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Book Review: The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Junius Stinney, Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South

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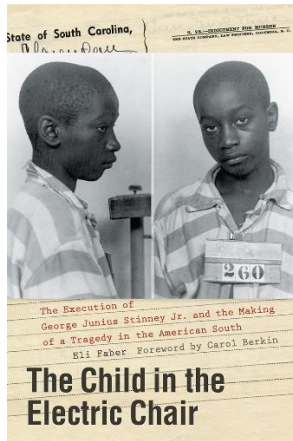
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Abstract

Tamara Law reviews *The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Stinney Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South* by Eli Faber with a Forward by Carol Berkin.

The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Junius Stinney Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South



Eli Faber

University of South Carolina Press, 2021, \$29.99

Hardcover: 978-1-64336-194-9

Ebook: 978-1-64336-195-6

After processing what I just read on the tragic case of George Stinney Jr., I thought of the countless Black males treated unjustly by the criminal justice system in the United States. Stinney is just part of long line of many lives taken prematurely by the racist and evil Jim Crow system that prevailed in this country from the end of the Civil War until 1968. I also thought about the similarities between Stinney and Emmett Till. Their cases were only 11 years apart, both boys were only 14 years old, and both were accused of doing the most heinous thing a Black male could be accused of during the Jim Crow era, harming a White female. Till allegedly whistled at a White woman and Stinney was accused of killing two young White girls. Till was more well-known because his mother chose to hold an open-casket funeral to show the world his severely disfigured face after he was lynched by a pair of racist White men. Stinney was spared from a lynching mob only to be sentenced to death by the state of South Carolina in the electric chair, becoming the youngest person to be executed in the United States in the 20th century.

On March 24, 1944, two young White girls, 11-year-old Betty June Binnicker and 7-year-old Mary Emma Thames, rode a bike ride together to pick flowers on the outskirts of town. After the girls never returned home, the entire town, young and old, Black and White, went on a search for them. They were both later found bludgeoned to death by a ditch. Stinney was arrested on mere circumstantial evidence based on a tip given to police. He supposedly confessed to the crime after being questioned by police without an attorney present. Racial tensions in the town flared up and many Whites wanted to skip a trial and lynch him right away, but he was spared from a lynching mob and was quickly brought to trial. He was arrested on March 25, brought to trial on April 24, and convicted in less than 10 minutes by an all-White, all-male jury. He was executed a mere 83 days after his arrest on June 16, 1944.

In the book *The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Junius Stinney Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South*, author Eli Faber, who tragically succumbed to cancer and would not live to see his book published, takes us into 1944 Alculu, South Carolina, the small town in Clarendon County where the tragedy took place. In a case with no trial transcript or written accounts and very little newspaper coverage, he managed to do meticulous research and in-depth analysis of the case and interview Stinney's still-living siblings who were never interviewed by police at the time of his arrest. With the help of David I. Buck's 1983 interview transcripts, which included interviews with both the foreman of the jury and one of the defense attorneys, you feel as if you have a front row seat to the trial. He takes us into the history, life, and racial climate in the small village of Alculu. The book also lays out how Stinney fell victim to the political aspirations of then-Governor Olin Dewitt Johnson. He was preparing for a Senate run and could not win without a strong stance on White supremacy, so he refused to commute the death sentence.

How could a 14-year-old kid be tried and executed by the state? It shows the depth of how truly evil the system of Jim Crow, which upheld White supremacy, really was. Beliefs of racial bias and stereotypes of Black males aided in Stinney's fate. His two court-appointed defense attorneys, faced

with pressure from White society, failed to provide him a reasonable defense. They failed to cross-examine witnesses or even point out inconsistencies in Stinney's supposed confession and evidence presented at trial. Sadly, the NAACP was distracted by other issues of the day and lacked funding to offer legal help, so Stinney fell off their radar. It took 70 years in 2014 for justice to finally be rendered. While Judge Carmen Mullen would not grant a retrial so Stinney's guilt or innocence could possibly be determined, she did rule that Stinney's rights, guaranteed by the 14th amendment for due process, had been fundamentally violated and vacated the judgement. It was the long-awaited justice that Stinney's family hoped for.

This is an important book to read, not only to get a clearer picture of what could happen to a young Black boy accused of a crime in the Jim Crow South, but to better understand what is still happening today. In this present time, due to racial bias and stereotypes, Black males of all ages are, more often than Whites, seen as a threat, viewed as sexual predators, suspected of violent crimes, presumed guilty by police, incarcerated at higher rates, and have more violent and deadly encounters with the police. The protests of the death of George Floyd, the calls for police reform and defunding, and the constant hashtags of another Black male killed by police tells us the legacies of Jim Crow still linger on and we need to get serious about criminal justice reform for Black people in this country.

Tamara Law, Reference Librarian and Instruction Coordinator at James A. Rogers Library at Francis Marion University. Tamara enjoys spending her free time getting her passport stamped, feeding her shopping addiction, dancing in Zumba class and trying out new recipes.