



# The Family Tree: A Lynching in Georgia, a Legacy of Secrets, and My Search for the Truth

*Karen Branan*

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In the tradition of *Slaves in the Family*, the provocative true account of the hanging of four black people by a white lynch mob in 1912—written by the great-granddaughter of the sheriff charged with protecting them.

Harris County, Georgia, 1912. A white man, the beloved nephew of the county sheriff, is shot dead on the porch of a black woman. Days later, the sheriff sanctions the lynching of a black woman and three black men, all of them innocent. For Karen Branan, the great-granddaughter of that sheriff, this isn't just history, this is family history.

Branan spent nearly twenty years combing through diaries and letters, hunting for clues in libraries and archives throughout the United States, and interviewing community elders to piece together the events and motives that led a group of people to murder four of their fellow citizens in such a brutal public display. Her research revealed surprising new insights into the day-to-day reality of race relations in the Jim Crow-era South, but what she ultimately discovered was far more personal.

A gripping story of privilege and power, anger, and atonement, *The Family Tree* transports readers to a small Southern town steeped in racial tension and bound by powerful family ties. Branan takes us back in time to the Civil War, demonstrating how plantation politics and the Lost Cause movement set the stage for the fiery racial dynamics of the twentieth century, delving into the prevalence of mob rule, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the role of miscegenation in an unceasing cycle of bigotry.

Through all of this, what emerges is a searing examination of the violence that occurred on that awful day in 1912—the echoes of which still resound today—and the knowledge that it is only through facing our ugliest truths that we can move forward to a place of understanding.

## The Family Tree: A Lynching in Georgia, a Legacy of Secrets, and My Search for the Truth Details

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My Search for the Truth Karen Branan**

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## From Reader Review The Family Tree: A Lynching in Georgia, a Legacy of Secrets, and My Search for the Truth for online ebook

### Donna Lewis says

This was a difficult book for me to read, partly because as non-fiction historical fiction, some of the text is detailed and dry, but mostly because the subject is horrifying. I cannot think of anything worse than a lynching. This author, Karen Branan focuses on the lynching of four African Americans - three men and one woman - in 1922. This was the first, but not the last, lynching of a woman in Georgia. And, as an aside, she was innocent. The historical data is very well researched and takes the reader through the violent Georgia past through the growth of the KKK and the NAACP. As late as 1972, although there were no more lynchings in Georgia, the state led the nation in executions, with 80% of those being black. This was a rough journey for the author who discovered that she shares "a murderous heritage, as well as a biracial heritage" with villains, bystanders and victims. She ends with: "As I bring this book to a close, America is once again aflame with racial violence and discrimination. There is no question that, as a nation, we have yet to honestly face our history and to trust embrace African Americans as full-fledged citizens and members of our human family. I believe this is the only way we can heal, as individuals and as a nation." One step forward...

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### Sandra Ross says

A harrowing read, but well worth the time spent enduring it.

For us Southerners, this ought to be mandatory reading, especially in this time of escalated racial tension, the resurgence of white supremacy (which has been one of the factors in the popularity of president-elect Donald Trump and the alt-right movement - and the spin from the extreme right, which sounds, as recounted in this book, eerily fresh and familiar in 2017), and in the whole discussion of *white privilege* (I actually understand this concept and how it applies personally to me, but the reality of us, the American population in general, is that genetically and racially, we are mutts, not a pure strain or line of anything, no matter what we claim in our religious organizations, our nation, and in our society).

This book shows the legacy of slavery first, racism second, and Southern hypocrisy third.

The bigger picture is that Branan's story weaves through the South and no Southerners can - although it seems that most do (my roots are Kansas and Oklahoma, but from the little I know about my biological background, although Irish is predominant, there is also a lot of other "stuff" mixed in so that it's impossible to know anything for certain, but the one truth is that I don't have any kind of "pure" bloodline - and, frankly, most of us Americans don't) - claim a bloodline that is purely Caucasian/European.

There are absolutes in the universe. I know that. I believe that. But racial superiority is not one of those. Racial purity - at least the way it is presented by the haters, the inciters, and the killers - doesn't exist.

We must grow up. Truly if God so loved the world (notice John didn't exclude *a single human being* - it is sin and evil we hate, whatever form it appears in and wherever it appears, not the people who were made in God's own image) that He gave His only Son to redeem them (John 3:16), then that must be the same mind and example we follow.

Anything other than that or that falls short of that is unacceptable.

## Grace Freeman says

Very interesting but hard to follow which family members were which - a pedigree chart with the family and relationships laid out would have helped keep track.

