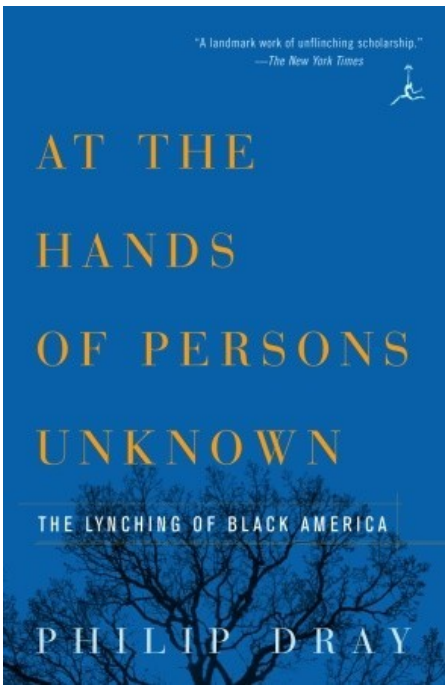

At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America

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Winner of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction

This extraordinary account of lynching in America, by acclaimed civil rights historian Philip Dray, shines a clear, bright light on American history's darkest stain—illuminating its causes, perpetrators, apologists, and victims. Philip Dray also tells the story of the men and women who led the long and difficult fight to expose and eradicate lynching, including Ida B. Wells, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and W.E.B. Du Bois. If lynching is emblematic of what is worst about America, their fight may stand for what is best: the commitment to justice and fairness and the conviction that one individual's sense of right can suffice to defy the gravest of wrongs. This landmark book follows the trajectory of both forces over American history—and makes lynching's legacy belong to us all.

At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America Details

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From Reader Review At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America for online ebook

Eric says

Somewhere near the end of *Koba the Dread*, his account of readerly adventures in the Stalin demonology, Martin Amis weighs Hitler and Stalin. He concludes that because racism is the purest product of our unreflecting reptilian brain, a racist ideology must represent the worst brand of the political violence our species finds so instrumental (Baudelaire was not overstating things when he equated cosmopolitanism with a “divine grace”). Along with Nazi Germany, we should look to the American South (although Dray's scope is not limited the south) for an instructive picture of a society whose moral awareness was put to sleep, and its potential for savagery licensed, by the division of humans into superior and inferior racial castes, the inferior one being a group whose members could be killed with impunity.

This is very much a book about slavery, specifically the drawn out volatile decadence of the society slavery made, of the racial caste hierarchy that chattel slavery wove into the psyche of southerners. If Nazism was a burst of gangrenous, putrescent gas from the German nationalism mortally wounded in 1918, then lynching shows southern white supremacy—-the ethos of slavery—-in its weakened, desperate, rearguard lashing-out at the once enslaved but now liberated and theoretically dangerous blacks. Dray quotes James Weldon Johnson, the writer, NAACP chair and a near lynching victim himself (on a Jacksonville, Florida streetcar in 1901, Johnson’s light-skinned black female companion was mistaken for a white woman by the conductor, whose alarms instantly formed a mob that almost hanged Johnson in a nearby park) to the effect that lynching was an expression of the same “evil” that fed slavery. And the widespread rape of black females by white men during slavery is no more apparent, Dray writes, than in the nightmares white men entertained of vengeful black men eager to rape white women, a specter always raised in justification of lynching. Such a justification is bullshit but that doesn’t mean it isn’t revealing: white male awareness of their sexual exploitation of black women during slavery and after made it quite natural they would fear payback in kind. Brutal people project their brutality on to others.

