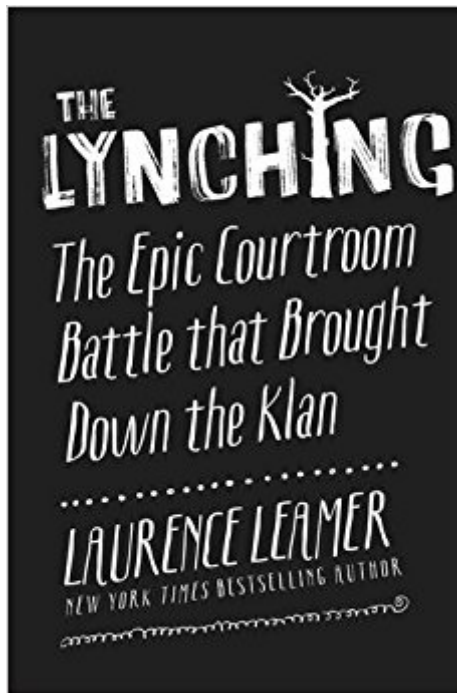


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# The Lynching: The Epic Courtroom Battle That Brought Down The Klan



## Synopsis

The New York Times bestselling author of *The Kennedy Women* chronicles the powerful and spellbinding true story of a brutal race-based killing in 1981 and subsequent trials that undid one of the most pernicious organizations in American history—the Ku Klux Klan. On a Friday night in March 1981 Henry Hays and James Knowles scoured the streets of Mobile in their car, hunting for a black man. The young men were members of Klavern 900 of the United Klans of America. They were seeking to retaliate after a largely black jury could not reach a verdict in a trial involving a black man accused of the murder of a white man. The two Klansmen found nineteen-year-old Michael Donald walking home alone. Hays and Knowles abducted him, beat him, cut his throat, and left his body hanging from a tree branch in a racially mixed residential neighborhood. Arrested, charged, and convicted, Hays was sentenced to death—the first time in more than half a century that the state of Alabama sentenced a white man to death for killing a black man. On behalf of Michael's grieving mother, Morris Dees, the legendary civil rights lawyer and cofounder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, filed a civil suit against the members of the local Klan unit involved and the UKA, the largest Klan organization. Charging them with conspiracy, Dees put the Klan on trial, resulting in a verdict that would level a deadly blow to its organization. Based on numerous interviews and extensive archival research, *The Lynching* brings to life two dramatic trials, during which the Alabama Klan's motives and philosophy were exposed for the evil they represent. In addition to telling a gripping and consequential story, Laurence Leamer chronicles the KKK and its activities in the second half the twentieth century, and illuminates its lingering effect on race relations in America today. *The Lynching* includes sixteen pages of black-and-white photographs.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

THE LYNCHING is a fascinating story of a determined lawyer bankrupting the Klan. This book is not actually about the criminal trial; rather, it's how attorney Morris Dees used a novel legal approach in a CIVIL trial to completely destroy the organization: "Dees hoped the amount would be so large that it would dramatically announce that the Klan could no longer commit violent acts against black people." As a side benefit of the civil trial, further criminal charges were later filed. The terrible story begins in 1981, with the beating/strangulation, then lynching of an innocent young black man, Michael Donald. Klan members Henry Hays and James Knowles were looking for someone black--almost anyone--to use as an example. After the two young ne'er do wells committed the deed, they publicly displayed the body as a horrific example: They "knew the body had to hang high up so everyone could see it." The two men were convicted, but Dees wanted to go beyond just convicting these two--he wanted to topple the entire Klan organization that had encouraged the violence: "Dees was convinced that the UKA could be sued directly for its role in the murder." In this case, the Klan was officially the "United Klans of America." The ensuing civil trial, which set a powerful legal precedent, is officially known as, "Beulah Mae Donald, as Executor of the Estate of Michael Donald, Deceased v. United Klans of America." The trial tested an important concept: Can an organization be held accountable for criminal acts of its members? To succeed at court, Dees would have to cross several legal hurdles. For one thing, "Dees would have to show a pattern of violence involving the United Klans of America.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," observed Edmund Burke centuries ago. It is an often-quoted observation because the world is reminded of its truth on a regular basis. THE LYNCHING by Laurence Leamer is a fascinating narrative of a moment in history when good people did stand up to racism, bigotry, evil and hatred. Readers of this compelling historical account will find themselves angry at silence and inaction in the face of clear injustice. But they also will find inspiration in the story of Morris Dees, an extraordinary American hero, who found a way to fight and ultimately defeat the Ku Klux Klan by resorting to the law rather than to violence. THE LYNCHING is the story of two trials, one criminal and one civil, that arose from the tragic events surrounding the murder of Michael Donald, a 19-year-old black man living in Birmingham. In 1981, an Alabama jury heard evidence in a criminal case whereby a black man was accused of killing a white Birmingham police officer. The jury of 11 blacks and one white was unable

to reach a verdict. Members of the Alabama United Klans of America were incensed by what they viewed as a legal injustice. Two Klan members, Henry Hays and James Knowles, went on a mission of revenge, seeking out a black man to kill. Donald was their randomly selected victim. Securing a conviction against the white defendants was not an easy task. Eventually the U.S. Justice Department became involved, resulting in a criminal trial. Hays was convicted and sentenced to death, the first time in more than 50 years that Alabama had imposed that sort of punishment on a white man for killing a black man. In most instances, that account alone would be compelling.

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