

Book Summary

Book Discussion Guide

BLOOD DONE SIGN MY NAME

Timothy Tyson

Discussion of Chapters 1-3

When you finish the book return to pages 8-9 where Tyson describes what he needed to do before he could grasp what happened in Oxford, NC and consider why he needed to do all those things. What did he need to learn? What new understandings did he gain? Why were they important? Does witnessing his education through the pages of the book effect your understanding of the many forms of discrimination, activism and protest?

In what ways were the events in Oxford that summer a life and death struggle as Tyson suggests (9)?

What do race, nation and freedom mean to you? What are the implications of these meaning (9)?

Tyson described the country as teetering on the brink of apocalypse. Which way do you think or feel it settled? Did we fall into or away from the apocalypse? How do you know? Why do you feel this way?

"'This is a dangerous situation,' the editors of BusinessWeek declared. 'It threatens the whole economic and social structure of the nation'" (9) What is the "situation"? What is "It" that is so threatening? Why is it so?

Outline Tyson's family tree. How do social beliefs evolve through the generations of his family? Why? Why does he tell us about their attitudes or social constructs? Why is it important to him? Is it important to you?

What is important about Tyson's description of his immediate family and their southern way of life on pages 11-14? Why is it important? Why does he tell us this information? Consider the same questions regarding the description of his mother (20-23).

"'You're not worried about me marrying your daughter - you're worried about me marrying your wife's daughter. I've been marrying your daughter since the days of slavery'" (39).

"The force that drove the bullet through Henry Marrow's brain, if you were searching for something more explosive than gunpowder and more specific than that Cain slew Abel, was white people's deep, irrational fear of sex between black men and white women, any

single instance of which was supposed to abolish the republic, desecrate the Bible, and ring in the Planet of the Apes" (43).

Ideas: this book as a journey, as a confession; non-judgmental; motivation: who acts? why? who doesn't act? why not? What am I willing to risk?

Discussion of Chapter 4

Who is Miss Amy's witness? Witness to what? Or is Miss Amy the witness? The false witness?

"I wanted this terrible thing to stop, but I didn't have the courage to risk alienating my best friend....I found that my deep sense of belonging and my tenacious desire for acceptance trumped my moral judgment" (63) How does this lapse in obedience to a moral barometer happen? Has it ever happened to you? What did you do about it?

How does Tyson's description of MLK, Jr. compare with your understanding of him? "King understood [that]...the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union offered African Americans the unique leverage to redeem or repudiate American democracy in the eyes of the world" (67). What are the "street-theater morality plays"?

"The battalions of nonviolence eventually overran segregation, and they also helped free white Southerners who felt the way my father did" (68). From what was the elder Tyson freed?

Consider the separation of Church and State. Consider King's letter from Birmingham Jail and Reverend Tyson's own open letter. Where would the civil rights have been without the power of the pulpit?

Why was King "the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro and national security" (73).

Why did people listen to Miss Amy Womble's story (77-78), but not to Reverend Tyson until after they heard Miss Amy?

Discussion of Chapters 5, 6 and Letter from Birmingham Jail

To Begin: Choose one of the two quotes below for individual, written reflection before class discussion

"It speaks volumes about the racial situation in the United States in 1970 that virtually every African American in the county believed that white men could butcher a black man in public and not even face arrest and prosecution, let alone conviction (129)." For how long, do you think, did this practice remain true? How has it evolved over the last 35 years?

"Children may not fully understand the social order, but they learn it easily enough when it gets acted out in front of them (138)" How was this true of both black and white children in Oxford in 1970? How has this been true for you? How do you know?

"But ministers tend to be impassioned men of the Word, large of ego, expansive of spirit, persuasive by profession, and admired by their flocks. Their status and their gifts offer them many temptations, and theological training does not transform a man into an angel." In what ways is Tyson talking about his own father? Who else is he describing?

Consider the separation of Church and State. Consider King's letter from Birmingham Jail and Reverend Tyson's own open letter. Where would the civil rights have been without the power of the pulpit?

