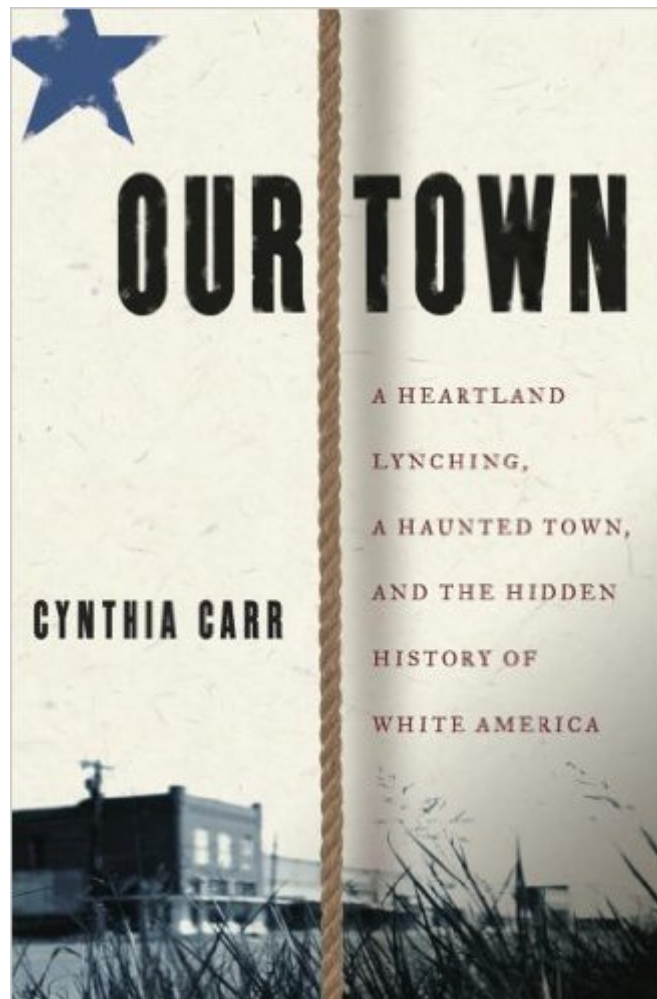


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Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, And The Hidden History Of White America



Synopsis

The brutal lynching of two young black men in Marion, Indiana, on August 7, 1930, cast a shadow over the town that still lingers. It is only one event in the long and complicated history of race relations in Marion, a history much ignored and considered by many to be best forgotten. But the lynching cannot be forgotten. It is too much a part of the fabric of Marion, too much ingrained even now in the minds of those who live there. In *Our Town* journalist Cynthia Carr explores the issues of race, loyalty, and memory in America through the lens of a specific hate crime that occurred in Marion but could have happened anywhere. Marion is our town, America's town, and its legacy is our legacy. Like everyone in Marion, Carr knew the basic details of the lynching even as a child: three black men were arrested for attempted murder and rape, and two of them were hanged in the courthouse square, a fate the third miraculously escaped. Meeting James Cameron "the man who'd survived" led her to examine how the quiet Midwestern town she loved could harbor such dark secrets. Spurred by the realization that, like her, millions of white Americans are intimately connected to this hidden history, Carr began an investigation into the events of that night, racism in Marion, the presence of the Ku Klux Klan "past and present" in Indiana, and her own grandfather's involvement. She uncovered a pattern of white guilt and indifference, of black anger and fear that are the hallmark of race relations across the country. In a sweeping narrative that takes her from the angry energy of a white supremacist rally to the peaceful fields of Weaver "once an all-black settlement neighboring Marion" in search of the good and the bad in the story of race in America, Carr returns to her roots to seek out the fascinating people and places that have shaped the town. Her intensely compelling account of the Marion lynching and of her own family's secrets offers a fresh examination of the complex legacy of whiteness in America. Part mystery, part history, part true crime saga, *Our Town* is a riveting read that lays bare a raw and little-chronicled facet of our national memory and provides a starting point toward reconciliation with the past. On August 7, 1930, three black teenagers were dragged from their jail cells in Marion, Indiana, and beaten before a howling mob. Two of them were hanged; by fate the third escaped. A photo taken that night shows the bodies hanging from the tree but focuses on the faces in the crowd "some enraged, some laughing, and some subdued, perhaps already feeling the first pangs of regret. Sixty-three years later, journalist Cynthia Carr began searching the photo for her grandfather's face.

