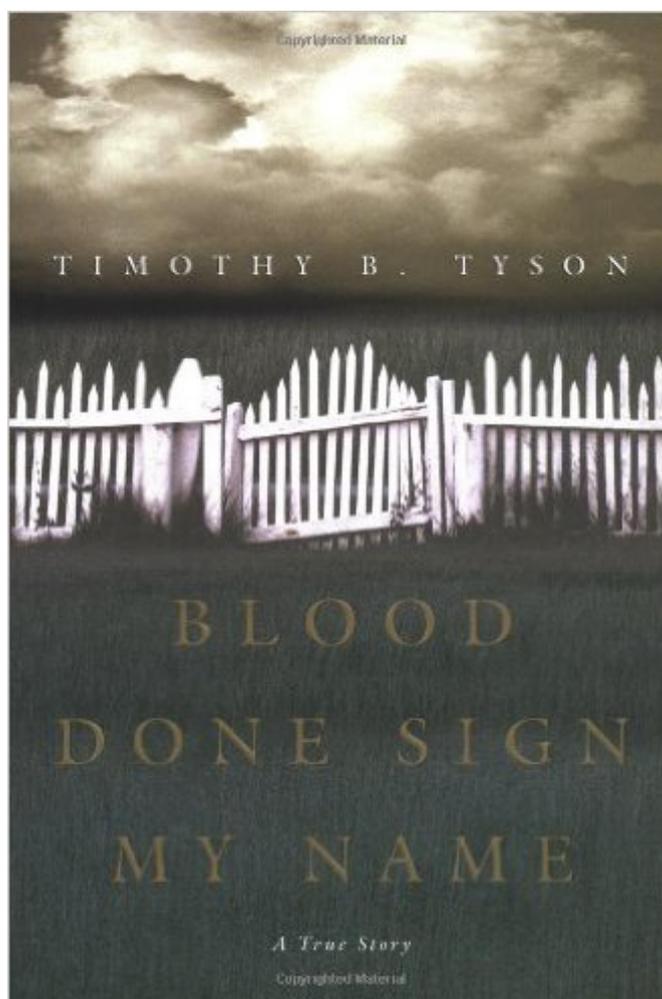


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Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story



Synopsis

"Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger." Those words, whispered to ten-year-old Tim Tyson by one of his playmates in the late spring of 1970, heralded a firestorm that would forever transform the small tobacco market town of Oxford, North Carolina. On May 11, 1970, Henry Marrow, a 23-year-old black veteran, walked into a crossroads store owned by Robert Teel, a rough man with a criminal record and ties to the Ku Klux Klan, and came out running. Teel and two of his sons chased Marrow, beat him unmercifully, and killed him in public as he pleaded for his life. In the words of a local prosecutor: "They shot him like you or I would kill a snake." Like many small Southern towns, Oxford had barely been touched by the civil rights movement. But in the wake of the killing, young African Americans took to the streets, led by 22-year-old Ben Chavis, a future president of the NAACP. As mass protests crowded the town square, a cluster of returning Vietnam veterans organized what one termed "a military operation." While lawyers battled in the courthouse that summer in a drama that one termed "a Perry Mason kind of thing," the Ku Klux Klan raged in the shadows and black veterans torched the town's tobacco warehouses. With large sections of the town in flames, Tyson's father, the pastor of Oxford's all-white Methodist church, pressed his congregation to widen their vision of humanity and pushed the town to come to terms with its bloody racial history. In the end, however, the Tyson family was forced to move away. Years later, historian Tim Tyson returned to Oxford to ask Robert Teel why he and his sons had killed Henry Marrow. "That nigger committed suicide, coming in here wanting to four-letter-word my daughter-in-law," Teel explained. The black radicals who burned much of Oxford also told Tim their stories. "It was like we had a cash register up there at the pool hall, just ringing up how much money we done cost these white people," one of them explained. "We knew if we cost 'em enough goddamn money they was gonna start changing some things." In the tradition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Blood Done Sign My Name* is a classic work of conscience, a defining portrait of a time and place that we will never forget. Tim Tyson's riveting narrative of that fiery summer and one family's struggle to build bridges in a time of destruction brings gritty blues truth, soaring gospel vision, and down-home humor to our complex history, where violence and faith, courage and evil, despair and hope all mingle to illuminate America's enduring chasm of race.

Book Information

Hardcover: 368 pages

Publisher: Crown; 1st Edition edition (May 18, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0609610589

ISBN-13: 978-0609610589

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.2 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (126 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #190,909 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #96 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > South](#) #138 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans > History](#) #336 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Minority Studies](#)

Customer Reviews

I learned about Blood Done Sign My Name in June 2005. I always wondered if anyone had told the story that changed my view of life in just two days. In August 1970, I was a young photographer on the weekend shift at the Raleigh News and Observer. An assignment came in to meet a reporter in a small town north of Raleigh. No details. Just meet the reporter. When I got into Oxford, the reporter told me a man would soon be testifying in a murder trial and that he needed a photo of that man. I parked across from the Courthouse. I put a 200 mm lens on my Nikon motor drive and waited. Soon a police vehicle pulled up with a single man in the back. As the man exited the car, I climbed out and got ready to make the picture. As luck would have it, the man had a newspaper covering his face. He walked a few steps, dropped the paper, and looked straight at me. I took the photo and got out of town. The next morning, I was ordered to return to Oxford. Big mistake. The photo of the third killer appeared on front page on the local newstands, and this did not go well with the locals. The verdict came and the streets emptied. I took a last photograph as a line of police officers passed me on the street. Moments later they were back surrounding me. One pulled a knife and poked me in the stomach. The older man with the knife started to tell me I was at my end. I don't know what made me say I only made \$2.00 an hour. The redneck just looked at me and said I was an idiot to risk my life for \$2.00 and I agreed. They let me go. Shortly afterward, I got to my car and hit the road south. A group of locals followed me in a truck while I was flat out in my Ford Pinto. I laugh these days when I think about that longhair photographer being chased down the highway at full speed.

At first glance, this is a historical account of the racial tumult unleashed by the 1970 killing of a black man in Oxford, North Carolina. The author, 11 years old at the time, was profoundly affected. Not only did he witness the burning of the town's infrastructure of tobacco warehouses, but his

Methodist minister father was drummed out of town for preaching against racial segregation. But this story is about more than one town, or one event and its aftermath. Tyson uses Oxford as a microcosm to examine the complex history of race relations in the South. As the narrative meanders along in the circuitous and philosophical style of the Southern storyteller, Tyson proceeds to ever-deeper levels of meaning and buried history. As someone who shares Tyson's roots in rural North Carolina, I find it particularly important to rediscover "the other South" - the South that has been systematically expunged from history. Tyson discusses the banished history of white resistance to slavery and racial segregation during the Civil War and Reconstruction. How many of us know about the "Red Strings," a secret society of anti-Confederate guerrillas and saboteurs in North Carolina? Tyson briefly recounts perhaps the most important historical event in North Carolina, the 1898 massacre of African Americans in Wilmington that overthrew Reconstruction there (and about which Tyson has also written a separate book). As Tyson lucidly explains, white supremacists and neo-Confederates have ignored all evidence to the contrary to make "enthusiasm for the Confederacy posthumously unanimous." This rewriting of history is profoundly personal for Tyson.

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