Dray classifies the various species of “lynchcraft.” 1.) The targeted, assassination-like killing of blacks by night-riding Klansmen careful to remain anonymous and secretive during Reconstruction, while Federal forces still occupied the south. 2.) The brazen, broad-daylight immolation, the so-called “spectacle lynching,” its heyday between 1890 and the early 1930s, that drew hundreds, even thousands of festive picnic-goers, from all corners of a state and even from out of state, to watch a black man be ritually mutilated and burned at the stake. Lucky spectators could come away from the barbeque with a bodily souvenir (toes, fingers, ears, knuckles, though the victim’s penis was the great prize, and drunk white men often brawled in the dirt for possession of it), or at the very least with a picture post-card of charred remains. 3.) The community lynching, a pogrom really, wherein rioting whites in northern and southern cities ran amok in black districts, burning and looting shops, shooting and beating any blacks of any age--toddlers, the elderly--they happened to encounter. Many such instances were the result of economic competition; others, because lynch mobs that couldn’t get a hold of a fugitive or securely jailed suspect had to make do with terrorizing the nearby black community. 4.) The “legal lynching” in which a court would conduct a speedy and sloppy “trial” with an armed mob gathered inside and outside the county courthouse, threatening judge and jury with harm if they found the defendant not guilty. 5.) The “underground lynching” of the 1940s-1960s, in which southern terrorists, mindful of mainstream America’s abhorrence and the federal government’s increasing activism, resorted to a Reconstruction-era style of nocturnal abduction after which the perpetrators strove to conceal the body and remain themselves anonymous. In many incidences of lynching, the styles of lynchcraft overlapped, and the cause of death of all lynching victims was recorded by coroners with the phrase “Death

at the hands of persons unknown.”

The system’s coarsening of southern whites extended beyond their brutality to blacks, it numbed the sense of their own interests as well. The lurid Manichean mythology of an embattled common whiteness held poor whites hostage, made them reluctant to see that their interests were not always interchangeable with those of wealthy whites. I’ve always been fascinated by this overriding solidarity of whiteness, its power to obscure seeemingly unmissable social facts, and the spectacle of poor whites who didn’t own slaves fighting in the Civil War to maintain an economic order that reduced many of them to subsistence farming (this was obvious to even the dullest northern prole by 1861). Dray makes me want to read more about labor relations in the postwar South. Many of the urban race riots Dray discusses, like the St. Louis pogrom of 1917, have their roots in white anger over the influx of cheap and therefore competitive black labor and the use of blacks as strikebreakers; and lynchings of individuals often had the (intended?) result of scaring north most of a county’s black population and thus depleting the local pool of cheap agricultural labor, much to the annoyance of landowners, many of whom deplored lynching when it hurt their pocketbooks. I’m curious to find out to what degree violence against blacks was tinged by white wage grievance, blacks being an easy scapegoat, just as a certain kind of American nativist today would rather bash Mexicans than question the capitalism under which employers maximize profit by welcoming desperate immigrant laborers willing do dirty or dangerous work for a low wage.

James says

an essential book for a vastly misunderstood and unimaginably awful phenomenon... Dray does his research and then some! one could argue the individual anecdotes bog down the book, but if that's your opinion you are likely unwilling to delve completely into the vast extent of lynching in America... this is not only a litany of uncontrolled violence and murder and racism, it is a theoretical and complex evaluation of the roots of lynching, which are not nearly as simple as "whites killing blacks"... the author makes no apology nor pulls any punches, he just tells you what happened, attempts to discern why, and catalogs the aftereffects in brutal but not overdramatic language (though i can say it is hard to accuse anyone writing about lynching to "overdramatize", as much of what occurred surrounding a lynching was unbelievably over the top extreme violence and hatred meted out on black bodies for the entertainment and valorization of white Americans)... a dreary, depressing, and sombre read, but it makes no claim to be a feel-good tale... yes, white America has an ugly and violent and murderous past (and present, and probably future) and reading about it makes black Americans fear, distrust, and hatred of the government and the police entirely justified and worthy of support...

Eric says

This book was hard on my soul. I always thought when a Black person was lynched, they died of a broken neck, which is a relatively quick death. I didn't know that being strung up on a rope was done after the person was tortured, mostly by first taking "souvenirs" of the still living person. The first to go was the victim's penis. then the fingers, toes, ears, etc. Then the person was roasted slowly over a fire, and then hung. After that pictures were taken of the body and sent all over the country with hundreds and even thousands of people standing around smiling. the audience actually fought over the remaining pieces of the victims. I also didn't know right after reconstruction up until the 1940's at least ten lynchings too place a month. Most of

them with cooperation with the local authorities , including the railroad companies that added special trains to get hundreds of people from different states to a lynching in another state. The papers covered these lynchings as entertainment. At times this was a difficult book to read, but I'm glade I did. Reading Chekhov along side it was soothing for some reason.