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Customer Reviews

Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America is an honest, though painful look at race relations in America. C. Carr sees parallels between her quest in Our Town and that of South Africa's "truth and reconciliation" hearings. The work bears witness to the searing history of lynching in towns all across America in the first half the last century. Carr captures white hatred, fear, denial, and guilt and black anger, bitterness, fear, and pain. She quotes Chilean legal philosopher and activist Jose Zalaquett, a member of the commission that investigated atrocities under the Pinochet regime: "If you have a choice between truth and justice, choose truth. Truth doesn't bring back the dead, but it does release them from silence." That's just what Carr does in this book. Carr was 17 when she learned her beloved grandfather was a Klansman. Not until she was in her 20s did she see the infamous photo taken in her home town on the sweltering summer night of August 7, 1930--a black and white picture of two black men hanging from a tree as smiling townsfolk looked on. Like so many of us white liberals she felt guilty about our country's racist history. But Carr also felt a special shame about her town's history and her grandfather's membership in the Klan. That shame ultimately led her to write Our Town. Her story is an effort to examine the truth as a means of healing and opening a dialogue. Carr pursues the truth like a bloodhound. It doesn't matter that she often loses the scent while on the trail because she refuses to give up and just keeps circling Marion and the small towns surrounding it until she gets the next whiff. Early on in her research she decides to go back home and ends up living in Marion, Indiana for an entire year.

I grew up 1/2 block from the Marion city limits. I spent 21 years there and wanted to leave from the time I was an adolescent. Although I have been gone over 30 years, I visit several times a year as I still have family there. The lynching was not something I knew about until I was in high school. (I am white and went to all white county schools. My parents moved to Marion in the fifties.) I also have to address the review by the man from TN. He objects to the characterization of the viewers in the lynching photo as gleeful. It is the single most harrowing aspect of the photo. Just look on the back of the dust jacket and decide for yourself. His apologia is that the viewers may have been on a voyage of discovery and not have known how to react because who could enjoy looking at such a sight. How does the reviewer then explain the photo becoming a local bestseller? The reviewer also suggests that the survivor of the lynch mob (James Cameron) may have fabricated his presence there. Cameron's surviving the lynch mob is not in question. There are numerous witnesses. The reviewer further tries to cast doubt by saying he doesn't recall what felony Cameron went to jail for. Cameron was imprisoned for his part in the killing of Deeter - the crime that led to the lynching - and was later pardoned by the Governor of Indiana. The teenaged Cameron had initially agreed to participate in the robbery but ran away when he recognized Deeter as a man who had been kind to him. You will meet many like the reviewer from TN in Carr's book. A theme of the book is the continuing denial of the lynching and the racism in Marion by the white community. Marion has been crumbling and shrinking as long as I have known it. Now I know why.

I know this town very well, so I was interested in reading this book. Several people I remember from Marion were interviewed and mentioned by name, which I found kind of cool and jarring at the same time. I like the way this author thinks and I love the way she leads the reader along on the search for answers and meaning. I felt like I was an insider and she was an outsider. I kind of had that feeling you have when watching the movie Titanic -- you know the ship will sink but the characters don't. So I was thinking that the author should go to this place or go to that place or look around this corner, but she would take a wrong turn. She also discovered some interesting new things down those turns. However, she missed some important people and missed some nuances. I almost gave this book 4 stars instead of 5 due to the inordinate amount of time the author spent on a ku klux klan tangent, meeting with the current klan and going to their events and their homes in Marion and in Ft. Wayne (which might as well be another world). Also the author saves a big revelation for the ending of the book about the real ringleaders in the lynching and their location and connections. She could have removed most of the information about the klan and focused on the actual people she indicates were involved. Many times she was blinded and led astray by her own preconceived ideas.

She came into her Marion project with ideas about the divisions between black people, white people, and native american people. Such rigid models just don't apply in a place like Marion.

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