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The Tuskegee Institute records the lynching of 3,436 blacks between 1882 and 1950. This is probably a small percentage of these murders, which were seldom reported, and led to the creation of the NAACP in 1909, an organization dedicated to passing federal anti-lynching laws. Through all this terror and carnage someone -- many times a professional photographer -- carried a camera and took pictures of the events. These lynching photographs were often made into postcards and sold as souvenirs to the crowds in attendance. These images are some of photography's most brutal, surviving to this day so that we may now look back on the terrorism unleashed on America's African-American community and perhaps know our history and ourselves better. The almost one hundred images reproduced here are a testament to the camera's ability to make us remember what we often choose to forget.

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Details

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From Reader Review Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America for online ebook

David Becker says

This book is a gold mine for so much in American history that it's hard to know where it will end.

Lynching is something that I hold akin to the Holocaust to me: it existed, and I might have known it happened, but I didn't really know what it means. I try to learn all that I can about the Holocaust, because even today, we learn new and terrible things about what was done in the Holocaust.

I think Lynching is a closed topic. And this book is the definitive explanation. First of all, without being absurdly cliche (minus the punctuation marks) about what a picture is worth, you only need to see the accidental photographic essay on Froggy's demise to grasp how big a deal this is. The essays at the beginning are also useful, too, though Hilton Als' is the only one that will stand up to the test of time.

This book's pictures say so much. The fact that a well-dressed African-American man (ostensibly...though it's unclear if that's entirely true) that looks like he just stepped out of the Gap was lynched in 1960 doesn't need to be explained. Or the fact that some of these were sent as postcards. Or, for that matter, a decapitated and dismembered man photographed, with a warning about not speaking to white women.

I'm a white man, so I cannot pretend to understand the sort of horrors that minorities have faced throughout history in America. I don't think I need to in order to grasp how important this book is. Or, why I should show this to the students I teach.

As an English teacher, when Jim the slave reacts with complete fear when he is threatened with being lynched, Tom and Huck laugh at him, and it's an otherwise minor moment in a seminal book. Without Sanctuary allows you the chance to not only see yet one more reason why Twain was a master, but why Jim shouldn't have been the only one fearing for his life. Why did so many people risk their lives to get slaves to safety? You'll get a better idea with this book.

Stephen Matlock says

This is a book I'd rather didn't exist in that it documents with a clear eye the monstrous torture of black Americans by white Americans through lynching, burning, stabbing, and mutilating, all done with great cheer and vigor, with family and friends, church members and community stalwarts, grinning as the camera focuses on their deeds and their whole-hearted approval.

I sometimes say I can't understand the depravity and wickedness of humanity in that we do these things AND also claim to be a great nation--but it is who we are, and nothing will change about our present until we both look at the past and repent, and change our behaviors today.

We are not good because we have great principles. We have principles that should guide us, but that are honored as nice ideas but not as boundaries or even as goals.

Just a terrible, tragic history that needs to be exposed so we can be reminded of what we do when our

community approves of our monstrous behaviors.

Suzette says

This book is not for the soft at heart. The images consist of various lynchings in America - men, women, blacks, whites, jews. What is compelling about this book is how society socialized a person's death through postcards. Yes...a postcard...because lynching was a social event - hence the title Without Sanctuary. It is a must read book regarding one aspect of American history.

Eugene booker says

Man what a fucked up book coming from someone who is a descendent of african of that time Im ashed thats apzrt of american history, one of things that make me ashamed of being american, its so powerful photographs of a past that you dont want to happen again. Great read and must of for history buff aficionado's. Spoiler must of the time in the book you will see white people smiling while the brothas are being hanged, that should tell you something!

Pamela Denise says

I am not sure this is the kind of book one actually "reads" as much as "experiences." I found this book incredibly brave and, based on filmed interviews with the author, completed with sincere humanity and humility. For every image, I found myself wondering what became of the terrorists and their children. What became of the victims' families? What is the intergenerational legacy of this trauma? How did that type of parenting affect the children of the torturers (whether attending or not) and what does that mean for the people they encountered in business and their professions? Just think, a nine year old attending a public torturing in 1950 would be 75 years old in 2016 and would have been a youthful 24 in 1968. In several images there were thousands of attendees, some of whom traveled from great distances to watch and/or participate in the torture. To question the legacy of this trauma and the human incubation of such parenting is to approach answering why we continue to "deal with" racism today.

Kathleen says

Thoroughly disturbing book. Displays the vicious and inhuman racism of the south prior to 1950. Extremely unsettling to look at, but very useful as a teaching resource, esp. for classes with younger college students who may be unaware of the commonness of horrendous racial violence in the South. The postcard images esp. drive this point home. A useful but chilling book.

Aimee says

Read/ reviewed this book years ago, and in my initial review, I praised it for showing the truth about lynchings, which most US history classes gloss over, since (Whyte) America would just as soon pretend this level of horrific violence never happened at the scope or severity it did. The review ignited a hotbed of commentary over what some believed was the glorification, even the pornographication of violence against African-Americans. This of course is a legitimate criticism, but as the comments moved away from questioning the merit of the work (or the book itself) and into personal attacks, I scrapped the review and decided to start again.