Mara says

Amazing book about appalling history...As a history buff who has also read a lot about the death penalty in the United States, I was surprised by how many of the stories and names in this book were completely new to me. I was also surprised to learn how wrong I was in my prior assumptions about what a "typical" lynching looked like--I had no idea how often victims were killed by means other than hanging (especially being burned alive) or how often the body was further mistreated even after death.

Horrific though this history is, though, this is also the story of the people and organizations who courageously fought back through campaigns to raise public awareness and attempts to pass legislation to make lynching a federal crime. Though it is easy to become depressed while reading all the lynching stories depicting the worst of humanity, Dray consistently highlights the best of humanity as well through the contributions of those who risked everything to resist lynching culture and put an end to "the shame of America."

In short, I would definitely recommend this book to all those interested in American history or in having a better understanding of race relations in the United States.

Richard Kavanagh says

I suspect that many people unfamiliar with the history of lynching shared a similar view I had going into this book. That lynching was a hold over from frontier times, reserved for cattle thieves and outlaws. And that it continued as a violent aberration of rural life that subsequently became entwined with Americas racial issues.

Instead Philip Dray lays bare just how prevalent the phenomenon of lynching was and how it was explicitly used to terrorise and disenfranchise black Americans from economic and political success.
How is was supported by Mayors, Senators, Congressmen and newspaper editors in explicitly racist terms for 50 years and how between 1882 to 1968 not a single federal anti-lynching bill was able to pass the senate.
Despite - or rather in spite of - such material Dray balances indignation and horror with incredible research and a tightly written narrative.

Andrew Tollemache says

Over the last few years I have started to realize that the Ken Burns classic documentary "The Civil War" did a huge disservice to the country. Though widely praised and loved, it really overly romanticized a conflict that was way more brutal and savage than we give it credit for. Away from the set piece battles of Lee and Grant was a very brutal, almost guerilla war, that truth be told, did not end until decades after the Appomattox treaty.

This book by Philip Dray on the history of lynching in US, particularly the South is largely a tale of the South trying to retain the same level of control and violence over its african-american residents that had been lost with the end of slavery. The South under slavery was already a paranoid, oppressive place, ever vigilant against an uprising. Its crushing defeat in the Civil War left it seething with repressed anger that boiled over into coups, massacres, etc. Starting in the midst of the South's looming defeat, picking up steam in the 1870s as the Klan and other groups fought what now would be seen as an insurgency/terrorist strategy and attaining a plateau of murder and violence in the 1880s that would last for decades wanton murder was endemic. The use of the mob/ Judge Lynch's law/lynching was a key method of spreading terror amongst it targets. Technically the last lynching, as properly defined, only happened in 1963, but was at appallingly high levels well into the 1930s.
Dray's brutal, but compelling book documents the scope and nature of these horrors, but also shows how the fight to end lynching lay at the heart of the civil rights movement for almost a century and was a key driver in the rise of the NAACP.

Christoaugust says

This is a fascinating history of a forgotten past era. What happened to black people in post-reconstruction America is sadly left out of most history books. This book places lynching in context of racial developments and also details the origins of many civil rights reformers devoted to ending it. Must-read.

Emma says

Sweeping, definitive, sickening. A companion to 'Buried in the Bitter Waters' that should be mandatory reading for those who utter the phrase 'post-racial age'.

Beverly says

The is a well researched and well written history of the lynching of black people in America. It should be on everyone's reading list. There are parts of the book that are hard to read, but they should be read. It will not make one "proud to be an American".

Andy says

Dray's powers as a writer are formidable; that and his humanity and command of the material combined to give me an experience that deepened my understanding of our history, wretched and noble, by leagues. I was immeasurably rewarded for overcoming my dread of approaching the horrific subject matter.

John Rymer says

This is an amazing book; read it. The premise sounds negative -- I mean, a history of *lynching*?? And the opening of the book was gruesome enough to scare me away for a few months. Why would you read such a book? I'm glad I picked up the book again and finished it. "At the Hands of Persons Unknown" is really a history of the black experience in America, circa 1890 through 1964, told through the lens of lynching. It is a horrifying tale, unflinchingly told. The cruelty inflicted on our black fellows is hard to bear. The people of the Deep South + Texas are the most obvious villains in this history -- but only the most obvious. The author documents lynchings in the Northeast, in Illinois, and in California as well. Yet the Old Confederacy's behavior was most extreme, both in carrying out mob murders on mostly black people and in preventing legislation to deter lynching by holding individuals responsible. The phrase "at the hands of persons unknown" was the euphemism employed on the death certificates of unfortunate victims of lynching, and time after time these crimes were deemed blameless acts of the community's outrage over acts real and imagined. The author does a good job of showing how events -- WWI and WWII in particular -- slowly changed attitudes in our barbaric country toward lynching in any form. Note that through 1964, NO ANTI-LYNCHING NATIONAL LEGISLATION ever got past the filibuster of the Solid South. Lynching, in the end, faded away.

