



Reflections on the Lynching of Emmett Till

"I thought of Emmett Till, and when the bus driver ordered me to move to the back, I just couldn't move."

"My legs and feet were not hurting, that is a stereotype. I paid the same fare as others, and I felt violated. I was not going back."

—Rosa Parks

EXCERPT FROM COMING OF AGE IN MISSISSIPPI BY ANNE MOODY

In her 1968 memoir, Anne Moody writes about growing up as a young Black woman in rural Mississippi. She explores the themes of racism and sexism, and recounts her role in the civil rights movement. In this excerpt, Moody expresses her feelings about the murder of Emmett Till and the personal impact it had on her.

I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmett Till was killed.

Up until his death, I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then.

When they had finished dinner and gone into the living room as usual to watch TV, Mrs. Burke called me to eat. I took a clean plate out of the cabinet and sat down. Just as I was putting the first forkful of food in my mouth, Mrs. Burke entered the kitchen.

"Essie, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed in Greenwood?" she asked me, sitting down in one of the chairs opposite me.

"No, I didn't hear that," I answered, almost choking on the food.

"Do you know why he was killed?" she asked and I didn't answer.

"He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came

to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys' heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble," she said passionately.

"How old are you, Essie?" she asked me after a pause.

"Fourteen, I will soon be fifteen though," I said.

"See, that boy was just fourteen too. It's a shame he had to die so soon." She was red in the face, she looked as if she was on fire.

When she left the kitchen I sat there with my mouth open and my food untouched. I couldn't have eaten now if I were starving. "Just do your work like you don't know nothing" ran through my mind again and I began washing the dishes.

I went home shaking like a leaf on a tree. For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me and had given up. But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me.

Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears.



REFLECTIONS ON THE LYNCHING OF EMMETT TILL (CONTINUED)

I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.

I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and

I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice (my teacher) had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites.

SOURCE: Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South* (Reissue edition). New York: Dell Publishing, 1992.

EXCERPT FROM A MIGHTY LONG WAY BY CARLOTTA WALLS LANIER

Carlotta Walls LaNier was one of the "Little Rock Nine," who bravely integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. In this excerpt from her memoir, Walls LaNier remembers when she first learned of Emmett Till's murder and the emotional impact it made on her family.

I first heard the name of Emmett Till whispered from the lips of adults, speaking in hushed tones around my house about the horrible thing the white people did to that little black boy in Mississippi.

It was one of those moments when legend meets reality. I had read stories before about the lynching of black folks in Mississippi and other areas of the Deep South. I'd even heard my relatives tell the story of a lynching in downtown Little Rock.

To me, such stories were tragic yet distant history. But I knew Emmett Till. I'd never laid eyes on him before the magazine photos, but in the handsome

face of the boy he had been before his murder, I saw my cousins, my friends, my classmates. He was just one and a half years older than me and as real to me as the black playmates I met on the softball field every day.

Because of what happened to Emmett Till, Mississippi became a fearsome place in my mind, and I wanted never to set foot there. That must have been the case with the adults in my family, too, because from that moment on, Daddy mapped out our road trips so that we never even passed through Mississippi.

SOURCE: Walls LaNier, Carlotta. *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School* (Reprint edition). New York: One World, 2010.