 2005, the state of Mississippi did not bring murder charges against any of the suspects.

Ball’s primary focus is Killen’s trial, but he is also in-

terested in examining the “cycles of events that led to the resurrection of this ‘cold case’” and explaining the “legal, social, political, and pseudo-religious roots of the crime” (pp. 5-6). Moreover, he wants to use the case to “assess the continuum of change in Mississippi” (p. 6). Ball identifies 1989 as a turning point in the history of Neshoba County and the Killen case. That year, Richard (Dick) Molpus, a white Neshoba native and current secretary of state, spoke at the twenty-fifth annual memorial service at Mt. Zion Church and made a public apology to the families of the murdered men. Stanley Dearman, editor of the local paper and one of the people featured throughout Ball’s book, explained that “Molpus’s words immediately ‘resonated’ with him and with other residents of the county” (p. 15). In 1989, Dearman published a long interview with Carolyn Goodman, Andy Goodman’s mother, that “gave Andrew Goodman and his friends a humanity and a warmth that had not been recognized by Mississippians for twenty-five years” (p. 55).

Ball also contends that Molpus’s apology was the catalyst for the formation of an integrated group of local citizens including whites, blacks, and Choctaws who began “working together to address the reality of racism in their towns and county” (p. 17). Later Ball writes that “Molpus is the person credited by all with pushing for the creation of a multiracial citizens’ movement, the Philadelphia Coalition, as early as 1989” (pp. 78-79). However, he then notes that the group was formally organized fifteen years later, in January 2004, with the help of Susan Glisson, the executive director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. Ball never provides any

detail or explanation about the nature, extent, or even existence of any formal interracial interaction between 1989 and 2004. Finally, Ball points to the importance of the 1988 Hollywood movie, *Mississippi Burning*, about the FBI investigation of the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. Ball acknowledges that the movie “was criticized by many for presenting a false picture of the role of the FBI during this era” and explains that he initially “hated the film” (p. 17). However, despite the movie’s many distortions, including its failure to include any civil rights activism; its simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of good (the FBI and federal government) versus evil (redneck Klansmen); and its characterization of African Americans as passive victims, Ball ultimately embraces and credits the film “for its educational value” (p. 17).

Ball then follows with what he considers the most important developments in the intervening years. These include the 1994 trial and conviction of Byron De La Beckwith for the 1963 murder of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, the first of the recent civil rights era prosecutions, as well as the February 1999 reopening of the Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman case by the state of Mississippi; the 2002 death of Cecil Price, the deputy sheriff convicted in the 1967 federal trial who had agreed to testify on behalf of the state; the temporary shelving of the case; and, finally, the combined efforts of Neshoba County District Attorney Jim Hood and state Attorney General Mark Duncan (who took office in January 2004) to bring the case to the Grand Jury and successfully prosecute Edgar Ray Killen in June 2005. Ball concludes the book by following the trial and sentencing, as well as Killen’s initial, unsuccessful, appeals. Throughout, he provides brief profiles of key players, including Killen, potential and actual witnesses, various elected officials, reporters, and a handful of Neshoba County citizens.

Ball’s book contributes basic information about the trial and participants that will be interesting to some readers. A few highlights are his several pages of the coverage of Cecil Price’s statements to investigators before his death (pp. 66–69) and the profile of Deborah Posey, whose former brother-in-law was one of the seven Klansmen convicted in the 1967 federal conspiracy trial. The latter offers a brief glimpse into the thinking and experiences that led her to join the interracial Philadelphia Coalition (pp. 80–81).

Despite a few notable details, Ball promises far more than he delivers. Rather than a complex story about the case and what it can tell us about the changes in Missis-

issippi over the forty years between the murder and prosecution, Ball has fashioned a superficial redemption story that paints most whites in Neshoba county as unfortunate victims of the Klan who, heroically, break their fear and ignorance to overcome the shame of their long-term silence through the successful prosecution of Killen. For example, Ball quotes a white Neshoba County native who remains angry that his “hometown will always be known for ‘Mississippi Burning’ and not the Philadelphia I grew up with” (p. 194). Ball follows this, in his final chapter, “Beyond 2005: Truth, Reconciliation, and Change in Mississippi,” writing, “For too many decades, most good people in Mississippi, the bystanders, were too frightened to even talk openly about the terrible events that were taking place—or had taken place in their homeland” (p. 202).

