

## “A Crime That’s So Unjust!”

# Chris Crowe Tells About the Death of Emmett Till

Jim Blasingame

“If you can’t speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that’s so unjust,  
Your eyes are filled with dead men’s dirt, your mind is filled with dust.”

Line from the song, “The Death of Emmett Till” by Bob Dylan,  
© 1963, Warner Brothers. Renewed 1991. Special Rider Music

In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American visitor from Chicago, Illinois, left his cousins waiting outside of Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi, while he went inside. Exactly what happened during those next few minutes while the two were alone only Carolyn Bryant, the 21-year-old white storeowner, and Emmett himself would ever know for sure. What happened four days later, however, is quite certain. According to Emmett’s great uncle Mose Wright’s testimony in court and the admission of the two men later in a paid interview with *Life Magazine*, Carolyn Bryant’s husband Roy and his half brother J.W. Milam kidnapped Emmett, and he was never seen alive again. Three days following the kidnapping Emmett’s horribly disfigured body was found in the Tallahatchie River. The two men were found innocent of murder and innocent of kidnapping (PBS American Experience Series: *The Murder of Emmett Till*).

The murder of Emmett Till is the subject of *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, BYU Professor of English Education and former ALAN president Chris Crowe’s first venture into young adult fiction. He followed soon after with a nonfiction companion work *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. The success of *Mississippi Trial, 1955* has been remarkable for any book let alone a first work. The American Library Association named it a 2003 Best Book for Young Adults, and the National Council for the Social Studies honored it as a 2003 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People in the category of History, Life and Culture in the Americas. It has also won the IRA Children’s Book Award in the YA novel category which Chris accepted in May at the IRA convention, and the Jefferson Cup, an award given for the best young adult historical book, fiction or nonfiction, which he will receive in November.

Chris was kind enough to speak with us recently by email:

**JB:** Chris, Congratulations on having your very first young adult novel, *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, win so many awards. Readers are also finding that your nonfiction work, *Getting*

*Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* is a wonderful complement to the fictionalized account. The research and the two books were quite a project. Were you thinking of a specific readership as you began?

**CC:** I’m always thinking about young adult readers, so when I learned about the Emmett Till case, I knew that I wanted to tell the story for teenagers. Emmett was only 14 when he was murdered, so I thought his story would be especially important for YA readers. There are many stories about teenagers in the civil rights movement, and Emmett’s death and the trial of his killers was a catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott that took place just months later. The story of Emmett Till was a story I had been ignorant of, and it’s a story everyone should know. I thought it would make sense to share it with YAs. I started the novel first, without any plans for a nonfiction book. It wasn’t until I finished the novel and looked over the stacks of notes and research material that I realized I had enough information for a nonfiction book about the case. And because this was such an important event in US history, I wanted to present teenage readers with the straight story, illustrated with photographs from the case. I wanted YA readers to know the facts of the murder of Emmett Till without any doubt about what was fact and what was fiction.

**JB:** In the Acknowledgements to *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*, you thank Mildred D. Taylor, author of the Logan family series, *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry, Let the Circle be Unbroken, The Road to Memphis and The Land*, “an awe-inspiring writer, who first sent me in search of Emmett” (6). Was this a figurative or literal sending? Can you tell us about that?

**CC:** It was more figurative than literal. When I was working on a book about Mildred D. Taylor, I came across a comment she made about the impact the murder of Emmett Till had on her when she was a high school student. That reference sent me in search of the story because I wondered if it might have had some influence on her writing as well. As



Chris Crowe surrounded by YA literature in Provo, Utah

I said, previous to this, I'd never heard anything about Emmett Till, so when I found the photo of his corpse in *Jet Magazine*, I was shocked. I was shocked because it was such a horrible crime, but I was also shocked because the murder had been a huge event in 1955 but somehow it never made it into most history books. In all my years as a student and a teacher, I'd never read about it. My ignorance of this major historical event shamed me.

**JB:** Speculating about the truth is perhaps one of the biggest requirements of writing a fictional account of an actual event. In *Mississippi Trial, 1955* you had to imagine or speculate about the truth of what happened during those seven days in 1955, a truth that may have also died, in part, with Emmett Till. How did you accomplish that?

**CC:** I wanted to make sure that any speculation I did was based on fact, so I did lots of research. As I learned about the people involved in the crime, I tried to imagine what they were like, what would make someone believe that they could justify murder. To create the fictional character of R.C. Rydell, I tried to imagine what sort of childhood a boy would have to have in order to grow up able to do awful, cruel things. I imagined what his home life must have been like and what might have warped him. In terms of the events, I read as many accounts of the murder and trial as I could find. Because it was such a sensational crime in 1955, there were lots of newspaper and magazine articles written about it. The trial transcripts have been "lost," so those weren't available, but I did make good use of microfilm records and even some video interviews of people involved in the case. I even spent a week in Greenwood, Mississippi, the same week in August that Emmett had been there, so I could have an accurate sense of the setting—the weather, the towns, the way people spoke.

**JB:** There is more going on with your characters in *Mississippi Trial* than just the story that people could have read in the news. What did you mean for your characters to show about the human experience?

**CC:** I suppose I was thinking most about Hiram Hillburn, my narrator. In many ways, mainly the cowardly ways, Hiram is a lot like I was when I was a teenager. Hiram's oblivious to the racism around, oblivious to the goodness of his own father, oblivious to the unsavory qualities of many of the people he thinks he admires. Hiram was a racist without being aware of it. He also was a part of an intergenerational family conflict. Hiram hates his father. Hiram's father hates his father. As I said, some of this comes from my own teen years. When I was in high school, I didn't get along very well with my own father, and it was my fault. After I got married, and especially after I had kids of my own, I realized what a dope I had been, and I regretted that I hadn't made a better effort at understanding Dad when I was a teenager. Anyway, my dad died while I was working on *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, and that caused me to reflect a lot on what my relationship had been with him and what I wish it had been.

One of the nice things about fiction is that it gives you a chance to work out some angst, and that's what I did through Hiram. I knew that this novel couldn't be about the Emmett Till case—it had to be a story that stood on its own, a story affected by the case rather than about the case. For Hiram, I wanted it to be a story of reconciliation; I wanted him to come to see his father in a new light, and I wanted him to learn about racism and how evil it is. Having him get caught up in the Emmett Till case provided the catalyst for both those lessons to take place.

So, I wanted Hiram to learn that our perceptions of others aren't always accurate. I wanted him to learn that people he loves can still do bad things. I wanted him to face something really scary and find the courage to do what was right, even if he didn't want to. I guess those are the same things I wish I would have learned when I was 16.

**JB:** Both books required an enormous amount of research (over 50 sources in the bibliography of *Getting Away with Murder*), and the facts you uncovered were hardly benign. As you were searching for Emmett's story what was going on with you on a personal level? What experiences along the way most affected you?

**CC:** The research was both fascinating and agonizing. I learned facts about the case, of course, but I also learned an awful lot about the Jim Crow South and many of the terrible things that happened following the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling by the Supreme Court. I'd never realized how that decision had inflamed the South. So the educational part of the research was fascinating. But it was agonizing because much of what I was reading and writing about was so awful. Emmett wasn't the only African American murdered in Mississippi in 1955, and reading about the hate and violence that was erupting then made me feel awful.

The details of the Emmett Till case, of course, are singularly horrifying. Here's a boy, barely 14 years old, the only child of a widow, who ends up kidnapped, tortured, and murdered for being rude to a white woman. The blatant racism during the trial was incomprehensible to me, and the cocky pride his murderers had for "doing their duty" was simply stunning. It was hard for me to believe that there really are people like that. Anyway, being immersed in this story for the years I spent researching and writing about this case kept me in a perpetual dark cloud of sadness. I have to admit, that when I finally finished both books, I felt a ton of relief, not just because the projects were done but because I could finally emerge from all the dark stuff I'd been dealing with for so very long.

