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Winter 2007

## Review of *Tulia: Race, Cocaine, and Corruption in a Small Texas Town* By Nate Blakeslee

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Hazel, J. Patrick, "Review of *Tulia: Race, Cocaine, and Corruption in a Small Texas Town* By Nate Blakeslee" (2007). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1516.

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*Tulia: Race, Cocaine, and Corruption in a Small Texas Town.* By Nate Blakeslee. New York: Public Affairs, 2005. viii + 450 pp. Photographs, appendix, notes, index. \$26.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

*Tulia* is a fascinating read and hard to put down. Unfortunately (especially for a native Texan), it is a true story that took place during the last year of the twentieth century and the first three years of the twenty-first in a small Texas town of about 5,000 located in Swisher County in the Texas Panhandle. The dominant themes are racial prejudice and legal misdoings, if not corruption, with justice finally winning out. But it is not really a “happy ending” book.

The events in *Tulia* were too reminiscent of my childhood. As a Texas trial lawyer and teacher of trial advocacy, they not only did not make me proud of the Texas legal system, they sickened me. But Nate Blakeslee does a superb job telling the story. Not only Texans and lawyers will be fascinated by this book. Anyone interested in a true story of injustice turned into justice will want to read it.

The prologue places us at a hearing in Swisher County, Texas, on March 20, 2003. The four Petitioners seeking legal relief—Joe Moore, Freddie Bookings Jr., Chris Jackson, and Jason Williams—sit in the jury box where juries had convicted them for ninety, twenty, forty-five, and forty-five years. Judge Ron Chapman, a retired judge from Dallas, presides. Representing the Petitioners is Vanita Grupta, a remarkable young woman from

Washington, DC, and just out of law school. Next to her is Jeff Blackburn, the only “local” attorney (from Amarillo, about fifty-two miles north of *Tulia* on Interstate 27—a stone’s throw in Texas), still fighting for his clients and other defendants, and Mitch Zamoff, one of the volunteers from Washington, DC. The courtroom is filled.

The “minor” villains are Sheriff Larry Stewart and District Attorney Terry McKeachern of Swisher County. The “major” villain is Tom Coleman, oldest son of a former well-respected Texas Ranger, Joe Coleman. Tom Coleman’s “investigation” and testimony convicted all the defendants who were convicted, including the Petitioners. No evidence corroborated his testimony. Yes, he was named Texas Officer of the Year in 1999. Following the testimony of several witnesses, Mitch Zamoff is posed to cross-examine Tom Coleman. Here the prologue ends.

The Petitioners were just four of the forty-six persons arrested on July 13, 1999. Thirty-seven were African Americans from a population of about 350 in *Tulia* (about one-half of those being children). All the Petitioners were arrested for selling powdered cocaine to Tom Coleman. Except for a few who had airtight alibis, all were convicted. The four Petitioners were seeking new trials based on a United States Supreme Court case, *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963), mostly for the prosecution’s withholding what it knew of Tom Coleman’s untruthfulness. The book proper begins with the unusually large arrest of a major part of *Tulia*’s black adult population, then looks at the history of *Tulia* and Swisher County, because it is important to understand that the area and the town were not, and are not, a land of milk and honey.

Instead of a chronological telling of events and trials, most of the chapters focus on single individuals. Some are about defendants, their lawyers, and their trials; some discuss a variety of personalities and their impacts on the story. Though the book could have been harshly judgmental, as, perhaps, the people of *Tulia* were, the author respects the populace of the area and seeks to convey an understanding and sympathy for them.

The reader must wait until page 353 to get to the cross-examination of Coleman, which never finished. The case was settled. The epilogue discusses Governor Rick Perry’s ultimate pardon of the defendants.

Though, as a lawyer, I find the failure to finish the cross of Coleman frustrating, I earnestly recommend

this book to all Texans, all lawyers, and all who are interested in how in a nation devoted to freedom, justice, and just plain moral rightness, such vestiges of slavery, injustice, and moral degradation can still exist. Even nonlawyers will find it engrossing.

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