In this and other instances, Ball consistently makes statements and assertions based on his assessment of white attitudes and behaviors, but he poses them as if they represent all citizens. In another typical example, he writes, “by late 2002 Neshoba County inhabitants were finally prepared emotionally for a criminal trial of the murderers of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman” (p. 71). His earlier assertion that Stanley Dearman’s interview with Carolyn Goodman humanized her son for Mississippians is another example that ignores Goodman’s friends and colleagues, along with the many black Mississippians who admired and identified with him. A related problem is Ball’s overwhelming (and also unacknowledged) focus on whites—as heroes and villains. The primary heroes of the story are crusading reporter Jerry Mitchell; Neshoba newsman Stanley Dearman; Philadelphia’s native-son and politician, Dick Molpus; the various prosecutors; and the interracial Philadelphia Coalition, facilitated by Susan Glisson. All of these people and organizations are worthy of recognition, but they are only part of the story.

While numerous Mississippi whites are portrayed as heroic, African Americans and movement activists are largely invisible and stripped of agency. Their presence is limited almost entirely to the role of family members of the victims. Ball includes a passing reference to movement activists as part of a group that gathered around Rita Schwerner Bender during breaks in Killen’s trial. Ball writes, “it seemed that she met old civil rights companions during every recess. Men in their sixties visited with her during these recesses; they had been youthful civil rights colleagues of her and her husband in 1964” (p. 144). Ball might have benefited from talking with some of those activists. Instead, he “clustered around the two prosecutors” (p. 144). This choice and identification is

obvious throughout his book.

In one notable example, Ball's lengthy discussion of the fortieth-anniversary memorial for Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, fails to include any mention of the speech by Dave Dennis, the former CORE and COFO leader who was instrumental in planning freedom summer and who would have been with the men the day they were murdered if he had not been home recuperating from bronchitis. At the memorial, Dennis spoke eloquently to the importance of prosecuting all of the living killers, and he also insisted that real justice would require far more—including quality education and economic opportunity for African Americans. Given the lengthy list of speakers Ball mentioned and quoted, Dennis's absence is inexplicable except that it does not fit well with Ball's emphasis on white redemption.

Similarly, Ball highlights and applauds the role of the interracial Philadelphia Coalition in pushing for Killen's indictment and organizing the fortieth-anniversary memorial. While the group is notable and a real change for Mississippi, Ball ignores the fact that local blacks and civil rights activists had been pushing for convictions and holding yearly memorials since the murder itself. He also downplays the considerable conflict that emerged over the Philadelphia Coalition's high profile involvement in this particular memorial. Many of the people who had worked longest and hardest for racial justice, generally, as well as for convictions in this particular case felt pushed aside and were unhappy with some aspects of the commemoration, including the invitations extended to conservative Republicans, like Governor Haley Barbour.

Ironically, in one of the few instances where Ball quotes a local black resident, he uses her description of fearing Killen to illustrate or, perhaps, justify what he calls the "mantle of impunity" that protected whites who killed blacks (p. 13). He fails to acknowledge the very real differences in blacks' fears and whites' fears, and their differing role and power in the community's legal, economic, political, and social structure. In this instance, instead of actually offering some insight into African American experiences and attitudes, he mis-uses a quote to explain away (white) complicity in allowing Killen and others to terrorize blacks in the service of white supremacy.