In terms of being thought provoking, this books is a "5", but I can't "like" this chronicle of abomination. While I still adhere to the need to face the past fully and honestly if the US is to move forward, I don't have a ready answer for the question "At what point does documentation of horror become pornographic/exploitative?", a question even more relevant today as anyone can be a witness (whether you want to or not) to brutality and murder via the internet.

???? says

Wow. Okay.

I first heard about James Allen's lynching postcard collection about a couple of months ago from a BBC documentary series about racism. Then I came across a reference to the postcards once again in Tracy Thompson's *The New Mind of the South* a couple of days ago.

When looking through Copenhagen Library's American History section, I found this book.

It's shocking. Not for the faint hearted. But how needed it is still in this day and age! Upon my visit to the Memphis' Civil Rights Museum, there is barely anything significant talking about lynchings. Although the targets of lynchings were pretty much anyone that was not white racists, I was still amazed at the breadth of the targets: Italians, Jews, even women! This is a really important part of American history that must not be forgotten as there are still people out there in serious denial. I hope to see the exhibition myself when I'm in Atlanta as there are plans for it to be moved to a new museum complex near to Emory University in 2014 and is meant to become part of the permanent exhibition.

Joe says

Lynchings - not nearly as glamorous as Quentin Tarantino suggests.

Monty says

How does one rate a book that has such horrible photos of lynching in America (it's not just in the south; there were photos of Yreka, CA and Duluth, MN; and there were lynchings as recent as the 1930s)? Half the book contains photos; the rest has text including comments about each of the 98 photos. I read very little of the text so I'm sure I missed much of what the book is about. Many of the photos were of postcards, which seemed really strange to me. I didn't want to be reminded of this gruesome part of USA history, but I decided to do it anyway.

Bridgit Brown says

Oh my goodness. Do not read this book alone. Get some friends and put together a discussion group around the reading, and bring lots of napkins, and expect surprises - especially when viewing the photos. This blood-thirsty chapter in American history is underexposed and perhaps in this new century we can talk more about it in a diplomatic way.

Diann Blakely says

The photographs of lynchings in James Allen's book documents historical atrocities. Far more than a new addition to an encyclopedia of the Southern Gothic, WITHOUT SANCTUARY stands alone as a chronicle of shame and tragedy, one that controverts the received wisdom that most Southern lynchings were the sole work of the disgruntled "white trash" comprising the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, Klan members, masked and working under cover of night, are somehow less troubling than the "ordinary" white citizens of Dixie seen in these pages—men, women, and children who were photographed while participating, actively or complicitly, in the torture, mutilation, burning alive, and/or hanging of black citizens in broad daylight and in public.

Leon F. Litwak, whose prefatory essay in WITHOUT SANCTUARY summarizes the history of "extra-legal execution," points to the numerous cameras visible in some lynching photographs as proof of the "openness and...self-righteousness that animated the participants." The presence of cameras has also been noted in prose; Litwak quotes Thomas Brooks, a man who lived in Tennessee's Fayette County in 1915: "Hundreds of Kodaks," wrote Brooks, "clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope.... Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man."

The photographs of white lynch mobs are deeply disturbing, but the photographs of lynching victims themselves are stomach-turning. Two plates display the charred remains of African American men whose legs were chopped off at the knee before they were burned beyond recognition and hanged. Nonetheless, a fathomless degree of horror—a horror more psychological, and thus perhaps more Gothic—is introduced with the "lynching postcards" that were made from such photographs. These postcards were initially sold at dime stores, and apparently there was plenty of demand: "Picture card photographers," reported Litwak's Fayette County witness, "installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched Negro." Many of these postcards show the smiling faces of women and children on mobs' outskirts; one is signed "Give this to Bud From Aunt Myrtle."

When laws finally forbade mailing such postcards, an underground, hand-to-hand market sprang up, fed by the 1920's resurgence of the Klan, which favored the postcards as a means of warning African Americans thought to challenge the status quo. One probable victim of the Klan was seized for wearing a silk top hat; perhaps he'd ignored a lynching postcard left at his home, its obverse reading "Warning//The answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the Womanhood of the South"—a phrasing that suggests an additional twist to what we normally term Gothic. In short, Allen's collection of photographs reveals lynching postcards to be racial pornography of the most extreme sort, equivalent to stills from racial snuff films.

An important question about WITHOUT SANCTUARY is posed by Hilton Als: Why would any sane person perform the painstaking, and doubtless nightmarish, archival work that underlies the book? Perhaps because Allen is a self-proclaimed “picker,” a pejorative Southernism term applied to a man with no apparent job other than wandering the roads of his home state to acquire things deemed “telling.”

In Allen’s case, these things included “handmade furniture and slave-made pots and pieced quilt tops and carved walking sticks” and, eventually, lynching postcards. “In America,” he bitterly pronounces, “everything is for sale, even a national shame.” A comment a bit too editorial to have come from Flannery O’Connor’s pen, but Allen would surely be at home in one of her stories.

