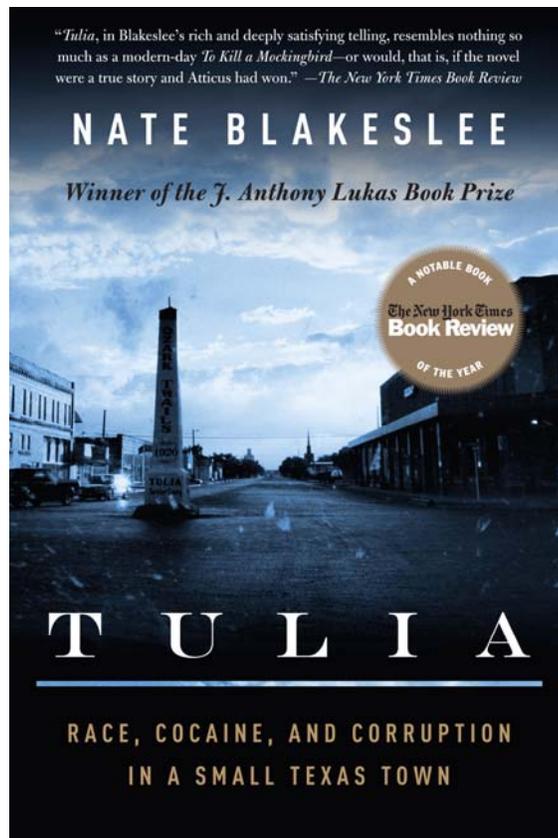




A Reading Group Guide for



Q&A With Nate Blakeslee

Q: What has happened to District Attorney Terry McEachern, Judge Ed Self, and Sheriff Larry Stewart?

A: With his law license on the line, Terry McEachern hired an attorney and launched an aggressive defense against the State Bar of Texas. His effort paid off, and he received only a mild sanction from the bar, despite essentially admitting that he had committed perjury in at least one of the original trials. He is now in private practice in Plainview. Judge Self is still on the bench. In the aftermath of the March 2003 hearing, there was talk of filing an official complaint against Self with the state's judicial ethics board. Such complaints are confidential, so it is unclear if the board even actually considered Self's actions in the Tulia trials. Thus far, however, he has received no sanction of any kind. Larry Stewart is still the sheriff of Swisher County, having soundly defeated Gary Gardner in the 2004 election. Despite the thorough examination of Stewart's role in the Tulia scandal—not only at the March 2003 hearing, but also during Tom Coleman's perjury trial, the fact that it was Stewart who originally brought Coleman to town seems to have escaped the attention of most Tulians.

Q: How did Tulians and others in Swisher County react to the publication of your book?

A: Among people who cooperated in the reporting of the book, the reaction has been generally positive. A couple of defendants, or family members of defendants, have let me know that they objected to certain aspects of the book. This included my description of Donnie Smith's drug abuse and the problems he faced growing up in general. It was of course not my intent to embarrass anyone or hurt anyone's feelings. While it's true that Donnie is a profoundly irresponsible person, he is also a very likable man and in some ways very capable. I hope this came through in my description of him. I felt it was important to explain as best I could, however, why Donnie was the way he was. I wanted to help readers see him as a three-dimensional person, rather than as simply a problem to be dealt with, which was how most people in Tulia seemed to think of Donnie. It was impossible to do that without talking about his family life.

It has been more difficult for me to judge how the book has been received by people who did not cooperate with the reporting. I have heard from a few Tulians and former Tulians since the book was published, however, and have been gratified to hear that they found the book to be a balanced account of what happened in their town. In the two years it took me to report and write this book, it seemed to me that the general opinion of Tulians about the bust and the fairness of the trials gradually evolved. I don't want to over-generalize—there are still those who feel that all of Coleman's cases were legitimate—but a consensus seemed to have been growing, by the time the book was nearing completion, that Coleman never should have been hired and that cases based upon his word alone were inherently unfair. I suspect that the strong editorial position

that the Amarillo newspaper took following the settlement—that Coleman’s behavior had harmed law enforcement in general—helped a great deal.

Q: The Byrne grant program—which provides federal funds to local law enforcement departments to hire antidrug task forces—seems to erode the standards of narcotics enforcement and increase the likelihood for corruption. Is the program still operative?

A: The budget for the federal Byrne grant program has been cut once again since the book was published, which has caused task force programs in many states to scale back. The change in Texas has been more radical. In March 2006, after eighteen years of participation in the program, the state stopped writing checks to Byrne grant task forces, causing virtually all of the remaining outfits in Texas to close up shop. The governor announced that he would be sending the state’s Byrne money instead to county sheriffs along the Mexican border, where he said funds were needed to target the source of the drugs. The change in Texas was met with dire predictions from rural sheriffs and district attorneys. The constant stream of scandals had so thoroughly soured the state legislature on the program, however, that the governor finally felt he had to do something drastic. In some mid-sized cities, ironically, authorities have noted that abandoning the task force model—with its far-flung rural operations—has freed up more manpower and resources for drug enforcement in their own constituencies. The situation seems likely to return to the status quo of the 1970s and early 1980s, when the state police assisted rural sheriffs with narcotics work when called upon to do so.

