

# MISSISSIPPI TRIAL, 1955



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September 2, 1955 - The state of Mississippi and Tallahassee  
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**Based on the true story of a tragic murder  
that helped spark the Civil Rights movement**

Chris Crowe

WOOD COMING



# **CHAPTER 1**

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My dad hates hate.

All my life, if the word ever slipped out of my mouth, he'd snap into me faster than a rattlesnake.

"Hiram," he'd say, straightening up tall like a preacher, "the world's got plenty enough hate without you adding to it. I will not tolerate such language—or even such thinking—in my home or in my family!" He'd go on with his sermon for too long, five minutes or more, preaching about the evils of hate and reminding me how hate had hurt folks back in our old home, the Mississippi Delta. Then he'd march me up to the bathroom and give my tongue a slathering of Lifebuoy soap.

I can't tell you which was worse, the sermons or the soap, but I will tell you this: I hated Dad when he acted like that, like some kind of born-again crusader out to protect everybody's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

By the time I turned sixteen last July, I'd had it with Dad's sermons and weirdness about hate, racism, equal rights, and all that. Funny thing was, the more he preached about hate, the madder it made me. Never told him to his face, of course. It wouldn't have been worth it, but I let him know in a thousand ways that I'd just as soon live in the Arizona desert with Gila monsters and tarantulas than spend any time with him.

But a few months ago, the summer of 1955, lots of stuff happened, stuff I never would have imagined. It was strange, but you know how sometimes when you get what you think you always wanted, it turns out to be nothing like you expected?

That happened to me when I was back in Greenwood, Mississippi, last summer. Some awful things happened to a Negro kid named Emmett Till, and I was right in the middle of it, smack in the heart of crazy, senseless hatred. And you know what? When it was all over, I started seeing Dad—and lots of people—a whole lot different than ever before.

I first started butting heads with Dad in 1948—I was only nine—because he dragged us away from Mississippi. Dad and his dad, Grampa Hillburn, got along about as well as Hitler and Roosevelt. Spend any time with the two of them in the same room, and you'd figure that World War II hadn't ended yet. The problem was that while Dad was away fighting Japanese in the Pacific and Mom was working for the war effort, Gramma and Grampa Hillburn raised me. They spoiled me pretty good, I guess, but as a

little kid, I liked the spoiling, and I loved my grandparents  
And their big old house. And Greenwood, Mississippi.

Dad came home from the war, took one look at how tight I was with Grampa, another look at the South he hated, and used the GI Bill to go up to Ole Miss to get a master's degree in English so he could land a college teaching job out west, far away from Grampa, from Mississippi, from racism and prejudice, from hate. Mom and Dad lived in a shoe box-size apartment up there, so while Dad studied and Mom worked at Oxford Elementary School, they let me stay with Gramma and Grampa for the two years it took Dad to finish school.

Looking back on it now, I can see how lots of things that happened when I used to live in Greenwood stacked up to set the stage for all the horrible stuff that took place last summer.

I still remember being a little kid in Greenwood. I spent nearly all my time with Grampa, and we had a regular routine: After breakfast we'd walk down to the Leflore County Courthouse so Grampa could "do a little business." That usually meant he'd stroll into someone's office, pull up a chair, and visit. Usually, before he'd even sit down, he'd fish in his pocket for a nickel, hand it to me, and say, "Hiram, Mr. Hardin and I have some serious business to tend to for the next little while. Why don't you run down to the lobby and see what Mr. Paul's got for sale today."

Funny how you remember some days more than others, but I still remember one summer morning there. With the nickel in my fist, I left Mr. Hardin's office and headed

## **A brutal murder rocks a sleepy southern community.**

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**A**t first Hiram is excited to be visiting his favorite grandfather in Greenwood, Mississippi. But before long Hiram begins to feel that the small town is not the place he remembers from his childhood. Then he crosses paths with Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago who is also visiting for the summer, and Hiram sees firsthand how the local whites mistreat blacks who refuse to "know their place." When Emmett's body is found floating in a river, Hiram is determined to find out who could do such a thing. But what will it cost him to know?

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**"Gripping." —BCCB**

**"Will get readers thinking." —PW**

**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults**