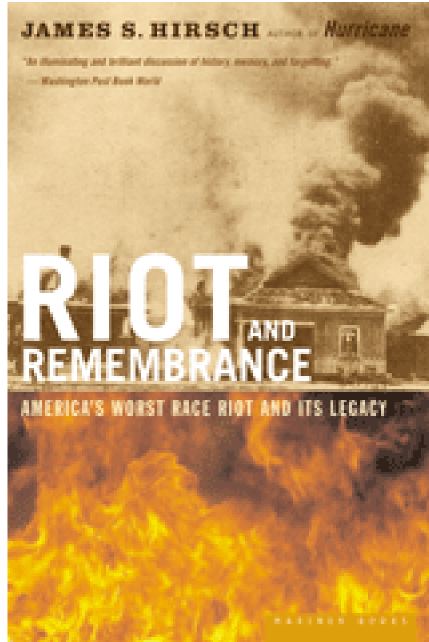
A Reader's Guide



Riot and Remembrance

by James S. Hirsch

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About the Book

"A profound, chilling, and heartbreaking contribution to American history." — *Boston Globe*

Before Rodney King, before the riots in Cincinnati, before Newark and Detroit and Watts, there was the Tulsa race war. On May 30, 1921, a misunderstanding between a white elevator operator and a black delivery boy escalated into the worst race riot in U.S. history. In this compelling and deeply human account, James S. Hirsch investigates how it erupted, how it was covered up, and how the survivors and their descendants are fighting for belated justice. "Superbly researched and engagingly written" (*Fort Worth Morning Star*), *Riot and Remembrance*, in powerfully chronicling one community's efforts to overcome a horrific legacy, reveals how the segregation of history and memory affects all Americans.

"The best book yet on the Tulsa riots, and one that should be required reading." — *Seattle Times / Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

"[Helps] to give the horror of racial violence a human face." — *New York Times*

"Powerful . . . Hirsch places the riot in the larger context of American and Tulsan history." — *Chicago Tribune*

A Book Sense 76 top ten selection and a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award

About the Author

James S. Hirsch is a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* and the author of *Hurricane*, the national bestseller about the boxer Rubin Carter. He lives in Needham, Massachusetts.

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A Conversation with James S. Hirsch

Q) Why did you write this book?

A) The Tulsa race riot was the worst of the twentieth century and perhaps in American history — that alone makes it important. But more significantly, eighty years after the fact, the state of Oklahoma and the city of Tulsa investigated the tragedy in an effort to quantify the damage, assess blame, and consider reparations. The book is really about one community's search for justice — and the painful lessons for any community, or country, that confronts its own history.

Q) Why is Tulsa's experience relevant to Americans today?

A) Because it highlights the clash between justice and reconciliation in American race relations. Black and white Tulsans today agree that a wrong was committed, but balancing the scales of justice — in this case, by paying reparations to black riot survivors — would drive a deep wedge between the blacks who demand restitution for their losses and the whites who disavow any responsibility. Whether it's for slavery or for past racism of any kind, justice is possible — but the price is very high.

Q) What set off the riot?

A) The catalyst was a sensational front-page news article about a black youth "assaulting" — the code word for "raping" — a young white woman on a downtown elevator. The claim was later proved false, but at a time when black men were often lynched for allegedly violating white women, a white mob in Tulsa formed outside the county jail holding the black youth, Dick Rowland. Fearing that he would be lynched, a group of armed black Tulsans made several trips to the jail to protect him. On one of the last visits, a white man tried to take the gun of a black man, an argument broke out, a shot was fired, and the riot was on.

Q) How did the riot unfold?

A) There were two phases. The first occurred in downtown Tulsa, where the blacks and whites fought after meeting at the courthouse. After the blacks returned to Greenwood, the shooting effectively ended by 2:00 a.m., and the blacks assumed it was over. But at daybreak the second phase began, when thousands of whites invaded the black district, looted homes and businesses, torched more than 1,200 buildings, and placed more than 6,000 blacks in detention camps.

Q) Why was Greenwood special?

A) Blacks created a self-sufficient community, with strong churches, schools, and small businesses. They fought Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and oppression. While Greenwood was not called the Black Wall Street, as was later claimed, it had great pride, unity, and leaders. Whites, however, saw Greenwood as a cesspool of crime and immorality, a district of opium dens, jazz joints, brothels, speakeasies, and gunplay. Those things did exist in Greenwood — but most of them existed in white Tulsa as well.

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Q) Why was Greenwood destroyed?

A) Because the whites believed that the blacks who went to the jail were engaged in an "uprising" — possibly including blacks in other cities as well — and they wanted to teach a brutal lesson to the African Americans in Tulsa and elsewhere: This is the penalty for "uppity Negroes." White businessmen also coveted Greenwood's land for development, and after the riot broke out, some of these businessmen helped organize the invasion of Greenwood, believing that destroying it would allow them to redevelop it themselves. That plan almost worked, but state courts nullified a law that would have forced blacks to relocate.

Q) How did blacks and whites remember the riot?

A) Each side created its own narrative of history, sometimes blending fact and fiction. According to the black version, the African Americans who went to the jailhouse were heroes who prevented a lynching, and the blacks would have "won" the riot if white Tulsans had not called in the National Guard for support and used aerial bombs against Greenwood. Hundreds were killed, and bodies were dumped in mass graves, incinerators, coal mines, and the Arkansas River. Some blacks also believed that the riot was a planned conspiracy to steal their land.

White Tulsans, in contrast, believed that the blacks at the courthouse were drunken lawbreakers who started the riot and that Greenwood was destroyed by a band of ruffians who did not represent the city. The magnanimous spirit of white Tulsa was revealed after the riot, when the victims were given shelter, food, and medicine. According to them, fewer than forty people were killed, and this number included white victims.

These two narratives were passed down from generation to generation and survive to this day.

Q) Why was there a "conspiracy of silence"?

A) White Tulsans didn't want to talk about the riot because they were embarrassed by it, and they recognized the damage to the city's image if the riot became widely known of outside Tulsa. Many blacks were equally reluctant to discuss the riot, because they feared that such discussions would ignite hostilities and spark another riot. For decades, blacks lived in fear that whites would find some reason to invade Greenwood again.

Q) Why were reparations to survivors such a divisive issue?

A) Reparations were never about the actual money that would be paid to survivors, but about what that money symbolized. Advocates believed that a government payout would represent an acknowledgment of responsibility, even guilt, for the city of Tulsa and the state of Oklahoma. Reparations, in this view, were the means to deliver retroactive justice. But opponents viewed reparations as another government handout to minorities and argued that taxpayers today were not responsible for the sins of their fathers.

Q) Are there any heroes in this story?

A) Yes — the black survivors who lost so much eighty years ago but whose strength and courage are undeniable. There are more than a hundred survivors left, and they have their

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own views about justice and reconciliation, although those views were rarely heard in the heated debate over reparations.

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