Wayne says

I walked up to the 'Black History Month' table at Housing Works Bookstore & Café in Soho. I had passed it by a few times during my stroll and perusal of books in the store. It's one of those used bookstores I always end up leaving with something unexpected, something unsought. My first glance at the 'Black History Month' brought a smart remark somewhere in the front of my brain. It floated and tapped at the back of my eyeballs. "Why only a month?" Of course, I understand why and where these calendar celebrations emerge from, but sometimes it shocks and jolts me our of my contemporary peaceful stupor. Reading the introduction of this book brought an evenmore intense pressure to that jolt. Applied remorselessly my mind flew back through the family albums I've had the privilege to survey in the past years. Those frightened soldiers that were my relatives or whom served side by side with my relatives. Those women, who put on their Sunday best. What part did THEY have in all this madness. This evil expressing of power that reigned the reconstruction South and pokes it ugly head back up in various forms, to this day, in this 'free' country.

I knew then it was a darkness I must enter and understand, so that I won't forget it, nor will I let it's absence to my daily routine and expression fail to impress upon me the depth and potential darkness within us all.

Jean louise Finch says

Excellent book, reads like a novel. I could see so many parallels with the present time. Read this after you read fluff like The Help for a more accurate reality and proof that black people were not "victims" but actively sought to change their circumstances. Also read "Without Sanctuary" the descriptions of these brutal and animalistic lynchings by racist America are almost hard to believe until you see the actual postcard photos that were collectors items!

Colin says

Although this book is anchored in the retelling of the stories of dozens of brutal lynchings that took place across America - predominantly, but far from exclusively, in the South - over the course of a hundred year or so span of American history, it is primarily a story of how activists and opposition movements worked to curtail and criminalize lynching. The sad personal stories of lynching's many victims often provide some insight into how these murders reinforced the local caste system and sought to quell black agency, social advancement, or economic competition — but the focus and narrative arc is ultimately on the reformers, not the perpetrators or the communities who participated and supported them in their crimes. The history does make clear that at least until the mid-50s (when they became more covert affairs), lynchings were collective actions, abetted by and celebrated by members of the community, but the hands of the persons involved remain largely unknown.

The story here — and it is a heroic one — is of the actions of individuals like W.E.B. Dubois and Ida B. Wells, as well as organizations like the NAACP , the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and the Association of South Women for the Prevention of Lynching, to hold communities, law enforcement, and the state and federal governments to account and institute a system of rule of law that would stand up against extrajudicial killings. While painfully incremental in their progress, these efforts were ultimately successful and helped set the stage for the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s. The factors that contributed to that success are varied, and include changes in the social patterns of Southern society driven by economic and post-war trends; the accompanying slow but continual struggle for empowerment by black communities and activists; the concerted efforts of anti-lynching advocates to expose the brutality of the crimes (and contrast them with the experience of the world wars); legal strategies and reform efforts aimed at holding sheriffs accountable for prisoners in their custody and institutionalizing due process; and the eventual intervention of federal and state authorities into local jurisdictions. It's a complex multi-causal history, and while the public brutality of the mob remains fundamentally alien to me as a distant reader, this was a great education into our history as a nation.

Mary says

Five stars because every American adult should read it. Unsurprisingly, it's not an easy or a pleasant read. But it is well written and compelling. The violence and terror experienced by blacks during the lynching era (1880-1940) was much worse than many of us have imagined. No aspect of black life was unaffected by that terror. It was deeply ingrained in black experience and nearly impossible to escape. It's essential for all Americans to understand how pervasive and profound the terror was that circumscribed black families and black communities at the hands of white people--not just those in white capes and hoods but the entire white establishment: state, community, media, churches. The violence was out in the open, shameless, even celebrated. Until we confront the reality of our past, we will not heal nor understand how that past informs the present.
