



# **Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America**

*Cynthia Carr*

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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.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

**Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White**

## America Details

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## **From Reader Review Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America for online ebook**

### **Laseghi2 says**

After reading James Madison's "A Lynching in the Heartland" while in college, I felt compelled to read this followup written by a journalist who was from Marion, Indiana, and might have had family involved in the 1930 lynching. It's a very interesting story of genealogy, family secrets, and race relations in the North.

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### **Jack Heller says**

I have been reading this because I am working on a commemoration of the lynching, working along with the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. A good book. An important book.

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### **Fishface says**

An unforgettable voyage of discovery into the secrets, not just of a family, but of an entire town in Indiana. In this book I learned about the 20s and the current-day KKK (two very different incarnations), the events surrounding a famous lynching and the wildly contradictory narratives people carry with them about it. The author interviewed the man who survived the lynching, eyewitnesses, police, neighbors, ministers, her own family -- you name it. The story gets more confused -- and weirdly, more clear at the same time -- as you read. Almost anyone who reads this book is going to learn something from it.

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### **Judy Aulik says**

Marion, Indiana is one of the cities of Indiana considered to have been a modern Klan hotbed. In 1930, two-- and nearly three--African-American men were lynched for being suspected in a rape of a white woman. That story alone was riveting. When the 1990s-2000s edition of the Klan was included, I could not believe these attitudes still persisted. Only after the numbers given by an ex-member were revealed did I feel comfortable again.

A must read for small town Americans. This should be required high school reading.

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### **Jenny Shipp says**

This book is very tenderly written. Cynthia Carr has lived in NYC for years and written for the Village Voice. However, she is from Marion, Indiana. This was the site of a famous lynching in 1930. She finds out that her grandfather was in the Klan and wonders if he was part of it. The book describes her journey into her past and the past of Marion, Indiana. she talks to may Klan folks, she talks to the people in her town and is a fine journalist in her seeking out of information. Her voice is never far away, and is clear about how she feels but she isn't out to beat people up. she presents them and there they are. This book also got to me as there is a

famous photo of the 2 lynched men. One of them is named Thomas Shipp. Wow, it doesn't get weirder for a white person to see a beloved family name pop out of a lynching photo. I kept thinking about dad what if he were lynched. Very powerful. And, the book is beautifully written. I recommend it.

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### **Pam says**

This for me was a haunting book. I grew up in Wabash, 15 miles or so from Marion. It wasn't until I had left Wabash that I realized the lynching picture that was so often referenced in history, was from Marion, August 1930. The author's beloved Grandfather was a Kan member. This motivates her to learn all she can about the event, to address her greatest fear, that her Grandfather participated in this event. The more she searches for the truth, the more elusive the truth becomes. It also becomes clear that the past is not past, and modern day Marion is impacted by the event of August 7, 1930.

She also looks at the Ku Klux Klan, both historically and modern day. It made me realize, there are questions I would like to ask my own family, if anyone was here to ask. I know my dad and his friends burned a cross to see if they could. My paternal grandmother made Klan robes until my Grandfather told her who she was making robes for and this scared her, and she stopped. My very proper maternal grandmother drove to Marion with her friend to see the hanging tree. I learned that after she was gone, from my mother. Now I wonder, as did the author, what did they know, are there layers in these stories no one wanted to talk about? Only now do I know what questions I would like to ask. I was struck by the observation of the author that there is "a curse we bring on ourselves by refusing to look at our histories. We white people don't want to feel guilty, of course. Who does? But too often we compensate by feeling nothing." (p. 464) Growing up so close to this story, I knew nothing, I wonder how it might have changed me then, to be aware of this story. I found this to be a powerful read.

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### **Kelly says**

A book touching on race relations between black and white is bound to strike a nerve; I read one review that picked on Ms. Carr for being "me-focused", for patting herself on the back as an enlightened white, for writing too long of a book, for spending too much time with the pathetic white supremacists. Ultimately I enjoyed her narrative and insights into the Klan, which as a PacNWer I had no concept of, as well as her willingness in submerging herself in her home town, county, and state of Indiana.

Sixty-odd years after the notorious lynching photo was taken, and facts have fallen away, mysteries have been compounded, memories are obfuscated, confused, or ossified - but pain lives on. The complexity of this pain in the community was a fascinating read.

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### **David Ward says**

[Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America](#) by Cynthia Carr (Crown Publishers 2006)(305.89607) is an interesting story of a lynching that took place in Marion, Indiana on the night of August 7, 1930 when three young black men were taken from the jail by a mob following the robbery, murder, and reported rape of a white woman. Interestingly, after two of the men were killed many times over and then hung in the courthouse square, they released the third young black man

without significant injury and returned him to the jail. The author's family is from Marion; she investigates the events of the lynching in an attempt to learn the whole story. Did she succeed? Only the reader knows (more or less). My rating: 6.5/10, finished 2/23/12.