Tyson discusses to communication on pages 96 and 97. What does (or did) communication mean to the groups involved? What is productive? How do you respond to Thad Stem's comment "'Terry Sanford, Dave Coltrane [head of the Good Neighbor Council], and all them political do-gooders are off on another fool's errand. What he and all the rest of them need to understand is that we were wrong about the Negroes, and I don't mean mistaken. I mean we were wrong....and there ain't a committee or a commission in the world that is going to change that. We're about three hundred years late for the goddamn 'Good Neighbor Council.'" "

MLK as an "innocuous black Santa Claus, genial and vacant, a benign vessel that can be filled with whatever generic good wishes the occasion dictates" (107). How can Tyson make this claim? How do you reconcile his depiction today with, as Eli Regan said to Tyson's father, the perception that King was "the worst enemy that America has had" (110)?

Reflect on the following comments made by MLK and quoted by Tyson (107):
In 1964: "It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years."

In 1957: "I never intend to accommodate myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the many in order to give luxuries to the few."

In 1968: "We are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.... We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power....the whole structure of American life must be changed...."

Ronald Reagan described King's assassination as "'a great tragedy that began when we started compromising with law and order, and people started choosing which laws they'd break.'" How do you understand this remark and the murder it is describing?

Discussion of Chapters 7-9

How important is Frinks' presence at Marrow's funeral? Why? How does he confront white supremacy? (162-163)

What is your opinion of Thad Stem, Reverend Tyson's friend and Tim's writing mentor?

"All around them the tone of the funeral was shifting from mourning to protest, and the days of white clergymen marching across the Selma bridge with Dr. King were over. For my father, like for most white liberals, his marching days had ended before they had really begun. Most white advocates of civil rights were, as Daddy had feared they would be, too late" (157). What was the Selma march? Why did it happen? What does Tyson mean that it was too late? Why did this happen?

Why couldn't Reverend Tyson and Thad Stem participate in the march? Tyson explains that his father and Stem "had not had the experiences in interracial coalition politics that would have enabled them to disagree with some parts of a black political agenda and support other parts, for example, and hammer out their differences while finding common ground" (159) Could this resolution have been possible?

Tyson continues: "Nor was there anything like a ready welcome from blacks. Not knowing about the real history of the South, few blacks and even fewer whites knew that these problems had been confronted before, and with some success. In some respects, the split between white liberals and black radicals was a failure of memory" (159). Do you agree?

What is the significance of the Confederate monument (159)? What does it mean to you?

What is your perception of Black Power? How do you understand Tyson's description of it: "The Black Power generation's vision of social change, though it was often portrayed as radical, and thought of itself as radical, was actually in some ways a deeply traditional and even conservative assessment: you could have whatever you could take, and you could keep whatever you could hold. Power conceded nothing without a demand..." (168).

Consider how Tyson describes his family and the motivation of their social attitudes (169). How different are they from most people? From the racist people they opposed? From you?

Remember Zinn's description of the Revolutionary War? "the mobilization of the lower-class energy by upper-class politicians, for their own purposes" (61). Why does that resonate with the Confederate sentiments that Tyson documents? "Sons of Confederate Veterans....believed that this war was 'a rich man's war and a poor man's fight,' and that they themselves had no stake in the system of slavery. Still others objected to the tyranny of the Confederate government, which they had never consented to support. Poor whites resented Confederate impressment and taxation policies, but hated Confederate conscription laws that conveniently exempted wealthy slave-holders and their sons, one exemption for every twenty slaves owned" (172).

"Most of us would rather claim to have always been perfect than admit how much we have grown" (176).

"The tone of the Black Power crowd disturbed some of the more traditionally minded African Americans in Oxford....More thoughtful observers...fretted that the young people hadn't experienced enough to understand the battle before them, and that their rhetoric sometimes served psychological needs rather than political goals" (198).

"Richard Wright once observed that a black man in the Jim Crow South had three options with respect to white people, none of them politically promising. He could adopt a docile and religious posture, accepting his racial subordination. He could play the part of the 'respectable Negro,' superior to the poor blacks beneath him, and thereby become complicit in the racial caste system. Or the final - and frequently suicidal - option was to adopt the 'criminal attitude' of the black desperado, the 'bad nigger' who haunted the fearful imagination of the white South. This almost nihilistic figure affirmed white terrors that what lay behind black masks of servility was a boiling black rage that had few other outlets" (200). To what extent do Wright's perceptions of the mid-20th conditions perpetuate? What are the ramifications of these conditions?

"But the indisputable fact was that whites in Oxford did not even consider altering the racial caste system until rocks began to fly and buildings began to burn....'We knew if we cost 'em enough goddam money they was gon' start doing something'" (204). How representative was Oxford of the nation as a whole?