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## Jane Irish Nelson says

The author is shocked when her grandmother tells her that her most unforgettable memory was "the hanging" that she had witnessed as a child. But, as a life-long journalist, she goes in search of the story, and makes a very surprising discovery: this lynching in the town of Hamilton in 1912 was common knowledge — and her great-grandfather was the sheriff there at the time. In the process of assimilating just what happened and why, she ends up digging deep into the local history, not just of Hamilton and Harris County, but of Georgia as well. This history is unsettling, as Georgia led the country in lynchings. The author discusses race relations, two-family families, miscegenation, and much more. All of these are very thought-provoking topics. I will probably never be able to fully understand some of these issues, since I am a white Pacific-Northwesterner, but I do believe, along with the author, that we need to keep working of improving the dialog between all races in hopes of making the future better for our children and grandchildren. Definitely worth reading. Highly recommended.

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## Charlene says

I read this book after hearing the author speak, very movingly, about the experience of researching and writing it. Also I have lived in a county bordering Harris County, the setting, for 40 years so the places, at least, were familiar. Reading the book was not a pleasant experience but it was enlightening and thought provoking. I give the author great credit for her honesty and tenacity in telling a painful story, of a lynching of 4 innocent African Americans in 1912 in her hometown, in a county where her great-grandfather was the sheriff. The book shifts back and forth in time, going from the pre-Civil War roots of both the black and white families involved to the 1912 time of moonshining and "two families" by well-off white men when the lynching occurs and then sometimes to the author's childhood in the 1950s to the 1990s when she was doing research. Sometimes that does interrupt flow & readability but just bear with it.

There's also a fascinating, sad postscript story about another innocent black man being killed in a Harris County jail in the 1940s.

The book has a family tree for some of the characters mentioned in the front but it is confusing and doesn't cover everyone. Be prepared to give this a careful reading but also expect to learn a lot and to be troubled by our recent past. An important book, well worth 4 stars.

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## Shelley says

The content was incredibly powerful, especially for this white southerner, and an important part of our history. The writing style was difficult for me to follow at times. The author skips around at times and goes into more detail about specific individuals than I thought was necessary. It became a distraction. I gave it 4 stars because of the importance of the content.

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## Lisa says

Rating: B+

Source: Edelweiss

Some good books are fun to read. You ENJOY them, you laugh, and you smile. Other good books are NOT necessarily fun to read. They are still good books, and often, important books. They are books people SHOULD read. But they are not enjoyable and they are not fun. The Family Tree is one of those books.

As an adult, author Karen Branan learns the horrible truth about her family's involvement in the lynching of three black men and 1 black woman in a small town in Georgia in 1912. With this backdrop, she discusses race relations and the mistreatment of blacks in the South (specifically, Georgia) from the end of slavery to beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. She focuses on the tangled web of family relations that both bound and separated blacks and whites. Family ties between prominent white families led them to protect each other from prosecution for crimes against blacks. It also intimidated others and kept them from speaking out. White men often kept black mistresses and therefore had "two families". This further complicated matters.

Branan discusses the shame, remorse, and hurt she felt upon realizing her ancestor's role in these atrocities. Eventually, she has reconciled with this truth. She writes that many whites do not want to really look at the ways blacks have been treated because we are afraid of knowing the pain our families have caused. It is hard to sit with that knowledge. But, she says, "It's just that fear of knowing, however, that continues to keep blacks and whites divided."

This makes sense to me. I have to admit, I know very little about my family ancestors. I know they came to Missouri from Kentucky (and there from Virginia). I know they were poor. But, even so, I don't know if they had slaves or how they treated blacks. But, I do know I grew up in an area that was not racially diverse. It was mainly white and there were very few minorities. This is partly attributed to a lynching of 3 black men in 1906. After they lynching, most blacks left the area. They have yet to come back.

The only reason I didn't give this book an A is because I often got confused with all the names and family members. I wasn't always sure who was being discussed. But make no mistake, even though this book made me uncomfortable, it is a good book. I needed to read it, and I needed to be uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is not a bad thing. It's how we learn, how we grow, and how we start to come together to solve problems.

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## Read In Colour says

The writer got bogged down in family history and who was related to whom. It made it difficult to keep up with what was going on. I understand that it was personal for her as it's told from her point of view as the

granddaughter of a sheriff during this incident, but the story could have been better told. There's a lot of going back and forth between present day and the past and it only gets really interesting when she begins to interview people that were alive when the actual lynching took place.

There's a real desire on her part to assuage her white guilt, but it does a disservice to the overall story. The focus of the story shouldn't have been on how she feels about knowing how cowardly & racist her grandfather, mother, aunts, etc. are or how she found out she wasn't as liberal as she thought she was. The story of the actual victims in the story are glossed over. I was reading this for their story, not hers.

Since the name of the book is *The Family Tree*, and she spent so much time delving into her white family history, I would have liked her to spend as much time talking about her black relatives instead of glossing over meeting them at a reunion.

I had high expectations for this book. Unfortunately, it came up short.

