



## **Beneath a Ruthless Sun: A True Story of Violence, Race, and Justice Lost and Found**

*Gilbert King*

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"Compelling, insightful and important, *Beneath a Ruthless Sun* exposes the corruption of racial bigotry and animus that shadows a community, a state and a nation. A fascinating examination of an injustice story all too familiar and still largely ignored, an engaging and essential read." --Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*

**From the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller Devil in the Grove, the gripping true story of a small town with a big secret.**

In December 1957, the wife of a Florida citrus baron is raped in her home while her husband is away. She claims a "husky Negro" did it, and the sheriff, the infamous racist Willis McCall, does not hesitate to round up a herd of suspects. But within days, McCall turns his sights on Jesse Daniels, a gentle, mentally impaired white nineteen-year-old. Soon Jesse is railroaded up to the state hospital for the insane, and locked away without trial.

But crusading journalist Mabel Norris Reese cannot stop fretting over the case and its baffling outcome. Who was protecting whom, or what? She pursues the story for years, chasing down leads, hitting dead ends, winning unlikely allies. Bit by bit, the unspeakable truths behind a conspiracy that shocked a community into silence begin to surface.

*Beneath a Ruthless Sun* tells a powerful, page-turning story rooted in the fears that rippled through the South as integration began to take hold, sparking a surge of virulent racism that savaged the vulnerable, debased the powerful, and roils our own times still.

## **Beneath a Ruthless Sun: A True Story of Violence, Race, and Justice Lost and Found Details**

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## **From Reader Review Beneath a Ruthless Sun: A True Story of Violence, Race, and Justice Lost and Found for online ebook**

### **Shirley Freeman says**

Beneath a Ruthless Sun is a true account of horrendous injustice and a relentless reporter seeking the truth. In the late 1950s the state of Florida was one of the strongest resisters to integration and Lake County, FL dug their heels in harder than most. Gilbert King tells the incredible story of how and why two of the most racist men in the world maintained their power, abused and murdered several black men and accused and imprisoned a young, white, mentally challenged young man for a crime he didn't commit. The story leaves you reeling though it was occasionally hard to follow due to numbers of people and lack of chronology. Still - a good read and a good reminder of what life was like in some places - not all that long ago. To be published in April.

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### **Char says**

The reason I requested this book from my library was because of Megan Abbott's excellent, succinct review, which can be found here: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

This is the shocking true story of a mentally challenged white man who was railroaded into confessing to a rape and who was then sent to a state hospital for over 14 years WITH NO TRIAL. It's a story of racism, small town corruption, networks made up of good old boys, and most importantly, a tenacious reporter named Mabel who never, ever gave up.

You know, I say it's a "shocking" story, but unfortunately, it's really not. Black or white, (mostly black), mentally challenged, and ALL poor-many people have not received a fair shake in this country over the years. It's unfortunate to note that many of them STILL are not receiving a fair shake. This book only proves how important a free press can be to the causes of justice and fair play.

Even though she has since passed of cancer, I feel the need to say WAY TO GO, Mabel! If it weren't for you, poor Jessie Daniels would probably have died in the state hospital.

Thanks to Megan Abbott for her intriguing review and thanks to my local library for providing the audiobook for free. Libraries RULE!

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### **Christine Mank says**

I just finished reading this most gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, yet true story. What is maddeningly is that the victims here are all AMERICANS. And they were the victims of Americans. Americans hating Americans.

What makes this particularly disturbing is that the monsters here weren't armed robbers or serial killers or pedophiles. No, they were the pillars of the community.

This is why we cannot tolerate white supremacists! There's never been a white supremacist who's been a decent human being. They lie, cheat, steal, perjure, rape, murder, bully, bear false witness, conspire, and willfully harm innocent people. It is impossible to be a white supremacist and not engage in the worst crimes against other human beings.

Over the years, I've had a few of these shitheels accuse me of being ashamed for being white.

No. I'm ashamed that they're white.

I do recommend this book, as difficult as it is.

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### **Bonnie says**

It's difficult to give 5 stars to a book on this topic, but I think it deserves it. I found myself being so angry throughout the book. I was born and raised in DeLand FL (an hour east of Leesburg) from 1948-63. During that time, I was totally unaware of racism going on around us.. partly because of my age, of course.. but also because of our parents who raised us to believe that we are all alike in God's eyes. We learned by their examples. I never once heard my mom or dad use any racial slurs even until their deaths. I found it important to raise my son that same way.

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### **Tammy says**

The truth really is stranger than fiction. When I began reading I made the assumption that I would be reading a true account of a case similar to the one depicted in To Kill a Mockingbird. In other words, a black man falsely accused of rape by a white woman in the 1957 Jim Crow south. In this true account, the wife of a powerful citrus grower is actually raped and black men were indiscriminately rounded up and held as suspects without reason. However, days later it is "decided" that the perpetrator is an intellectually challenged nineteen year old white male.

In this backwater Florida town of Okahumpka a racist sheriff is king. Swagging, mean-spirited and hateful Sheriff McCall is the embodiment of bigotry at its ugliest. In contrast a committed, relentless and civil rights minded female reporter never stops trying to right a grim wrong. Naturally, the KKK terrorizes her but is unable to prevent her from pursuing her cause.

This well-researched book addresses almost everything that was wrong with the system regarding the violation of civil rights: illegal confinement, segregation, failure and manipulation of the judicial system as well as the powerlessness of the poverty stricken against established institutions. We still have so far to go. The violence in Charlottesville, VA. is a prime example of the revival of white supremacy groups today. Books like Beneath a Ruthless Sun may help us move forward rather than backward. One can only hope.

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### **Becky Loader says**

I had a hard time reading this book, as it deals with a truly horrifying incident. However, that being said, King is the trifecta of authors: excellent research, Outstanding writing style, and attention to detail in presentation. He won a Pulitzer Prize for an earlier book, and I can see why.

The state of Florida has been notorious for corruption in government and politics. Sheriff McCall is the epitome of all things bad in such a category. He runs his county with an iron fist, and he takes no prisoners. Literally. Ugh. When the wife of one of the Citrus Kings (i.e. descendants of minor British aristocracy who didn't inherit anything and who came to Florida to make fortunes in citrus growing) is raped (in her own home, with a baby asleep in a crib) Sheriff McCall is the man of the hour. His spider web of corruption, racism, bigotry, cruelty, and yes, evil, expands and takes over the investigation. Needless to say, he knows who is going to pay. That would be regardless of who is guilty.

King has written a non-fiction book that reads smoothly from one character to another, from one incident to another. I admired his presentation, and I was appalled by what he wrote.

Oh, my. History is a harsh teacher, and I can only hope we have learned.

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### **Megan Abbott says**

An important, wrenching, movingly told story with all the narrative energy of King's previous book, the unforgettable *DEVIL IN THE GROVE*. (It's impossible not to fall in love with the crusading reporter Mabel Norris Reese who forms the spine of the book.) Masterfully told, full of heart and pain, and perhaps more vital a book now than ever.

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### **Laura Jean says**

I got 49% of the way through. It's not the book's fault. It is well written and it delves deeply into the inherent racism in the late 1950s in Florida. I suppose it was just so bleak. I was also upset and saddened...nor horrified...but just what a horrible human being that sheriff was. I found myself getting enraged...and that's just not what I needed right now. I may come back to it some day because...just because something makes you uncomfortable is no reason NOT to read it. In fact, it's an indication you NEED to read it. Just not at a time there is a major technological transition going on at work.

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### **Nicholas says**

The actual history here is indeed chilling, but King just couldn't help himself when it came to the detail. Every single one--every character, no matter how tangentially related to the case-- is included in this account

of how a developmentally delayed teenage boy was wrongfully imprisoned for the rape of a woman in 1950s Florida. Yes, this is a story of violence and race, but it's also a story of hundreds of people whose names you will soon forget because they didn't actually contribute all that much to the central narrative.

