Book Interview

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I was born in 1939 and grew up in the Midwest and the South at a time when lynchings still occurred. They were not as frequent as they had been, but frequent enough to hang over my life and the lives of other young blacks as something that could happen to you if you did not "stay in your place."I remember vividly the lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955 and particularly the photographs in *Jet* magazine of his brutalized body. I also remember the lynching of Mack Charles Parker in 1959, also in Mississippi. When I did research in 1966 in Mississippi on black folklore and music, I interviewed people who, with no prompting from me, described lynchings they knew of. Lynching was a form of domestic terrorism designed to intimidate black people from seeking political and economic power as well as education. For the most part, it succeeded.The word lynching comes from the name of a justice of the peace in Virginia in the late 1760s. Charles Lynch "and his neighbors created an informal court . . . to deal with suspected Tories and horse thieves." They were brought before Judge Lynch, found guilty, and "tied to a walnut tree in his front yard and given thirty-nine lashes." This extralegal justice became known as Lynch"s Law and, eventually, lynching.1Lynching is the use of violence by a mob to circumvent the law and injure or kill a person accused of a crime. Between 1882 and 1968, approximately 4,743 men and women were lynched. Of that number, 70 percent—3,446—were black and 1,297 were white. These numbers represent only those lynchings for which there is a written record. There were lynchings that were never reported. Estimates of the number of lynchings before 1882 vary from 4,000 to 20,000, the number author Dorothy Sterling cites as the number killed by the white supremacist terror group, the Ku Klux Klan, between 1868 and 1871 alone. A Congressional investigation carried out in 1872 said that "as many as 2,000 blacks had been killed or wounded in Louisiana alone since the close of the Civil War."2 Of the lower forty-eight states, only four states never had a lynching—Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island.In most instances, lynchings were supported by state and local governments, the police, and the mediA: In 1899 a black man named Sam Hose was accused of murdering Alfred Cranford, a white landowner, and his baby, and raping the landowner"s wife. The front page of the Atlanta Constitution had a headline that read, "Determined Mob After Hose; He Will Be Lynched if Caught." The subhead added, "Assailant of Mrs. Cranford May Be Brought to Palmetto and Burned at the Stake," Palmetto being a town in GeorgiA: Two trains of white people came from Atlanta to watch.Lynchings were seen as social events. For one anticipated lynching in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1917, people camped out overnight at what was to be the site, and some parents sent "notes to school asking that their children be excused" so they could attend the lynching.3 People posed for photographs in front of the hanging or burning body, and purchased "souvenirs," i.e., bones of the victim.In the first decades of the twentieth century, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and other organizations publicized lynchings widely and tried to get the U.S. Congress to make lynching a federal crime, since the arrest and prosecution of lynchers was a rare occurrence. Indeed, the verdict of practically every lynching was that the person met his death "at the hands of persons unknown." To its shame, a federal law against lynching was not passed. In 2005 the United States Senate passed a resolution apologizing for never passing antilynching legislation. However, even in 2005, eight senators refused to sign the resolution. 2The lynching described in this novel is not based on any particular one. And the lynching I describe here does not begin to describe the full horror of what actually occurred at lynchings. For those interested, I refer you to the books in the bibliography.Having grown up with the prospect of being lynched as part of my awareness as a black child whose parents wanted me to reach adulthood, I have thought about lynchings often, from the point of view of what it was like to be lynched as well as what it was like to witness, to be a part of a lynching. This may sound a little macabre, but as a writer, part of my responsibility is to wonder, "What was it like when . . . ?" Several years ago a movie producer contacted me about the possibility of making a film based on my novel *The Autobiography of God*. Having been contacted several times in the past about making a movie from one of my books, I knew not to get excited because nothing had come from previous entreaties.The producer called one evening to see if I would be interested in another ideA: He had seen an article in the *New York Times* about an exhibit of postcards depicting lynchings of blacks. I knew of the exhibit and had the book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by James Allen.As noted above and in this novel, photographers went to lynchings to take photographs of the victims as well as photographs of people posing next to the bodies of those lynched. These photographs were turned into postcards, purchased by those pictured at the lynching, and mailed to relatives and friends. James Allen, a white man from Georgia, spent