

Stories Can Have Sharp Corners: A Review of *Blood Done Sign My Name*

by Robert Arndt

Blood Done Sign My Name is Dr. Timothy Tyson's examination of the racial conflict and riots in Oxford, North Carolina during 1970. The book begins with the recollection of a conversation he had with his playmate Gerald Teel. Teel's father and brother had just beaten and killed an African American named Henry Marrow, in public. The tensions of racial conflict and desegregation in 1970 Oxford were the same that were being felt throughout North Carolina and the rest of the nation. *Blood Done Sign My Name* explores the reasons behind Marrow's death, the motivations of his killers, and the riots afterwards.

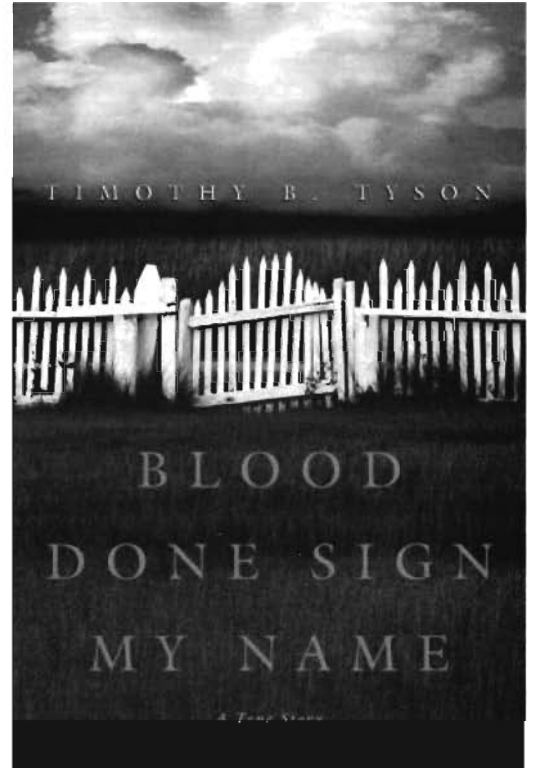
Dr. Tyson does more in his book than just cover the racial conflict in Oxford. He embarks on a journey of self-discovery to see how racism affected both Oxford and himself. Dr. Tyson is a son of the late 20th century South, and Oxford is a typical North Carolina small town. His father was a liberal Methodist minister who supported desegregation and worked towards a peaceful solution in Oxford. Growing up in Oxford, Dr. Tyson has firsthand knowledge of the racial, spiritual, and physical landscape. Because of his background, the people Dr. Tyson interviews (Robert Teel, Mary Catherine Chavis, Ben Chavis, and others) provide more information to him than they would to an unknown outsider. His insider knowledge creates characters that

are more than a name with a label of racist or militant; these are people that readers can imagine or even know in their own hometown.

Dr. Tyson also uses his father's journals to get insights into the mood of the town and his father's mind.

The book is more than just a recounting of the events that spawned the racial unrest so many years ago; it is a book that makes the reader aware of the more subtle forms of racism that exist today. Dr. Tyson writes in the closing pages that "the enduring chasm of race is still with us, in some ways wider than ever. . . . White supremacy remains lethal, though most of its victims die more quietly than Henry Marrow." As described by Dr. Tyson, the characteristics of the white supremacists and the moderates, liberals, and radicals of both races still exist today. "Stories can have sharp edges," as Dr. Tyson notes in the "Author Notes" of *Blood Done Sign My Name*. Readers will recognize people in their lives who embody these characteristics of racism and may recognize themselves. Recognition of the sharp edges is the humanizing force of literature that bleeds into sleepless nights where readers or listeners of stories must ponder their individual humanity.

Dr. Timothy Tyson has authored two other books. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999) was the winner of the James Rawley Prize. Along with David S. Cecelski, Tyson co-authored *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*.



Dust jacket picture provided
by Mary Williams



Coffin of Henry Marrow
Photo provided by Mary Williams