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### **Tamsin Bourgeois says**

Meticulously researched over more than a decade, this is a fascinating history of racism in a small town in Indiana, the location of a 1930 lynching (the last to take place in the USA north of the Mason-Dixon Line). While I was not as absorbed by this book as I was by Carr's incredible, perfect biography of David Wojnarowicz, it is a similarly impressive work; epic, forensic and underpinned by a personal-political quest. Carr explores the emotional legacy of the lynching on the town as she faces up to her own grandfather's possible presence at it. The first hand accounts of 1990s KKK cross burnings and conversations are sickeningly matter of fact, but never sensationalist.

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### **Sherrie says**

I had heard about this for years as I was growing up. The lynching of two black teenagers. But had never heard all the story, just about the hanging of the three people. I am ashamed to say this happened in my home town. I was outraged that something like this could happen and no one offered to help those poor boys. Cynthia Carr came back to Marion to research this book. She came up against a brick wall when trying to find people to talk about this. Even in the early 2000's no one wanted to talk about it. But thankfully Cynthia Carr kept digging and wrote this book. She even got to talk to James Cameron, he's the man that escaped the hanging. There is lots of information in this book about my home town that I didn't know. So I learned a lot from this book.

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### **David Mills says**

Ned Gillum, if you are reading this (and I hope you are), I want you to know that I have you all figured out. You "set me up" when you lent me a copy of Cynthia Carr's *Our Town* and said I might find it "interesting".

If you are reading this and are not Ned Gillum then bear with me for a moment as I explain. Ned knew that I was moving into 215 East 3rd Street Marion, Indiana. To me this was the site of an available apartment. To Ned and every other long time resident of Grant County this was the building that until recently had served as the county jail. For Cynthia Carr, who has deep personal connections to Marion and who in preparation for her book conducted ten years of painstaking research, the old jail is a grim icon which frames the fragmented nature of race, community and self. I have read many books on these subjects. I found Taylor Branch's "Parting the Waters" trilogy is an excellent summary of the social history of race. I have always appreciated Edwin Freidman or Daniel Quinn's unique blending of sociology and storytelling in which they lay bear the systemic nature of social organisms. Augustine's "Confessions" and Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov" are, for this reader, essential texts for exploring the nuances of the self. So what is it about Cynthia Carr's work that prompts me to reference them? Yes, she too touches on many of the topics as they. But what makes her treatment of them so powerful is her "Ned Gillumesque" approach. She is good at "setting us up".

Carr's narrative "set up" resembling the floor plan of many of the homes in Marion. She begins by meeting the reader on the equivalent of a sunny front porch by relating memories of her happy childhood visits to her grandparents who resided in the community. Her memories, which are glided with neighborliness, egalitarianism, civic pride and pragmatism, invoke images of Midwest charm. These are the qualities that Midwesterners are most ready to on display and have ascribed to themselves. Then, as Carr tell us of how as and adult she discovered her dead grandfather's Klan membership card and a copy of the infamous Lawrence Beitler photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham Smith, she opens the front door and grants us access to those aspects of her family and the community that are not so flattering and therefore not left in the open for public inspection. Here again it is useful to keep the floor plan of a house in mind for Carr inspects the Beitler lynching photograph as a contractor reads blueprints. Just as a the presence of a stove identify a room as a kitchen or a bathtub a bathroom, Carr delves through data that has accumulated around those in the picture seeking for signs of the unique and often hidden sub-stories that are present in individual lives, the collective life of community, and in her own life. Some of this work borders archeology as it unearths tales that have almost become lost. Two good examples of this are the author's overview of the now almost forgotten efforts by the Klu Klux Klan to style itself as a force for social reform up through the mid twenties and the story of the disappeared village of Weaver and the frequently family references to a distant Native American heritage. Counterpoised these two sections make clear the incompatible social ideologies that would collide in the lynching of Shipp and Smith. Other sections feel like a tour of a bedroom or other highly personal space. The account of Oatess Archey's 1998 election as the Sherriff of Grant County (or for that matter any county in Indiana) and the accompanying backstory, functions in this manner. So too does reoccurring presence of James Cameron, who narrowly being lynched with Shipp and Smith and became the founder of the National Black Holocaust Museum which is located in Milwaukee. His story, which begins in 1930, resurfaces repeatedly throughout the time stream thereby enabling the reader to observe how the community has and has not come to terms with its own dark side. To my mind the most bittersweet subsections shared by Carr have to do with forays into what she calls "Klanland." On the one hand her interactions with white supremacists are hilarious (I couldn't stop laughing while reading the exploits of Larry Hitler. Just typing the name is enough to set me chuckling). Yet the laughing ends when one considers Carr's painful observation that such individuals enable the bulk of mainstream Americans to stay disengaged from seeking genuine community. Laugh at Larry all you wish, she seems to say, but do not use him as social soporific. Almost channeling Edwin Freidman Carr shows that everyone (including the author herself), not just extremists, are a part of the community and therefore interconnected in a system. Changing the system requires more than the replace of one component. True change, which in scripture is called righteousness, the collective fruit of which is justice, involves changing both community mores and individual hearts.

