

EMMETT TILL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

RACIAL RECONCILIATION BEGINS BY TELLING THE TRUTH

A Conversation with Wright Thompson, Author of the New Book *The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi*

By Elliot Long

On September 24, 2024, [Wright Thompson's](#) latest book [The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi](#) (Penguin Press, 2024) will be released. The book drills down deep on the history of the place where Emmett Till was brutally beaten and murdered on August 28, 1955, and in the process uncovers a much larger history of the region and of our country. Wright first drew attention to the barn with [his article in The Atlantic](#) published August 28, 2021. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Wright to discuss his new book and his motivations behind writing it.

“The barn and the way it has been ignored, to me, is the perfect metaphor for Mississippi and therefore America,” said Wright. “People like to talk about Mississippi, but really we’re talking about the whole country by picking out one square of it. The barn and the attempt to bring it into the light by so many people from Jessie Jaynes-Dimig to Keith Beauchamp [*TILL* movie producer] is vitally important because until you recognize all of the Emmett Till memory sites in the Delta, you haven’t really recognized any of them.”

When Wright says that you can talk about the history of this whole country with this one square of land, he is not kidding. I was surprised at the layers of people who have come into contact with this plot in the Delta over the centuries, from President Theodore Roosevelt, to KKK founder Nathan Bedford Forrest, to blues singers Charley Patton and Muddy Waters who began making music on nearby Dockery Farms.

THE BARN



THE SECRET HISTORY OF
A MURDER IN MISSISSIPPI

WRIGHT THOMPSON

New York Times bestselling author of *Pappyland*



The book skillfully weaves together the story of the land and of the people living on it in a way that only someone with generations of knowledge of the Mississippi Delta could have written it. Wright, who grew up in nearby Clarksville but didn't know about the barn until recently, said, "I was trying to make sense of my home to me. And before serving any other reader, I needed to do that."

The book tells the story of this plot of land from when it was first explored by Hernando de Soto in 1541, to the carving up of the land with Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance of 1785, to the cotton boom, all leading to the ultimate torture and murder of Emmett Till. It explores the stories of the families most directly impacted by the murder, tracing how they came to be there in 1955 and what became of them and their descendants after. It then follows to present-day efforts to remember Emmett, ending on the dedication of the Graball Landing river site as a new National Monument on August 28, 2023.

The Barn begins and ends looking at the work of the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, Ms. Gloria Dickerson, and others in the Delta as well as Till family members in Chicago working to preserve the legacy of Emmett Till and his mother. "After seeing up close the work of Rev. Willie Williams [ETIC Board Chair] and Patrick Weems and Wheeler and Marvel Parker in Chicago, it honestly felt like it was incumbent upon everyone who could to throw their pebble into the ocean and make as many ripples as possible."



Photo credit: Evan France

I asked Wright what he hoped readers would take away from his book. He said, “The American experiment is ongoing and unique. I think to want it to be better is a profound act of both grace and patriotism. It is not only possible, it is *essential* that you both love your home and interrogate it so that you are making it better, because otherwise it is just lust or something that burns out quickly. I just hope that people want to know about the region and the state and the country that they are from and come to it with a gladness and eagerness of heart.”

A book release event featuring Wright and Ms. Gloria Dickerson will be held at [Square Books](#) in Oxford, MS, on September 24, 2024. Space is limited, so if you plan to attend, make sure you pre-order a book to save your spot. The full book tour schedule with stops in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee can be found on [Wright's website](#).

PRE-ORDER AT SQUARE BOOKS

ETIC Board Member Dr. Jodi Skipper Interviewed on Sites of Conscience Website

ETIC Board Member Dr. Jodi Skipper was recently highlighted in the fall newsletter for the International Sites of Conscience, an organization of which the Emmett Till Interpretive Center [is a member](#). Dr. Skipper is a Professor of Anthropology and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi; her research focuses on African diaspora anthropology, historic sites management, historical archaeology, museum and heritage studies, and Southern studies. In addition to serving on our board, she is a member of the UM Slavery and the University Working Group and a member of the Sites of Conscience's North American Steering Committee.

In the interview, Dr. Skipper discusses her motivations to study anthropology, her work with the Behind the Big House program, and her current project centering on the history of Lafayette, Louisiana, her hometown.

Read the full article [here](#).

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Photo courtesy of Dr. Jodi Skipper

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