



# Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases

*Ida B. Wells-Barnett*

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## **Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases** Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Ida Bell Wells, later Wells-Barnett (1862-1931), was an African American civil rights advocate and an early women's rights advocate active in the Woman Suffrage Movement. Fearless in her opposition to lynchings, Wells documented hundreds of these atrocities. Wells became a public figure in Memphis when, in 1884, she led a campaign against racial segregation on the local railway. In 1889, she became co-owner and editor of *Free Speech*, an anti-segregationist newspaper based in Memphis on Beale Street. She also published in 1892 her famous pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. This pamphlet, along with her 1895 *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States*, documented her research on and campaign against lynching. In 1892, Wells went to Great Britain at the behest of British Quaker Catherine Impey. An opponent of imperialism and proponent of racial equality, Impey wanted to be sure that the British public was informed about the problem of lynching. After her retirement, Wells wrote her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice* (1928). Her other works include *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900).

## **Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases Details**

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# From Reader Review Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases for online ebook

### Marisa Jeanne says

Cw: overt violent racism, antiBlack violence (mentions)

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This pamphlet is a must read for my fellow white people. It details the horrors of the South's Lynch mobs and their brutality against the regions Black inhabitants in the form of case studies and examinations of motives for these heinous crimes. Wells examines the prevailing attitudes toward Black Americans and the way that white Southerners enacted terror toward their Black contemporaries

Wells also lists the ways in which Black people can fight back, one of the most prominent being boycott of industries that treat Black people as subhuman. This pamphlet is important. We need to know our history and we need to not be complacent in hiding the past

## Lark Benobi says

Interesting on so many levels, it is a cry of outrage against Southern lynch culture, it is an example of early editorial journalism, and it is a scathing critique of media representations of black and white, in an era when Southern newspapers regularly wrote of white "gentleman" and "Negro scoundrels." Wells brings into sharp relief the extreme and ever present danger of being a black man in America, not only in the South.

This work is interesting in an entirely different way for its lack of names and dates and place names throughout the litany of lynching stories Wells presents here. I'm not sure if this vagueness is out of kindness to victims and their families, in the way newspapers today don't name minors involved in crimes, or whether the lack of verifiable detail in Wells's writing about lynch culture is simply a representation of how young the craft of journalism was in her era.

## Tasha says

It was difficult to read through this book. I found that it took me several tries, having to stop and start over time and time again due to the outlandish nature of the crimes against the men and women identified. This glimpse into history is graphic in that readers are easily able to recognize shortcomings in the laws and in the thinking patterns of many people at the time period spoken of.

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## Bill Kerwin says

Outraged by the execution of her friend Thomas Moss in the “Curve Riot” by a black-masked mob, Ida B. Wells, co-owner and editor of the Memphis negro newspaper *The Free Speech and Headlight*, began to research the facts that lay behind the lynching of black men in the South. Two and a half months later, in May of 1892, she published, in *The Free Speech*, an editorial on the subject:

*Eight negroes lynched since last issue of the Free Speech, one at Little Rock, Ark., last Saturday morning where the citizens broke into the penitentiary and got their man; three near Anniston, Ala., one near New Orleans; and three at Clarksville, Ga., the last three for killing a white man, and five on the same old racket--the new alarm about raping white women. The same programme of hanging, then shooting bullets into the lifeless bodies was carried out to the letter. Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.*

Edward Ward Carmack, editor of the *Memphis Commercial*, questioned whether “a black scoundrel” like the writer of this editorial should be “allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies. . . There are some things that the Southern white man will not tolerate . . . We hope we have said enough.”

The office of *The Free Speech* was demolished and torched. There was also talk of lynching, but Ida Wells was far away, on vacation in New York. She says she was informed by telegram, however, that “bodily harm awaited my return.” Wells refused to even visit the South for thirty years.

She did, however, continue her research, the first fruit of which is this pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*. In it, Wells argues that cases in which a black man is charged with rape often suggest a more complex, consensual relationship: it is, in Miss Wells words, a case of “poor blind Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs.”

This is a well-argued, well organized pamphlet, and Wells is a meticulous researcher who writes with considerable self-assurance.

I will conclude with two excerpts. First, a passage in which Wells, discussing what “Afro-Americans” themselves may do to address the problem, refers to the “Curve Riot” and its aftermath:

*To Northern capital and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation. If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities.*

*The Afro-Americans of Memphis denounced the lynching of three of their best citizens, and urged and waited for the authorities to act in the matter and bring the lynchers to justice. No attempt was made to do so, and the black men left the city by thousands, bringing about great stagnation in every branch of business. Those who remained so injured the business of the*

*street car company by staying off the cars, that the superintendent, manager and treasurer called personally on the editor of the Free Speech, asked them to urge our people to give them their patronage again. Other business men became alarmed over the situation and the Free Speech was run away that the colored people might be more easily controlled. A meeting of white citizens in June, three months after the lynching, passed resolutions for the first time, condemning it. . . Memphis is fast losing her black population, who proclaim as they go that there is no protection for the life and property of any Afro-American citizen in Memphis who is not a slave.*

*The appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is to be gained by a further sacrifice of manhood and self-respect. By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists.*

I conclude with another equally interesting passage on the subject of self-defense:

*Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did not occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky, and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.*

*The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.*

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## **Christian Büttner says**

This makes for a fascinating read. If you can't stomach occasionally graphic descriptions of violent crimes, maybe don't read this. It's a short 50ish page pamphlet printed originally in 1892. It's a discussion of lynchings and what contributed to them towards the end of the 19th century. It lays bare the horrid racist narratives of the time, including the false narrative of black males raping white women, something quoted in Dillan Cross's manifesto.

While this is an old pamphlet much of what went on back then in terms of narrative, press spin, still seems pertinent and speaks to the mentalities and attitudes we see today.

Read this, see how it relates to today. Learn something.

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## **Tom says**

Star ratings are tough for books like this. It's not an enjoyable read, but is an important one. It's a good overview illustrating the pernicious and resilient hate of white men towards Afro-Americans (to use Barnett's parlance) and the shockingly common use of vigilante executions and lynchings to trod upon minorities and keep them powerless in fear. The contrast between the white newspapers and African American newspapers is horrifyingly stark, and this book focuses on how even an unpopular editorial would be used as "justification" for inciting honky mobs.

This title has been referred to in many of the news articles concerning the racial terrorism in Charleston, South Carolina at the Emanuel AME Church.

Available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14975>

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## **Lydia says**

Short and searing.

Ida B. Wells does an incredible job researching lynchings reported in the South. In 1892 she works hard to discover if the men lynched had been in fact charged with any crime or if the crime itself was a rumour, based upon a single allegation.

Frederick Douglass gives this piece his blessing and after reading it, I can see why.

While reading, I couldn't help but think of the unmitigated violence against black people by police in the United States. Men, in positions of power, who escape egregious actions by nothing more than the shadow of their authority.

I thought this book would be difficult to read, and at moments, of course, it was, but her determination rose above all the descriptions of the crimes. I felt her longing for justice.

Edit: Still think about this book, and Emmett Till, who was lynched 63 years ago. Within my mother's lifetime. This book will stay with me.

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## **K says**

This is a deeply important book. I listened to the free LibriVox audio. Two criticisms I have of this audio is it would have been more authentic to hear it read in an African-American female's voice. It seemed inappropriate to hear the book spoken by a white woman. Secondly, it didn't say if what I heard was abridged, or the whole publication.

What Ida B. Wells-Barnett teaches the listener or reader in less than one hour is why so many black people got lynched and why segregation took hold in the post-Civil War era. White women, she was looking at you.

The impression left after listening to the book is 1) Ida B. Wells-Barnett is a complete and total badass and deserves all the fame we can bring her. 2) Segregation did not work. It's time to find ways to end it as quickly as possible. This misguided idea did not work as intended and keeps people down. Our nation would be stronger if everyone was able to achieve to their level without false barriers.

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### **Ashley says**

"In the creation of this healthier public sentiment, the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him. The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such great outrage and provocation."

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### **Jeremy Mccool says**

This pamphlet is a scathing review of the silence of the press on urgent matters of civil rights and murderous prejudice. It tells the stories of several innocent (or presumably innocent) African American men, women, boys and girls who were brutalized, raped, hung, shot, or all of the above as scapegoats for the true criminals who were generally white. The author also details several instances in which black men were lynched or imprisoned without trial or even plausible attestation of their guilt, often by conscience-stricken white women who had consensual illicit affairs with the accused (Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' contains an excellent example of this practice). Frederick Douglass provides a heartfelt forward.

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### **Elizabeth says**

This is my first time reading Ida B. Wells, and while I knew of her brilliance before, it was still great to see firsthand.

Southern Horrors is incredibly interesting and useful when looked at as history, especially with prime examples of the horrors of lynch law featured within. I can also see why it would have been so effective in its day, particularly given her ideas for moving forward from lynch law.

Definitely recommended for any one looking for an interesting and important piece of history. It is more than worth the short time it takes to get through.

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### **Pink says**

Really short, really good, really worth a read. Even if you don't think you're interested in the subject matter. You should be.

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### **Adam McPhee says**

[Wednesday evening May 24, 1892, the city of Memphis was filled with excitement. Editorials in the daily papers of that date caused a meeting to be held in the Cotton Exchange Building; a committee was sent for the editors of the Free Speech an Afro-American journal published in that city, and

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### **Max Ritter says**

Don't let the three stars deceive you, this writing is incredible. Ida Wells was one of the greatest writers in the Reconstruction Period, end of discussion. But her descriptions of growing up in slavery, being freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, and continuing to see awful racist hatred... it's difficult to get through. It was legitimately emotionally painful. My ratings tend to be based upon my experience reading the book, so I have to put it at 3/5 because it was a good read but also I don't know if I can ever recommend it to somebody.

That being said, I suppose if you're looking to study politics or history, you have to read things like this. You can't understand the United States without pulling away the frills and leaving bare the horrors we've committed against our own people. To distance ourselves from it is dangerous, and that's why this book is as important as it is heart-wrenching.

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### **Tali says**

A concise, brutally honest narrative that sheds light on the horrific history of lynchings in the late 19th century. Ida B. Wells documents in detail various examples of the crimes that took place during this time and explains ideological, economic, and political reasoning for the violence. I will forever be grateful for Ida B. Wells' exceptional investigative reporting and activism during this time of silence and apathy. It's a difficult read and very graphic, but I recommend it if you want to truly understand the horrors of African-American life during this period. Also a great read for black history month.

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