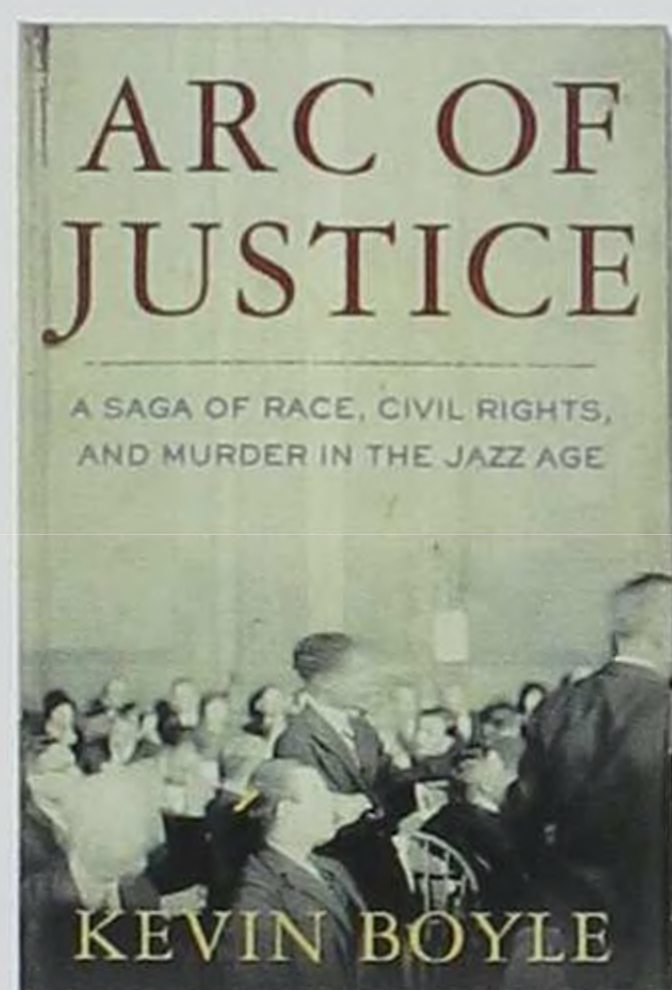


Reading the Past

Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age, by Kevin Boyle (New York: H. Holt, 2004), 415 pages.



Historian Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* relates the dramatic and true story surrounding the trial of 11 African Americans for murder in the mid-1920s. It's not only good history, but just plain a good book—a good reading experience.

At the center of the story are a young, emotionally scarred, and therefore somewhat insecure African American doctor, Ossian Sweet, and his young, self-assured wife, Gladys. The story, as Professor Boyle tells it, begins with the couple, along with nine friends and relatives, defending their newly purchased home from the threat posed by a white mob gathered outside. In the confusion, someone in the house opens fire from an upstairs window, injuring one bystander and killing another. All 11 of the people in the house are rushed to police headquarters, interrogated at length, and charged—all 11 of them—with murder.

Then Boyle takes us back to the rural Florida of Ossian Sweet's childhood and the brutal racism he witnessed there as Florida's white citizens retracted most of the gains African Americans had made under Reconstruction. We follow Sweet to Wilberforce University and then to Howard University, where he trains to become a doctor. He decides, along with thousands of others seeking to escape the Jim Crow

South for opportunities in the North, to participate in what historians know as the Great Migration and to settle in Detroit.

There, as the African American community expands dramatically, white neighborhoods band together to defend their communities from the declining property values they fear will follow the migration of African Americans into their communities. In 1925, the year the Sweets move into their new home, the Second Ku Klux Klan is at its height and has even become a powerful political force in Detroit. The preceding decades have seen race riots in many cities North and South, riots in which whites—at the least provocation—invade African American communities, wreaking havoc and destruction. (Boyle calls them "pogroms" to distinguish them from the very different race riots many readers will recall from the 1960s and 1970s.)

As the trial opens, we are introduced to a fascinating cast of characters, many of them, like Ossian Sweet, unlikely heroes. James Weldon Johnson and Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) hope to use the case as a wedge to prevent the spread of institutionalized, enforced, residential segregation—and as a tool to build an NAACP legal defense

fund. In one of the many elegant characterizations that mark the book, Boyle comments that Johnson "infused NAACP activism with an extraordinary dramatic flair, beginning with his masterpiece, the 1917 Silent Parade down Fifth Avenue, a peerless example of protest as performance art, and reaching full flower in the literary renaissance of 1920s Harlem, when Johnson helped to make art into a performance of protest."

Johnson and White convince Clarence Darrow, America's most famous attorney, to take the case. It was his first case after his dramatic performance at the Scopes "Monkey" trial in Tennessee, the trial about the teaching of evolution immortalized for future generations in the film *Inherit the Wind*. Johnny Smith, Detroit's mayor, tries to minimize the social divisions that the trial represents, even as he capitalizes on the political divisions it spawns. Frank Murphy, the surprisingly fair-minded judge in the trial, will eventually become mayor himself and later be appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by Franklin Roosevelt. Reinhold Niebuhr, America's most prominent 20th-

century theologian, is a young pastor in Detroit at the time and heads a commission to study Detroit's race problem.

What makes this book so special is the extraordinary way it blends three tools in the historian's toolkit. First and foremost, Boyle is a masterful storyteller with a dramatic story to tell, which he tells with literary flair. He ends chapters and sections the way good mystery writers do, making you want to keep reading to see what happens next.

Second, Boyle engagingly fills in the back story. As he pushes the history of the U.S. civil rights movement back to the 1920s, he educates readers about the many larger forces that impinge on this narrowly focused story. Even readers who are well informed about many of these large movements in American history—Reconstruction, the Great Migration, urbanization, residential segregation, the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan, the founding of the NAACP, and the division between the followers of Booker T. Wash-

ington and W. E. B. DuBois—will learn things they don't know, while those who don't recognize the terms will be enlightened but not overwhelmed.

Finally, Boyle never forgets that these large forces in American history affect and are transformed by real individual human beings. He relates both the dramatic story and the accounts of the larger forces through the eyes of people—flawed heroes and villains whose motives he makes understandable.

Alas, this story has little direct connection to Iowa (though we do learn that Dr. Edward Carter, a fellow doctor and fraternity brother to whom Ossian Sweet increasingly turned for advice as he settled into Detroit society, was "the first black doctor to graduate from the University of Iowa's College of Medicine"). But anyone who is interested in history will find this to be an illuminating and engaging story. ❖

Marvin Bergman's occasional column, "Reading the Past," introduces selected books to our readers. Bergman is editor of the Annals of Iowa, published by the State Historical Society.