"Violence that did not represent a broad community consensus could hardly be ended at the negotiating table, especially when no one who approved of the violence had a seat at the table. The negotiators did not speak for the rioters" (205). Given this assessment by Tyson, did the non-violent and radical movements actually compliment one another? Did it matter if fear of the radical movement forced the political power structure to respond to the demands of the mainstream protestors?

Discussion of Chapter 10

Reflections on the trial...

Why does the court reporter, in recounting for Tyson the scene with the baby crying outside the courtroom window say, "All of this was our fault, not theirs. It was all our fault" (243)? Why does she include herself?

When the judge polled the jury, why, in Tyson's words, did he ask them to "pronounce" (245), instead of "say" the words "not guilty"?

Discussion of Chapter 11

"a decision to *obey federal law* stretches the meaning of the word 'voluntary'" (247).

"The majority of African Americans in Oxford and elsewhere had stayed on the sidelines, paralyzed by fear, indifference, or their inability to imagine a better world" (248).

Power of fear and the power of the purse (249-251).

"And so one of the major by-products of the freedom struggle, in Oxford and across the country, was a white political backlash of sustained ferocity" (253).

"Dangling Spanish moss, flowering oleanders and azaleas, and gracious antebellum architecture hinted at an unspoken history that still exerted a controlling influence on both sides of the color line" (256).

- Wilmington Ten (269)
- Wilmington Race Riot (271)
- Cape Fear, 1898 (271)

"In the 1970s, my father...continued to talk about race problems in a 'civil rights' paradigm, as though all that we had to do was pretend that black people were white and accept everyone as God's children" (261).

"Unless the people who believed in racial justice could summon the resources to force change, the hour would remain too late. If we had insisted on waiting for popular consensus, it would have been too late ever since the first slave ship arrived at Jamestown in 1619" (265).

"We are all the captives of our origins, especially when we do not fully know and understand them" (265).

"Africans were not Christians....And so the slave traders and the larger society that depended on them conjured up the poisonous lie of white supremacy; that is, the notion that God conferred moral, intellectual, and cultural worth upon humanity on the basis of pigmentation, with lighter-skinned people inherently more worthy and darker-skinned people intrinsically less worthy....Daddy...believed, we were all God's children and we were all in this together. He believed that progress depended on dialogue, which depended on civility and communication. Lasting change required entire institutions to open their doors and rethink their traditions..." (266-267).

People who were not there, did not see the events, were not victims of the atrocities, have a visceral response to being at the scene of the events. How do you account for or understand this length of cultural memory?

How do you respond to the white police officers who corralled Tyson in the basement room and told him, "'You can't write about his. No good can come of it.' (298)?

Discussion of Chapter 12 and the Epilogue

"If, in moving through your life, you find yourself lost...go back to the last place where you knew who you were, and what you were doing, and start from there" (288) Tyson quoting Bernice Johnson Reagon.

"When they discovered that the changes the black freedom movement brought did not land a black man in every white woman's bed or have Granville County declared a Soviet republic, the white upper classes did not wish to be reminded that they had sanctioned public murder and had turned a violent tragedy into a late-model lynching" (289).

"It baffles me that people think that obliterating the past will save them from its consequences, as if throwing away the empty cake plate would help you lose weight" (296).

Herman did not grow up in America. Exiled from the country whose uniform he continued to wear, Herman's brokenhearted father moved the family back to Germany. The land that had produced Hitler seemed safer for a mixed-race American family than the nation that had lifted up Martin Luther King Jr." (306).

"It's true that we must make a new world. But we can't make it out of whole cloth. We have to weave the future from the fabric of the past, from the patterns of aspiration and belonging - and broken dreams and anguished rejections - that have made us. What the advocates of our dangerous and deepening social amnesia don't understand is how deeply the past holds the future in its grip - and, even perhaps especially, when it remains unacknowledged" (307).

"Ralph Ellison expressed the central meaning of the blues better than anyone. 'The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness,' Ellison wrote, 'to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.' In that sense, this book is a kind of blues expression that urges us to confront our rage, contradictions, and failures and the painful history of race in America....there is no clean place in this story where anyone can sit down and congratulate themselves" (316-317).

"we want to transcend our history without actually confronting it" (318). What does this mean? Is it possible?

"The civil rights movement knocked down the formal and legal barriers to equal citizenship, but failed to give most African Americans real power in this society" (318).

"America owes a debt that no one can pay, and yet it probably remains what Lincoln called 'the last, best hope' of human freedom" (320).