For me, one of the most painful aspects of Emmett's story was his tragic death. I have four children of my own, and I can barely imagine the agony Emmett's mother endured when she learned what had happened to her only child. In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to have two long phone interviews with his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and she was a remarkable, noble woman. If I had been her, I'm afraid I would have been festering with hate about the whole

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thing, but she had this regal charm about her, very gracious, very smart, very objective. When I was talking with her, I felt a sort of awe—here I was, a nobody white guy talking with the woman who was a big part of the civil rights movement, a woman who has shared speaking engagements with Rosa Parks. Mrs. Mobley was polite and kind and so very open. It was clear that she still mourned the death of her son, but also that she had forgiven his killers. What a magnificent woman! Those conversations with her were the high points of my work on these books.

**JB:** How did you ever find the time to write these two books? You have a full schedule as a professor at BYU, you were president of the ALAN at the time, you have a family, and many other obligations; I'm sure. Do you have a time management secret?

**CC:** I don't have any secrets about getting writing done. In fact, I usually feel like I'm an unorganized, undisciplined slacker. The research was interesting and seemingly never ending, and I realized at one point I was using research as an excuse to avoid writing. Anyway, I didn't set any writing speed records. I started research on the novel way back in 1997 and started writing in earnest the following year. I had other writing projects going on at the same time—and, of course, all the stuff that comes with teaching at a university—so I had plenty of distractions. My best writing period came when I'd go to a carrel in the library every morning and work on the novel for one or two or three hours. That daily rhythm helped me finish the first draft, and I still do my best writing when I can work on it daily. Though the university provides lots of work that takes me away from writing, it also offers support and much more flexibility than I had when I was a high school teacher. That flexibility and support really helps my writing. Here's what I know about writing—and about most things in life: we make time to do what we really want to do.

**JB:** You could have chosen a much safer, less challenging topic for your first attempt at a novel. Why did you choose the story of Emmett Till for your opening endeavor?

**CC:** I suppose I may have thought that historical fiction might be easier because it provided a ready-made story for a framework. Man, was I wrong about that! I found that it was incredibly difficult blending history with fiction because my fictional plot and characters kept bumping up against

real history, so I had to keep rechecking facts to make sure I was faithful to the historical events. I chose the story of Emmett Till because I felt it had to be told, that kids should know about the murder of this 14-year-old boy and its place in American history. Looking back, I realize that I was pretty naive about what this work would entail. It was painful being immersed in the facts of this case for so long, but I'm glad I did what I did and that it's turned out all right.

**JB:** What contributions do you believe the genre of nonfiction makes, or can make, to young adult literature?

**CC:** I guess Betty Carter and Richard Abrahamson's book about nonfiction was the first thing that made me aware of how important nonfiction is to YA readers. In recent years, many states have added nonfiction or informational books to their core curricula, so it's clear that kids are going to encounter more nonfiction than ever before. And the recent nonfiction is incredible, much better than anything that was available when I was in high school. Jennifer Armstrong's *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* is just one example of the fine YA nonfiction that's being produced these days, and it's only the tip of the iceberg (sorry about that pun). Kids today have a wide range of really terrific nonfiction books to choose from, and I assume the market will continue to expand.

**JB:** Any advice to aspiring writers?

**CC:** A writer is someone who writes. If you want to be a writer, you've got to sit down and write; you've got to make time for writing. I also recommend that writers find trusted mentors, someone who can read their work and tell them what's working and what's not.

Aspiring writers also need to read widely. Of course they should read the sorts of books they hope to write, but they also need to read all kinds of other books too. It's all grist for the writing mill; you can never know how what you read will influence you as a person and as a writer.

Both *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, and *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* are available from Phyllis Fogelman Books.

#### Works Cited

- Dylan, Bob. "The Death of Emmett Till." Warner Brothers, 1963.  
*The Murder of Emmett Till*. Dir. Stanley Nelson. PBS American Experience Series.

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