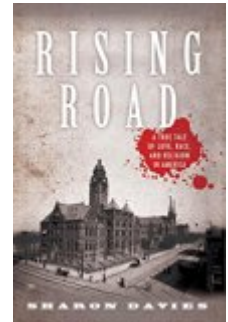


Sharon Davies. *Rising Road: A True Tale of Love, Race, and Religion in America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Illustrations. 327 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-537979-2.



Reviewed by Krystal A. Humphreys

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Very rarely is one given the opportunity to read and review a book that is entertaining, informative, and almost impossible to criticize. *Rising Road*, by Sharon Davies, is one of those books. Davies brings to life the historical narrative surrounding one of the most controversial court cases in Alabama history, one that centered on issues of race and religion.

While the book neither advances nor challenges the historiography of the Jim Crow South, it does act as a historical synthesis of all of the social issues that came to a head in 1920s Alabama. The decade was characterized by extreme social change and an equally extreme backlash. Conservatives were concerned about the apparent loss of tradition that was changing the social landscape of the United States. Women had the right to vote, and the flapper came to represent a new breed of women who were both independent and somewhat rebellious. The years after World War I also saw increased membership in the Ku Klux Klan; no longer solely focused on black people, the

“new” Klan sought to “purify” the nation and “protect” it from immigrants, African Americans, Catholics, and anti-American ideas. Fundamentalism emerged in opposition to intellectualism and liberal Christianity in an effort to protect so-called traditional family values. The trial of Edwin Stephenson that is at the center of *Rising Road* acts as a microcosm for an examination of these issues.

On August 11, 1921, the Reverend Edwin Stephenson, a Methodist minister with no pulpit to preach from, shot and killed Father James Coyle, a Catholic priest and pastor of St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Birmingham. This event resulted in one of the most interesting and influential trials of the century. Rather than simply relating the story of the trial, Davies goes into a great deal of depth to show us the world that Stephenson and Coyle inhabited and the events that led to the crime.

Given the careers of both the victim and the defendant, religion held a prominent position in the trial. Fears of Catholicism were common during the 1920s, sometimes causing outbreaks of violence, as was the case in Birmingham. Tabloid papers and so-called patriotic groups spread anti-Catholic propaganda to the masses, and Davies does an excellent job of showing the effect that this had on Americans. The killing of Father Coyle was, in many ways, a violent act of aggression against Catholicism. Father Coyle had, on the morning of the day he died, presided over the marriage of Stephenson's secretly Catholic daughter, Ruth, to another Catholic. In addition to anti-Catholic sentiment, Davies also goes into detail regarding the history of the Methodist Church and the schisms over the issue of slavery that eventually created the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. All of this background information is necessary for the reader to fully understand the scope of this trial.

As part of Stephenson's defense, the racial identity of Ruth's husband was also called into question during the trial. Alabama's harsh anti-miscegenation laws, in addition to the complicated definition of race that shaped both legislation and social interaction in the Jim Crow South, influenced the trial's narrative. The event that spurred Stephenson's actions was the marriage of Ruth Stephenson to Pedro Gussman, a native of Puerto Rico and a Catholic. While there was no legal reason that the two could not be married--both were of age and both were considered "white" under the law--testimony at the trial suggested that Gussman was, in fact, a Negro and therefore Stephenson's actions were understandable, if not justified. As a Klan member, Stephenson would have been praised for "protecting" his family both from a Negro and a Catholic priest.

In addition to addressing race and religion, the Stephenson trial and Davies's book also highlight issues of gender in the 1920s. The decade saw an increase in the political rights of women

through their acquisition of the right to vote, but social changes were slow to develop. As Davies writes, "Women of the 1920s might have been enfranchised, but they were hardly liberated" (pp. 18-19). The treatment of Ruth Stephenson as an unreliable witness, the press's portrayal of her as immature, and her family's reaction to her both before and after the trial indicate a negative perception of women, especially young women, in the South. For example, when Ruth arrived in court to hear her father's verdict, she sported a new bobbed hairstyle that her aunt referred to as "frightful" (p. 271). Ruth's adoption of modernity, particularly her insistence on making her own decisions apart from the teachings and guidance of her parents, led her to be ridiculed by friends, family, and neighbors. Her decision to speak with Father Coyle as a young girl and her later choice to become a Catholic resulted in forced isolation and harsh punishment by her father.

Davies's rich use of description draws the reader into the story in a way that most historical narratives do not. The book contains a set of photographs, but the descriptions of people and places are so detailed that actual photographs are hardly necessary. Davies sets the stage very well by carefully detailing style, fashion, the journalistic process, and the dissemination of news. Descriptions of relevant locations in Birmingham are also well done. Davies paints a picture of the majestic St. Paul's Catholic Church and the newly built Birmingham train station in addition to describing major events, such as the funeral of Father Coyle.

What is truly amazing about *Rising Road* is the way that Davies uses her sources, which are mostly court transcripts and newspaper accounts, to weave together such a rich and complicated tale. She uses these sources to discuss numerous historical topics other than the trial. She describes the history of Birmingham to set the scene; examines the history of technology and journalism to elaborate on how news of the trial and anti-

Catholic sentiment were spread; and provides biographies of the individuals who were involved in the trial, some of whom went on to have distinguished careers in politics.

Rising Road is an excellent read for professional historians and fans of historical novels alike. It is also ideal for using in both undergraduate and graduate classes on such historical topics as race, religion, law, and the American South. This book is very reminiscent of Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (2004) and would work well in combination with that book for a discussion of the law and race in the 1920s.

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