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## **Celia M parks says**

### **Amazing truths about southern history**

All the stuff I suspected but didn't know comes out in this book . The research and honesty can take your breath away. You don't have to like what she writes but you should read it.

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## **Laura says**

Rating: 3.5

*The Family Tree* is a combination memoir and history of Harris County Georgia from Reconstruction to the present, with a focus on race relations. The organizing story is a 1912 lynching of three black/mixed race men and one woman - the first woman lynching in Georgia. Author Branan, it turns out is related to the victim of the murder that spawned the lynching, the perpetrators of the crime, and one of the victims of the lynching itself. She has done lots of impressive research, from personal interviews of family members of all concerned, newspapers, church histories. Her focus is not on the gory crime itself, though that information is there, but more on the intertwined relationships and politics of the black and white communities of Hamilton and Columbus, Georgia. The story and the backstories are fascinating. The writing and the editing of the book, though, could use some refining. The "backstory" sections are not always crisply written and sometimes interrupt the story at curious places. There's information missing or at least not presented (the actual murderer for instance) and rather than come out and say she's not going to tell us who did it Branan muddles her language and goes vague and philosophical - and wordy. And there are some pretty big grammatical errors that editing should have caught. All that messed up the flow of the book for me and sometimes sent me flipping back through the pages trying to figure out what she was talking about. That surprised me, because Branan's credentials are impeccable. That said, I'd recommend the book to anyone interested in Southern history, particularly pre-Civil Rights Movement. The personal level from which Branan is able to tell this story is enlightening.

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### **Laura LeAnn says**

Branan tells the story of the town she grew up in, Hamilton, GA, and her family's - both black and white - history. It focuses on a lynching of four individuals - 3 men and 1 woman - that occurred in 1912 in Hamilton. But beyond that central story is the story of her learning of her own families (yes plural), their secrets, and the interconnectedness of all of the people in this town. She flips between telling the story of the lynching and the various other stories that are connected to it to the telling of how she found out about this story, and how she determined a bit of the truth - at least the part that is able to be determined.

This book can help all of us to learn something, not only of the story of this lynching, but how painful and difficult and heart wrenching it is to confront one's family's own past and to acknowledge the part your family played. While she did not participate in the events of 1912 (she was born almost 30 years after the lynching), little bits and pieces of its effects have been imbedded in her makeup from her family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, mother, father, etc.) and she has had to come to terms with those. As someone that enjoys researching my own family genealogy and that of other friends, this is part of why I do it. To learn about the not so nice (and even hateful) things that have happened, that people have been involved in, and that I can acknowledge and ask for forgiveness for on behalf of those individuals and the long-lasting effects it has had on others.

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### **Roger Smitter says**

Branan gives us a very engaging story about lynching in the Deep South in the years after the Civil War. She pulls together a set of data that gives us an insight into a time and place we don't know much about. It's a powerful story that makes history an engaging story. The last chapter is especially powerful.

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### **Darryl Pierce says**

The focal point of the book was based on events that happened in 1912, but there is so much History in this book. The author does an excellent job of assembling all of the oral and written dialogue together to arrive at a truer picture of Post Cival War Georgia and specifically, Harris and Muscogee Counties.

If it were not for the stories I personally heard from family members in other parts of Georgia and the South, this book could easily have been mistaken for fiction. It is not fiction, it is painful to read, but a real eye opener.

If you ever lived in any rural town in the South, even now, this is a must read.

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### **Bayliss Camp says**

Tell me lies, tell me sweet little lies. Tell me, tell me lies.

This is the story of a poor little rich girl, a committed liberal (much like me, or one of the Schlegel sisters), a traitor to her class and caste, who discovers — apparently quite late in life — that Southern Gothic isn't fiction. It's fucking documentary.

My complaints aren't with the set-up. It's accurately advertised for what it is. My complaints are with (a) the style (short, choppy chapters. Much cutting back and forth between present day and the past), (b) an unremitting commitment to the maudlin first-person, and (c) such thin characterization (she is a journalist, after all, not a writer of fiction) that it was really hard to keep all the names straight.

If you're interested in how thoroughly a lynching jacks up the white community (drug addiction, murders, lifelong nightmares, etc. - you know, the usual Faulknerian spiel), go for it. If you're looking for anything approaching a black perspective on this type of event, you're better off reading back issues of *The Defender*, or the collected works of I.B. Wells.

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## Mary says

Sandwiching the lynching tragedy of 4 individuals (1 female, 3 males) with the author's own family history, this story details one small Georgia town's ongoing fight to keep the horror of its past hidden. Branan's storytelling draws you in and her fight to honestly examine the part her own family played in this injustice is courageous. Read alongside Cone's "The Cross and the Lynching Tree" or Xendi's "Stamped from the Beginning," one will see clearly how poorly we've handled our nation's foundation built on the bloodshed of the innocents (Native American and African American).

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