It’s unclear whether other states will follow suit. The general consensus among the law enforcement lobby in Washington, however, is that Byrne money is on the way out. If the Byrne program, now funded at about \$400 million annually, were to disappear altogether, it would mean a very large number of unemployed narcotics officers nationwide. One irony of the decline of Byrne is that drug war reform advocates have a lot to lose as well. That’s because the Byrne grant funds not just task forces, but also a host of criminal justice initiatives, including such progressive reforms as drug courts, which divert low-level offenders out of the prison system. So reformers and narcs may soon be making common cause in Washington to salvage what’s left of the program’s funding.

Q: The reviews for Tulia were so overwhelmingly positive. What, if any, controversial reactions did you get from your readers? Was there any backlash to the book?

There really has been no serious backlash against the book. My main concern was that I would be accused, as other reporters covering Tulia have been, of downplaying the actual drug problem in Tulia, or of portraying the defendants in an unrealistic way. I think this would be a difficult conclusion to draw for anybody who has actually read the book. I was particularly sensitive to this issue because I knew it was the source of some of the disgust in Tulia’s white community following the initial round of national publicity about the scandal. They felt they knew the defendants and their reputations better than any out-of-town reporter ever could, and they scoffed at what they perceived to be an

effort to portray the defendants as beyond reproach. As a result, they were not disposed to view the accompanying reporting on Coleman's many problems as trustworthy, either. Underlying all of this mistrust is of course the bigger issue of an eroding faith in the media in general, particularly in conservative areas of the country.

Q: What do you think is the biggest lesson we should take away from Tulia?

A: I think the fairness of our criminal justice system is a reflection on the state of our democracy. The Constitution guarantees you a right to a fair trial, regardless of how wealthy you are or what your station in society is. One of the defense attorneys I interviewed told me that in his view the real evil in this story was efficiency. The investigation by Coleman, the preparation of a defense for the accused, the trials themselves—they all seemed to be shaped above all by a desire to spend as little resources and energy as possible to get to the desired goal. In many ways this is a by-product of the war on drugs, which had dramatically increased the flow of people through the criminal justice system in this country in the last twenty years, until it has inevitably come to resemble an assembly line in order to keep pace. Every taxpayer wants it to run smoothly until it's his or her loved one on the assembly line. Then fairness becomes the most important value, not efficiency. Powerful people, of course, know that they can stick a wrench in the cogs if it is ever their own freedom—or that of somebody they care about—on the line. As a result, they don't ordinarily feel any pressing need to defend the principles underlying our criminal justice system, which are the same core values that have sustained us as a nation. That seems to me to be a sign of a democracy in decline.

Q: How has your life changed as a result of the publication of this book? What projects are you working on now?

A: I am currently a staff writer at Texas Monthly, as well as a contributing writer for The Texas Observer. This project has certainly made me a better reporter. I am from Texas, but I grew up in a suburb, so spending time in a small Panhandle town was a crash course in rural American life for me. Reporting and writing this book also did something for me that years of reading civil rights history (not to mention writing a master's thesis on the subject) somehow failed to do, which was to finally internalize the fact that race is a central organizing principle of life in this country. This is hardly a revelation, but it did not really come home for me until I spent time doing interviews in Tulia. There really is no substitute for sitting down with somebody in their living room and listening to them talk about the way they see the world. For one thing, there are very few histories of the civil rights movement written from the perspective of somebody who opposed it. The sort of unspoken conclusion, I guess, is that the photos of cops unleashing dogs on black men and angry white teens shouting at black students trying to enroll in school speak for themselves. But those angry teenagers didn't disappear when the fight over integration was over; they're still there, only now they're working at the school, or the lunch counter, or the bank. Or they're sitting on juries. They have learned, for the most part, not to talk about race—at least not in ways that will get them in trouble. But that doesn't mean they

don't think about it, everyday. Reporting this book gave me a chance to ask them what they were thinking. More often than not, and sometimes to my amazement, they told me.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Tom Coleman do what he did?
2. Why did Gary Gardner get involved? Why did he stay involved for so long?
3. Tom Coleman and Gary Gardner used the same offensive word to refer to black Tulians. Was Gardner a racist?
4. To what extent was the federal government responsible for what happened in Tulia?
5. Could Tulia have happened in another part of the country? In your own town?
6. How should we measure success in the drug war?
7. What will happen to Donnie Smith in the future? To Donnie's two sons?
8. What made Freddie Brookins, Jr. different?
9. Why was Joe Moore so respected in town, despite his reputation?