

Our book for 2006:

Blood Done Sign My Name

“Daddy and Roger and ‘em shot ‘em a nigger.”

Those words, whispered to ten-year-old Tim Tyson by his neighborhood friend Gerald Teel heralded an uproar that would literally set his small tobacco town of Oxford, North Carolina, ablaze in the summer of 1970. In ***Blood Done Sign My Name***, Timothy B. Tyson, a white professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offers one of this year’s most highly anticipated books in nonfiction—a masterful rendering of a small town’s racially charged murder, the emotional riots and trial that would ensue, and Tyson’s candid examination of the African-American struggle for freedom in America.

On May 11, 1970, Henry “Dickie” Marrow, a 23-year-old black veteran, walked into a crossroads store owned by Robert Teel, a rough man with a criminal record and ties to the Ku Klux Klan, and came out running. Teel and two of his sons chased Marrow down, beat him unmercifully, and killed him in public as he pleaded for his life. An all-white jury would later acquit Teel and his two sons of all charges.

Like many small Southern towns, Oxford had remained almost untouched by the civil rights movement. Frustrated by this lack of change, Oxford’s African-American community exploded after the killing, going beyond their tipping point and into the streets—led by 22-year-old Ben Chavis, a future president of the NAACP. As mass protests destroyed storefronts and ultimately led to a march on Raleigh, returning Vietnam veterans organized what one called a “military operation,” burning down the town’s costly tobacco warehouses.

With large sections of the town destroyed, Tyson’s father, the pastor of an all-white Methodist church, pressed his congregation to reach across the breach and come to terms with its racial history. In the end, however, the Tyson family were regarded as traitors and forced to move away.

In ***Blood Done Sign My Name***, Tyson returns to Oxford thirty years later to make sense of what happened and how the events of May 11, 1970, changed his own life. He interviewed Teel, who told him “That nigger committed suicide, coming in here wanting to four-letter-word my daughter-in-law.” He also interviewed the black radicals, who instructed him in the bitter truths of local race politics: “We knew if we cost ‘em enough goddamn money they was gonna start changing some things.” As he weaves together childhood memories with the realities of present-day Oxford, he sheds new light on America’s struggle for racial justice.

In the tradition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, ***Blood Done Sign My Name*** is a classic work of conscience, a defining portrait of a time and place that we will never forget. Tim Tyson’s riveting narrative of that fiery summer and one family’s struggle to build bridges in a time of destruction brings gritty blues truth, soaring gospel vision, and down-home humor to our complex history, where violence and faith, courage and evil, despair and hope all mingle to illuminate America’s enduring chasm of race.