I won't give away the final plot twist in which the author comes to realize this truth. What I will say is that I did move into the apartment complex that occupies the old jail. It was there that I finished the book and made a personal decision. Shortly after my arrival I, along with the help of a carpenter friend and a few old church pews, transformed my living room into a café. There, two or three times a week I have six to eight folks over for dinner. I cook for them and then, while the after-supper- coffee brews; we walk together through the public parts of the building all the while sharing stories. Since most of my diners are long time residents of the area they often arrive embarrassed at their own inquisitiveness. But after being plied with a free supper their tongues are loosed and they speak at length of how as children they were traumatized by the lynching, have often heard the urban legends that surround this place (ghosts, the fate of the trees around the courthouse square, people who claim to have pieces of the lynching ropes, etc.), and, just prior to leaving they almost always say how glad they are that they came to this place they never thought they would visit. In the grand scheme of things such evenings may not amount to much. But if Cynthia Carr is correct both collective justice and personal healing require us to go places we'd rather stay away from. What is more if Ned Gillum is right (who by the way was one of the first of the folks to join in me the jail for supper), then a

good "set up" is never a waste of time.

Oh, and about this book, I think you may find it "interesting".

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### **Terry says**

This is a book that makes you recoil from what you may see in a mirror.

The famous photo of the lynching in Marion, Indiana led Ms. Carr (a longtime resident of New York and reviewer for the Village Voice) to re-examine her native town and those people she grew up among.

What she discovered about long-time family acquaintances and even her own family will make you reconsider what you think you know about your home town, who you are and what you think you know. This book develops slowly and with all the detail and color of some other famous books that detail small-town life (*An Hour Before Daylight*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*) but where it goes will (or should) haunt you. And by you I mean us.

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### **Marty says**

Picked this one up on a "help yourself" shelf at a bookstore. It has taken me two years to finally get to it. What timing! A long, sometimes tedious story of the lynching of two Afro-Americans in Marion Indiana in 1930---who did it; why? and why relevant today? Lots of detail on the KKK.....and interesting linkages to Milwaukee and its Afro-American Holocaust Museum (did you know that?). What it did though was to release a flood of childhood memories.....things I had not thought about for years/ever. The issue of racism.....what it meant to the author....and memories of living in what was then Milwaukee's inner city. A most interesting story....good job by the writer to be so persistent in writing this story.

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### **Don says**

I REALLY liked the author's style. It was that style that kept me reading the book, but after a while it felt like a slog - I'm gonna get through this, I'm gonna get through this.

There was just too much stuff about the KKK. I got the picture that they were low-lives without the added 100 pages that drilled it in.

The good part was the conversation about race - so well written, so well said.

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### **Hawthorn says**

On August 7, 1930, the courthouse square in Marion, Indiana was the location of one of the most shocking events in the town's history -- the lynching of two young black men who were dragged from the city jail and brutally beaten before being hung from a tree in the square. A third young man escaped being lynched to tell the tale. Because of him, and because of an infamous photo of the scene showing hundreds of perpetrators



and spectators viewing the crime, (a photo that was sold by the thousands in the days after) the event has never been forgotten, although it is spoken of rarely and with trepidation amongst the residents of the town. Journalist Cynthia Carr, who grew up in Marion and whose family has a long history there, set out to examine that event, the history of race relations in Indiana that led up to it, and the unspoken resonance from it that has haunted the town every since.

Every family in 1930s Marion had some sort of personal connection -- directly or indirectly -- to the lynching, and Carr's family is no exception, so her investigation of her town's history often takes a turn to the personal and reflective. Her willingness to confront that connection is clearly unusual in a town where residents both black and white just want the whole history to disappear into the mists of time -- a sentiment that is really the exact reason why the story just won't do so.

Many people in Marion have some evidence of the violent, covered-up crime hidden in their attics, sometimes literally and always figuratively, and piecing together what really happened that night, and who was involved (several men were tried for the lynching, but no one was convicted) becomes an exercise in frustration for Carr, who has to separate myth from rationalization from fact. But over time she teases out many details and assembles the most complete picture of the lynching that has ever been discussed in print.

Carr also reconstructs another compelling story -- Indiana's own history of the relationship between black folks and white folks. Prior to the civil war, Indiana had a strong history of abolitionism and activity on the underground railroad, but during reconstruction that history was virtually forgotten with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. It's estimated that during the 1920's one in every three white men was a part of the Klan, and Indiana was also home to numerous "sun down" towns -- where signs at the city limits warned black people not to let the sun go down on them in that town. Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson's arrest in 1925 is often referred to as the event that "broke the back of the Klan" in Indiana, and it did mark a turning point in the popularity of the Klan, but the racist organization has never really disappeared from the state.

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