After all, it was O’Connor who noted of the Southern grotesque, in its human incarnation, the lack of mere humor or quirky diversion that characterized “Gothic” or “grotesque” elements in other regions’ literature. Folks whose lives revolve around such things as collecting lynching photos, O’Connor wrote, “carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity.” A reproach indeed, one from which Allen does not exempt himself, one that seems to have issued directly from O’Connor’s own fierce, furious, and doom-bringing vision of the Old Testament Jehovah, accompanied not by sweet baby Jesus but Christ the Destroyer.

(originally published in the NASHVILLE SCENE)

n.b. O'Connor, always smarter than I'll ever hope to be, would have shared Melissa Harris-Perry's view of the now commonly used term "lynching" in regard to political figures, which she invoked recently in the NATION, citing both Clarence Thomas and Herman Cain. Taking a broader view than I was able to find, Harris-Perry points out that the act was never about protecting vulnerable white women from "brute"--i.e. superior--African-American male sexuality; indeed, in it was a means of maintaining the social order and still is. How else did Thomas attain his appointment to the Supreme Court, and, for that matter, why hasn't he been impeached? When, after all, did one ever hear of men of either color being lynched to protect vulnerable African-American women? What should have been obvious to me suddenly now is, and ironically so, since I located Harris-Perry's essay on the Facebook page of Ron Wynn, a former colleague at the same alt-weekly where I wrote the original review of this book.

Ron Wynn

Takes a long time to make the point, but eventually does.

Herman Cain: What High-Tech Lynching? |

[http://www.alternet.org/story/153155/...](http://www.alternet.org/story/153155/)

Despite the typically explosive alchemy of race and sexuality, the details of the charges against presidential candidate Cain seem to have elicited little more than a shrug.

Diann Blakely: Very, very provocative. Reviewing WITHOUT SANCTUARY for the SCENE, which frightened me so badly I wrapped the book in plastic and left it on the Boss's front porch--it seemed so evil I didn't want it in my house, I explained, though I'm sure he thought I was crazy--but I'm going to post this with my piece on NBCC/Goodreads, for I've honestly never considered this POV.

Diann Blakely: So thank you, Ron and Ms. Harris-Perry! I'm very fond and always appreciative of people who make me think about items, particularly ones of such profound importance, in a way I might not have otherwise.

Nikhil P. Freeman says

There worst book I ever read. Life changing. Where did all of that hate go? Ritual murders turned into social events for white supremacist mobs with glee in their eyes--gazing at tortured Black bodies. America will never be post-racial, too many victims need justice and collectively we keep putting off the conversation about race and white supremacy--the schizophrenic, sociopathic, genocidal idea that a lack of melanin equals superiority and gives ground to mutilate--physically, emotionally, socially--another human being whose skin is rich in melanin.

Jim Robles says

A picture is worth a thousand words, and this book has many pictures. Although I remain fascinated by the history of race relations in The United States in the 1920s, I find it difficult to comprehend the level of brutality demonstrated, by self-identified believers, in waging what can only be described as a terror campaign to subjugate a segment of American society. This book is tremendously helpful.

The (p. 15) report on the execution of the Holberts, captured by a reporter for the "Vicksburg Evening Post" demonstrates the sheer inhuman brutality of these acts of terror, but also how public and accepted they were.

I read something recently that reminded me that, in the time of Shakespeare, the standard punishment for a Jesuit priest, caught ministering to recusants in England, was to burn his entrails while he was still alive.

"Not to know what happened before you were born is to be a child forever." - Cicero.

Many societies have outgrown this level of barbarism. I look forward to the day when all have.

The eleventh book I have finished this year.

SmarterLilac says

Um, holy shit.

I was not totally ignorant of the lynching phenomenon in the United States, as my parents and grandparents told me all about it from the time I was young (and yes, they were all opposed to it.) It was also discussed at length in my college African American Poetry and Drama class in the year 2000.

But the reality of these gruesome photos is something I was totally unprepared for (my textbooks didn't exactly have any pictures in them.)

Some things I learned from *Without Sanctuary* that did away with some misconceptions I had about this shameful part of our country: a) lynching did not die out after 1920. Many of the photos in this book are dated well into the '30s, '40s and even 1960. b) Not all lynching victims were black. This book contains images of lynched Italian immigrants and several white lynching victims (much to my shock.) c) Not all lynching victims were male. There is a terrible photograph in here of an African American woman in Oklahoma hanging from a bridge. This picture, believe it or not, was the only positive element in reading this

collection--someone tried to mail that cruel travesty as a postcard, and over the stamp on the other side was written "unsendable." So at least someone in an Oklahoma post office may have had some decency regarding the wrongness of lynching.

An amazing feat, this book, despite its horrifying subject, which is as much a part of American history as the Model-T, Franklin Roosevelt and Nolan Ryan. Yet I almost never hear anyone talk about lynching anywhere.