While Ball ignores blacks and movement activists, he also seems content to equate modern-day racism with Killen, a remorseless Klansman and out-dated relic of "an unholy era" (p. 197). Comments by James Chaney's

brother, Ben Chaney, are relevant here, even though he was referring to prosecutors and the grand jury, not Ball. Following the indictment of Killen, Chaney angrily asserted that they were using "the most unrepentant racist as a scape goat" (p. 103). Ball falls into this trap, as well, describing his "staring contests" with Killen during the trial. "I had never been this close to evil; to an alleged cold-blooded, anti-Semitic racist who had no reluctance to kill in order to maintain a 'white Christian civilization.' Frankly, these staring battles were a very scary time for me" (p. 141). And Ball repeatedly separates Killen from other (white) citizens in Neshoba County, asserting in one instance (and with no proof) that "most residents of the county were mortified that the three men were killed in cold blood by the Klan, and that the killers were walking the streets of Philadelphia" (p. 51). Though Ball quotes others, including Rita Schwerner Bender, on the importance of understanding the murders in the context of "state-sponsored racism," he never fully engages with that crucial point (p. 103).

Unfortunately, most of the best analysis in Ball's book is embedded in the quotes he includes by others, including family members, activists, journalists, Dick Molpus, and the Philadelphia Coalition, who show far more insight than Ball into the connection between Killen's trial and larger issues of institutional racism—past and present. For example, after Killen's conviction, the University of Mississippi student newspaper, *The Daily Mississippian*, pointed out that "Blacks today still face many of the economic, political and social injustices they faced in the 1960's" (p. 182). Ball also quotes *Nation* writer Gary Younge, who writes, "while symbols are important, they should not be mistaken for substance...While the crimes that occurred during segregation were rarely systematic... they were systemic. They were born from a system of segregation that worked to preserve white privilege in the face of a concerted progressive onslaught—a system in which the white community had to collude in order for it to function. While the scale and nature of these privileges may have changed, the privileges themselves still exist" (p. 205). Ball takes issue with Younge's assessment, asserting, "this is extremely grim criticism of Mississippi and of the events taking place in the state, and some argue it is not valid" (p. 205). Rather than careful use of evidence and analysis to support such assertions, Ball seems to rely on his personal ties to the state as the basis for his authority. He positions himself as a knowledgeable insider/outsider by explaining, "having lived in Mississippi between 1976 and 1982 and having visited the state many times since then, most recently to attend the

Killen trial, I believe I have a sense of the people, their values, and the nature of change in Mississippi” (pp. 195-196).

Though based on a promising idea, Ball’s book is disappointing and falls into the *Mississippi Burning* trap of emphasizing white heroes, offering a superficial story of good vs. evil, and relegating blacks to the role of passive victims or virtually invisible backdrop. Perhaps one of the biggest disappointments is that Ball fails to offer insight into the white Mississippians he features and so clearly empathizes with and admires. We get no real sense of the interactions of the interracial Philadelphia Coalition or what brought the group together, how they work, and what challenges and difficulties they face. Similarly, my respect for Dick Molpus is reinforced by reading his words excerpted in Ball’s book, but I gained no understanding of what influenced him to personally adopt and publicly articulate a vision of racial justice.

Ball also fails in his goal to use the trial to examine the complex changes and continuities that make up Mississippi today. These changes must be traced back to the civil rights movement’s successes, including the im-

pact of black political power. Meanwhile, the continuities point to the complex role of state-sponsored racism. This is racism that does not vanish easily—even after the emergence of black political power or the much-needed conviction of an unrepentant racist. Ball touches on such issues only in passing and through the quotes of others. There is little depth, complexity, or serious scholarship in this book. In fact, Ball gives more attention to gratuitous information, like the courtroom dynamics surrounding some of the reporters, who he describes as “attractive females”; repeated off-hand references to Annie Pullen, “everyone’s favorite waitress at Peggy’s”; and even a passing description of Hal and Mal’s, “one of the truly great bars and eateries in Jackson” (pp. 143, 22, 77). Ball’s bibliography does not include the most important books on the Mississippi civil rights movement and his index is skimpy and inaccurate. Readers interested in learning some of the basic facts related to Killen’s trial might find Ball’s book a useful starting place. Anyone looking for insight into the legacies of the civil rights movement, contemporary Mississippi society, or race relations should look elsewhere, maybe starting with the news coverage of the trial.

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