

A Review of Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas

By

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Book: Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas
Author: Joyce King
Publisher: Anchor Books
Year: 2002

Joyce King, a former news anchor at a Dallas-affiliate of CBS radio and a former street reporter for the radio station KRLD, provides an unnerving re-creation of the murder of James Byrd, Jr. She presents an examination of the Byrd murder with a detailed analysis of the victim and offenders, as well as a trial summary. Hate crimes that are racially motivated are still a problem in society today. One of the most powerful examples was the murder of Byrd by three White young adults, which was found to be racially driven.

Throughout the book, King attempts to present the story of James Byrd, Jr. without racial bias. However, being a woman of color, she admits she finds it difficult. The book provides insight into the murderers' minds and provides details about the crime that was ignored by the media. King believes that if we examine how we act towards different races, it might help us understand some of the racial biases we have. King states, "I was harboring my own insecurities about race and my own tendencies to stereotype. Recycling untruths simply made me more like the very people I avoided" (p. 212). King also suggests that the judicial system is on the right track in the avoidance of racial discrimination. This book's main purpose is to examine how the intersection of race, economic status, gender, sex, and other demographics impact racial issues in society. The review structure will examine each chapter, followed by identifying the strengths and the weaknesses of the book, and concluding with personal insights on this book.

King begins her examination of the racial hate crime by recapping the acts through a detailed description of the murder. King initially provides the reader with a description of the town of Jasper, Texas. She describes the history and atmosphere of the town, which makes the reader feel as if he/she is actually there. King then shifts her focus to the events that preceded the murder of Byrd. King shows how different the victim and offenders really were by their activities and lifestyles. For example, the author points out that Byrd was spending time with friends and family the night he was killed, while King, Berry, and Brewer, the three offenders, were drinking, trashing people and cheating on loved ones. Identifying how each party spent their time before the crime helped show how different the victim and offenders were.

The author then moves to the events right before Byrd was murdered. Byrd was drunk and was staggering down Martin Luther King road in a drunken stupor right before his abduction. She identifies how Steven Scott, who was a key witness, placed the victim with the offenders right before the murder, since he saw them drive by. King quickly identifies how the offenders were racist from the start after picking up Byrd. “King turned to Berry, red-faced and suddenly more sober than drunk, and made an announcement: ‘That’s some ho-ass shit, picking up a fucking nigger’” (p. 23). Identifying the racial intentions of the offenders is critical in labeling this crime as a hate crime. King gives a spine chilling recap of the murder. The recount is extremely accurate and detailed, which makes the readers feel as though he or she was present at the event. This chapter sets the scene for the next chapter, which discusses the murder investigation.

Chapter two starts off with recapping the events the day after the murder and the investigation of the crime. King gives an insider’s perspective to the three offenders the following day. She details how each offender dealt with the horror of the crime they had committed. The remorse, or lack thereof, each offender displayed helped determine how credible their testimonies were. This section allows the reader to see the connections between the offenders and witnesses, which are presented later on in the trial. As the crime scene investigation takes place, she identifies key evidence that was collected at the crime scene. The police found physical evidence that linked the offenders to the scene of the crime.

As her description of the investigation goes on, King points out how the three offenders were connected to the crime through legitimate police investigation techniques. Finally, King points out that police found more evidence that indicated the murder of James Byrd Jr. was racially motivated. For instance, they found newly scratched words that read, WHITE PRIDE, inside of the holding cell of John William King. These small details that King points out during these first couple chapters, help connect major issues which are discussed later in the book.

The next section of King’s book gets a bit confusing, because this section tries to focus on what seems to be the central theme of the book—that there are racial problems in society. King discusses how minority individuals became involved during this horrific trial and investigation to help the Byrd family. King also points out how different racial groups started to show their support for each of the individuals involved in the murder. Michael Lowe, the regional director for the KKK, Jesse Jackson, and Denis Rodman were a few of the supporters involved.

King changes direction and begins to discuss her personal experiences that occurred months before the murder of Byrd. King discusses being fired from her job, which left her unemployed. She also explains how she started to question issues of racism. King continues to discuss issues such as racial tolerance and racial healing. King, who is a Black woman, considers whether or not her firing was racially driven. She states, “The only news anchor of color on the air, I can’t help but wonder if my termination was, in any way, racially motivated” (p. 60).

King explains how she tried to keep from being overwhelmed with racial issues by working in programs that promoted racial equality. This section shows that racial issues are always in the back of our minds, even if we are not conscious or aware of them. King starts to describe her initial journey to Jasper to investigate the murder and trial. This begins with a detailed description of how she felt riding down the same road that James Byrd Jr. took his last breath on.

These sections help the reader get a feeling of the crime under investigation. King also shows how a racially driven hate crime can alter a person's opinions and beliefs. She writes that when she broke into the courthouse before the first official media briefing, she encountered the Sheriff of Jasper. She surprisingly admits that after interviewing him, he was not like she would have imagined. King admits that she had a racial image of White men in the South. In contrast to the picture that she had envisioned, the Sheriff was kind and considerate. She concludes that most people have these conceptions based on stereotypes.

