

Hill, Karlos K. and David Dodson. *The Murder of Emmett Till*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 165 pp. Cloth, \$24.95. (Also available electronically)

Readers should be advised that racial epithets are included in this text. A note placed at the start of the book provides a “trigger warning” for those who might be offended.

The Murder of Emmett Till (the ninth volume in the Oxford University Press Graphic History Series) is a thorough and highly accessible examination of the notorious 1955 event, an event whose impacts still resonate today. As told here, the story of Emmett Till—a young black man from Chicago visiting family in Mississippi that fateful summer, his brief interaction with a white woman and subsequent murder by white locals, a trial that resulted in acquittals for those who later admitted to the crime—is broadened and enhanced by an inclusion of rich archival material. The reader is provided an in-depth study of the Till case, as well as a deepened sense of the place of this case in the larger circumstances of America.

The book opens with a comic book-style presentation of Till’s murder. David Dodson’s illustrations are effective and compelling in portraying the events leading up to the murder, and examining the subsequent trial and its aftermath. The graphic format is engaging and should serve to make the material highly accessible, perhaps most of all for younger readers.

The second half of the text begins with Karlos K. Hill’s insightful commentary, which furnishes wide-ranging background and context. With connections to a range of academic sources, Hill provides insight and addresses a wealth of material including the segregated south, the Great Migration, a discussion of the civil rights situation in mid-twentieth century Mississippi (augmented by maps), a table detailing over seventy-five reasons that were given to “justify” the lynching of thousands of blacks, and additional details on Till’s murder, the subsequent trial, and the event’s aftermath. For instance, a passage entitled “The Historical and Contemporary Significance of the Till Murder” traces the importance of the Till case to near-present times,

culminating in the 2008 passage of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (which allows the U.S. Department of Justice to reopen investigations of murders committed during the civil rights era). This portion of the book also includes a call to the importance of “remembering authentically,” and it is without doubt that *The Murder of Emmett Till* has specifically provided much, and thus accomplished much, toward achieving the goal of authentic remembering.

Still more evidence regarding authentic remembrance is provided in the documents contained in the book. Offered evidence includes photographs (including the significant picture of Till in his casket), excerpts from various news accounts, and selected portions of court testimony from Mamie Bradley (Emmett Till’s mother) and Carolyn Bryant (the white woman who was allegedly approached by Till; decades later, she would recant her version of events). Strikingly, but not surprisingly, a September 1955 piece from *The Morning Star* (Greenwood, Mississippi) noted that the trial of Till’s murderers “proved to the world that this is a place where justice in the courts is given to all races, religions, and classes.” This portion of the book also contains portions of “Mamie Bradley’s Untold Story” (serialized in the *Chicago Defender* in 1956), an account which provides the seeds of her eventual turning toward what would become lifelong work as an educator.

The book concludes with supplemental material including a suggested reading list, questions for discussion and research, a timeline of Till’s murder, an overview of lynching and racial violence in America, a chronology of lynching in America, and a discussion regarding the use of *The Murder of Emmett Till* in a classroom setting. In addition to the mass accessibility provided by the graphic format, these additional materials enhance the wealth and richness of material provided by the book.

Notably, the author addresses the use of racially derogatory terms contained within the book itself, and how to approach a classroom discussion of such words as related to the book and its circumstances. A note placed just before the main section of the book observes that while such terms are “offensive,” they are nevertheless “necessary for presenting a realistic historical portrayal.”

With its mix of formats and thoroughly researched and well-documented material, *The Murder of Emmett Till* is a welcome examination of one of the most notorious crimes in American history. Ultimately, its message also harkens back to Mamie Bradley’s words from her story in the *Chicago Defender*: “the large class of decent people in this country are guilty of the sins of omission when they fail to speak out for the right and take a stand against injustice. These are the people I am appealing to.” This book, grounded in history, clearly echoes Mamie Bradley’s sentiments, and is thus similarly and importantly keeping the past in mind while also looking to the present and future.

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