twenty-five years searching for these postcards with their horrific images. (What does it say about America that such postcards had no problem being sent through the mail, but a postcard depicting a woman"s breasts would have resulted in the arrest of the sender for using the mail for obscene material.)The Hollywood producer wanted to know if I"d be interested in writing a film with lynching as the subject matter. I said yes, but that I wanted to write something from the point of view of a white boy. In looking at the postcards in *Without Sanctuary*, I had been struck by the number of them that showed children, boys and girls, present at lynchings. I remembered having had an exchange of letters in 1970 with George Woods, then children"s book editor at the *New York Times*, about black children"s books. Our letters were printed as an article in the Sunday *New York Times* Book Review on May 24, 1970. In my last one, I wrote: "White writers are so dishonest. Seldom have they written what they could have and should have, which is, the white side of racism. I"d like to see a children"s novel about a little white boy who goes with his father to a lynching." This notion had come to me reading Ralph Ginzburg"s *100 Years of Lynching* when it was published in 1962. The book was a compilation of actual newspaper articles describing lynchings.I wrote a seventy-five page treatment of the movie I envisioned about the white boy at a lynching. The producer read it, but his mind was set on a movie about a lynching from the perspective of blacks. There was no creative challenge for me in writing that story. I felt like it had been done, and I wasn"t interested in writing something that would enable whites to shed crocodile tears for blacks. The producer and I parted company amiably.Oddly I did not sit down immediately and begin work on this novel. I put the treatment in a folder and forgot about it.I can"t recall what happened, but five years later the treatment I had done came to mind. I read it over, sat down, and began this book. 3It may seem odd for me to say that the book came very easily. But it did. It was as if the characters had been waiting for me, and characters I had not thought of presented themselves with their stories. Zeph Davis was a complete surprise, and the scene under the bridge in which he kills the frog came to me so easily that I was uncomfortable being in such proximity to my "inner sociopath." While the subject matter is a lynching, on a deeper level, this is a novel about identity. Whom and what we identify ourselves with determines our characters, determines who we are, and what we do. Whose opinion matters to you the most? When you know that, when you know whom it is you most care about pleasing, you know who you are. We make choices every day that shape the content of our characters.Lynchings can take many forms. The one described here is only more dramatic.Unfortunately, the use of nooses as threats to blacks has become a cruel metaphor of our times. Over the past ten years, "about a dozen noose incidents a year came to the attention of civil rights groups," according to an op-ed article in the *New York Times* (November 25, 2007). That number escalated after an incident in Jena, Louisiana, where nooses were hung from a tree at the high school.In 2007, there were between fifty and sixty noose incidents—a black foreman at an ironworking plant in Pittsburgh found a hangman"s noose at his work area; a black professor at Columbia University"s Teachers College found a noose hanging from the doorknob

of her office. Noose incidents were reported in Illinois, Minnesota, Indiana, Missouri, Louisiana, Texas, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Florida, New Jersey, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Connecticut.According to a 2005 Justice Department study, more than 190,000 hate crimes are reported every year. The Southern Poverty Law Center says the number of hate groups has risen by 40 percent, going from 602 groups in 2000 to 844 in 2006.As much as many would like to believe that racism in America is on the wane, the truth is that in the hearts of some, it is, but in the hearts of all too many others, racism is not only not declining, it is acquiring new life.Because of this country"s history, a hangman"s noose cannot be benign. It is a metaphor for a form of terrorism that touches every black life. Indeed, in 2008 an announcer on the Golf Channel was suspended for saying that young golfers who wanted to challenge Tiger Woods should "lynch him in a back alley." Her comment was meant as a joke, but there is no humor to be found in lynching. On February 11, 2008, at a ceremony commemorating African-American History Month, President George Bush said, "The noose is not a symbol of prairie justice, but of gross injustice. Displaying one is not a harmless prank. And „lynching" is not a word to be mentioned in jest. As a civil society, we should be able to agree that noose displays and lynching jokes are deeply offensive. They are wrong. And they have no place in America today." It is my conviction that the racial divides in the United States will not be overcome until lynchings of all kinds are as painful to nonblacks as they are to blacks, until each of us become guardians of the sufferings history has bequeathed us.Julius Lester1 At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America by Philip Dray, Modern Library, New York, 2003, p. 21.2 Ibid., p. 49.3 Ibid., p. 232.