Our Town
A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America
By Cynthia Carr


Our Town takes readers along on Cynthia Carr’s tortuous return to Marion, Indiana, site of the infamous lynching of Abe Smith and Tom Shipp on August 7, 1930. As a child, Carr often visited her grandparents in Marion; here, she returns to uncover possible family connections to this event, to find out what “really” happened, and to understand how this horrific event continues to haunt the city. Our Town emerges out of a growing interest in engaging these murderous events in the nation’s past through a kind of symbolic archaeology, digging out such toxic stories so that communities can “come to terms” with them, settle accounts, make amends, and exorcise a variety of demons. In addition to a burgeoning body of scholarly and popular literature and a range of highly publicized museum exhibitions, many of the communities scarred by these events struggle with diverse forms of memorial expression: cleaning gravesites, requesting pardons for those unjustly convicted by kangaroo courts, creating interracial rituals of reconciliation, and building physical memorials.

Carr’s story is part family history—her grandfather belonged to the Klu Klux Klan, and she thinks she sees him in the infamous Lawrence Beitler photograph of the lynching—part investigative reporting as she tries to reconstruct what actually happened, and part psychoanalysis of the lynching’s poisonous legacy. Carr writes of Marion that “it became the town that never repudiated, investigated, or fully acknowledged the events of August 7, 1930. So the lynching never took its place in history, never receded into the past. It remained alive in the Marion psyche” (p. 219). Carr’s interviews—with the late James Cameron, saved at the last minute from being lynched that August night and founder of the Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; with Oatess Archey, elected the first African American sheriff of Grant County in 1998; with witnesses, bystanders, and family members; and with contemporary members of the KKK—are revealing and troubling.

Despite some compelling stories, however, the book never becomes a coherent whole. Carr’s grandfather’s Klan membership is certainly not enough to link him to the lynching. Nor does Carr engage satisfactorily, in my view, with historian James H. Madison’s observation that “[i]t was not the Klan that lynched Abe Smith and Tom Shipp . . . . The Indiana Klan was guilty of much evil and much
foolishness, but it was innocent in the Marion lynchings, or rather no more guilty than many others in this ordinary place in America’s heartland who continued to believe in ‘us’ and ‘them’” (*A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*, pp. 41-42).

Carr understands her family story as a “model for the larger American family with its repressed history of racial traumas: not just slavery but something as recent and as shared as Jim Crow” (p. 27). Fair enough. But can a city, like an individual, be “traumatized”? Can a city have a “psyche”? Carr uses too easily the popular term “collective memory.” I much prefer James E. Young’s sense of “collected” memories of a society (or a city) as the “aggregate collection of its members’ many, often competing memories” (*The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, p. xi). Carr’s search reveals plural and clashing memories of this searing event. The lynching registered differently for many whites than it did for many blacks—a “justifiable punishment versus a day that would live in infamy” (p. 103). This grim reality subverts the widespread and overly simplified idea that the work of memory is by definition “healing.” Remembrance can tear a community apart as well as help it come together.

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**Five Days in Philadelphia**

*The Amazing ‘We Want Willkie’ Campaign of 1940 and How it Freed FDR to Save the Western World*

By Charles Peters


Charles Peters, founder of the liberal magazine *The Washington Monthly*, thinks something magical happened to American politics in 1940. The Republican party’s nomination of native Hoosier Wendell Willkie for president, he argues, allowed the American people “to rise a notch or two above the usual limits of human nature” (p. 5). Without Willkie’s support for Franklin Roosevelt’s destroyers-for-bases deal and his tacit approval of the peacetime draft, Peters believes that the United States would have been, at best, even less prepared than it was for the Second World War. At worst, the victory of an isolationist Republican would have led to a