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### **Linda says**

This is the type of situation that makes me angry. Good people caught in the machinations of people in authority. Made me think of Sheriff Arpaio in Arizona. Just close the case, don't worry about the evidence. I'll be shaking my head for a long time.

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### **Michael says**

I received this book through a Good Reads "First Reads" Give-away. "Beneath a Ruthless Sun" is a gripping account of a terrible injustice perpetuated by the local sheriff and state's attorney in Lake County, Florida. In December 1957, the wife of a prominent citrus grower and businessman was raped in her home outside of Leesburg. Based on her description of the rapist, the Sheriff's department indiscriminately rounds up over 20 young black men in the hours that follow. Several days later, however, the police arrest and charge a 19 year old mentally impaired white man, Jesse Daniels, with the crime. Jesse is subsequently committed without trial to the notorious state mental hospital at Chattahoochee. The book recounts the tireless efforts of a local newspaper reporter and Jesse's mother on his behalf. Readers who have read King's Pulitzer Prize winning "Devil in the Grove" will already be familiar with a number of the most reprehensible characters in this saga, most notably the Sheriff Willis McCall, as well as the virulent racism, violence, and intimidation that plagued Lake County during those turbulent times. King's writing is engaging and brisk - I would definitely recommend this book to others.

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### **Sue says**

Excellent telling of numerous miscarriages of justice occurring in Lake Count Florida in the mid 20th century. A page turn from start to finish and quite the history lesson.

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### **Gloria says**

Pulitzer Prize winning author Gilbert King offers a sobering look into the state of Florida in the 1950s. A wealthy white woman, mother of three, is raped in the dead of night in her own home. It was dark and she stated that a black man was the perpetrator which resulted in dozens of black men hauled to jail for questioning. Shortly thereafter, the sheriff arrests a white, mentally disabled young man for the crime. What really happened?

An ugly story emerges from this bucolic state. A racist sheriff affiliated with the KKK reigns for decades terrorizing and even killing anyone he chooses to. Women are expected to look the other way when their husbands openly cheat, the mentally ill are confined in horrible asylums, young arrested men too often do not live to see their day in court, the poor live a hardscrabble life.

This is the story of one female crusading journalist who went head-to-head with a well-connected sheriff that spread terror in his wake. Over several decades, Mabel Reese dug at the truth, eventually uncovering the conspiracy, while a young man languished in a mental hospital.

This one case changed many laws in the sunshine state and brought national awareness to the plights of the mentally ill and civil rights issues. It is also simply a powerful tale of one person caring to stand up for what is right in the face of oppression.

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### **Julie Derden says**

Gilbert King has accurately captured the climate - both politically and racially - in Lake County, Florida in the 1950s. He weaves a thriller through his copious research into primary source documents and carries the reader along into a nasty web of lies, deceit, and miscarriage of justice. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning Devil in the Grove, King introduced most readers to the Central Florida sheriff, judge, jury and executioner, Willis V. McCall. In Beneath a Ruthless Sun, Sheriff McCall and his henchmen railroad a 19-year-old cognitively impaired young resident of Okahumpka, FL into the State Mental Hospital in Chattahoochee for a rape he did not commit. At the end of the book, the reader is left wondering which of the men involved in the case was the worst: the sheriff, his deputy, the State's Attorney (who hailed from Lake County), or the state representative from Lake County to the Florida Legislature. Gilbert King nailed this one, as he did with Devil in the Grove. He should be commended for writing this brave book and celebrating the women and ethical law enforcement who would not let the case go unresolved. In a rare twist of irony, less than two months after the release of this book, the innocent man who spent 14 years in a mental institution under despicable conditions died on June 21, 2018 at 79 years of age.

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### **Lynne says**

This is an amazing and shocking piece of history that everyone should read!!!

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