At the end of this chapter, King provides a biography for each of the three offenders to shed light on their lives. King suggests that for these three men, time in prison may have caused them to become racist. She primarily focuses on John William King since he was the main criminal mind behind the murder of Byrd. King believes that in the case of John William King, the prison environment promoted his racist beliefs. King goes on to suggest that this occurs because prison is a coercive and dangerous place. Joining racially motivated groups can help ensure safety in a dangerous place. King also suggests that these groups can have a tremendous amount of influence on your thoughts and beliefs.

The biographies of these three men slowly move towards their initial contact with one another. King shifts from a discussion of the three men into the structure of the prison without a clear transition, which causes confusion to the reader. King may be trying to show how the prison structure and its lack of control allow racial issues to be exploited in the prison atmosphere. She analyzes of each part of the prison, though the reader wonders what the purpose of this section is. It may be implying that our prison system promotes racial discrimination, or that the goals of the prison are not being reached because of the hostile environment within most prison facilities. This section does help explain issues that are examined in the last chapter.

In the last section of King's book, she provides trial details of the three murderers. These men are accused of the murder, but have not been found guilty yet. King does an incredible job of describing the anticipation of John William King's arrival to the Jasper court room to begin his trial. King describes each piece of evidence against the offenders. She also captures the initial response of the jury for each piece of evidence. She points out there may have been racial biases that influenced the investigation due to police assumptions. King suggests that assumptions are signs of poor police work, which is the case because sound evidence proves assumptions right or wrong. Specifically, with John William King's trial, she points out that she was surprised by the lack of racial bias,

something she expected in a southern court. King finds that the lack of racial biases in courts is a move in the right direction to overcome race issues. At one point, King found that after looking at crime scene photos of the murder she was emotionally drawn to support death sentences for the three men. During John William King's trial, his racist beliefs were drawn out, which justified the decision of the jury to believe Byrd was murdered because of the color of his skin.

Joyce King provides play by play commentary of the criminal trial for King, Berry, and Brewer, including detail that most people may not have noticed. King spends significant time and detail on John William King's trial because he was ruled to be the leader of the trio and the man who felt the least remorse. In Brewer's trial, King notes the defense tried to show that he was not as much of a racist as King was, and that Brewer felt extreme remorse for the crime. King points out that, similar to his friend John William King, Lawrence Brewer's racist character was drawn out through his prison affiliation and history. King does a satisfactory job of illustrating the relationships and similarities between King's trial and Brewer's trial. King explains that the jury was not convinced by Brewer's remorse, and he therefore faced the same fate as his friend, death. In the trial of the third man, the evidence suggested that Berry was at the wrong place at the wrong time. However, his fate was the same as his fellow murderers; Berry was also found guilty and sentenced to death.

In the conclusion, King provided updates on the three death row inmates' appeals of their death sentences. She pointed out that their appeals were unsuccessful. She also provided updates on the sheriff and other individuals from Jasper with whom she formed close relationships during her time there. Finally, King offers a personal experience with racism, which would perhaps be more appropriate at the end of the book than in the middle. She ends by summing her feelings on the trial, the south, and her new found perspective.

The main strength in this book is King's ability to provide enriched facts about the crime, trial, witnesses, murderers, and other aspects of the crime in Jasper, Texas. The detail she used throughout the entire book allowed for the reader to know all of the mitigating factors of this crime under review. The detail King used also allowed the reader to get the feeling that they were in each situation as it was occurring. King covered every aspect of crime, trial, and sentencing. If King did not add in all these facts, then this recount of this event could be misleading.

The book's major weakness is its organization. She does not give the reader any indication of the structure and goals of the book is. With organization, the goals of this book and her personal opinions would be clearer. Another weakness is her explanation of her reasons for discussing personal issues of racism. In addition, King does not provide any insight into how to prevent racial issues. The book is confusing in some sections because King overlaps herself as a narrator and character. At times, it seems as if King starts discussing certain racial issues and does not follow up on them. For instance, King mentions events that she felt had racial implications, like being pulled over by police officers and being fired from her job, but does not connect them to the

theme of the book. King does not explain the reasoning behind these stories, which leaves the reader to wonder why these stories were added to the book. King does not provide enough insight into the racial hostility that exists in prisons to support her discussion of the prison environment. Finally, the conclusion would have been supported more through the inclusion of research. For instance, King indicates that we are still far from overcoming racial issues in society, but does not support this claim.

Joyce King's recount of the murder of James Byrd Jr. and trial of his killers, allows society to learn things that they may not have been aware of. This book would benefit anyone who is interested in the criminal justice system because it gives a detailed recount of a crime, police investigation, and court process. The book would benefit anyone interested in studying law, because it covers the trial in great detail. King's recount of the crime suggests that there are a lot of factors that can contribute to someone being racist. King also implies that most people, including her, are unaware of their personal racism. Examining yourself may help you see these biases more clearly. Throughout the book it seems she is implying that class, gender, sex, and economic status also impact racial issues. She implies these issues when she details her personal experiences, but does not follow up on those issues. Being aware that these factors impact these problems may help with future research and policies that focus on racial issues. King recounts the events leading up to and following this trial in hopes of helping society become more aware that racism is still a major issue in our society. Until we become more aware of these issues, personal biases, hate crimes, and other racial issues will continue to plague our society.