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## The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Junius Stinney, Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South

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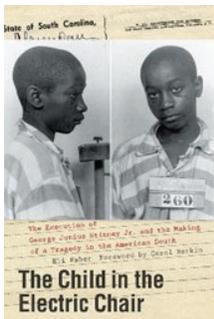
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Family photographs are also interspersed throughout the sections. Mary Martha Greene shares her joy of cooking and entertaining and invites the reader to use the recipes to start their own traditions. These recipes can be made by beginners and seasoned cooks. Recommended for public and academic libraries.

Sarah Grace Glover, University of North Georgia

***The Child in the Electric Chair: The Execution of George Junius Stinney, Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South.***



Eli Faber  
Columbia: University of South  
Carolina Press, 2021  
ISBN: 9781643361949  
192p. \$29.99 (Hbk)

In many ways, this is a timely book. The struggle by African Americans to seek justice in an unjust criminal justice system is perpetual but has become even more urgent in recent years as the nation has grappled with the racially motivated killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, to name only three of the most prominent cases. The guilt or innocence of five-foot one-inch 95-pound 14-year old George Junius Stinney, Jr. remains unclear but the travesty of the South Carolina criminal justice system of 1944 in action as it rapidly rushed to judgment and then executed Stinney has been made clear thanks to Eli Faber's fascinating and disturbing investigation in *The Child in the Electric Chair*.

Sadly, Eli Faber (1943-2020), a professor of History at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, died before completing this book. His long-time friend, Carol Berkin, has successfully completed the task. Because Stinney's case was not appealed to a higher court, there was no existing trial transcript for Faber to consult in his research on the case. However, Faber was able to locate a number of primary sources in South Carolina archives plus microfilmed documents produced by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), along with a number of

newspaper and magazine articles of the time. Perhaps his most valuable primary sources are his interviews, conducted in 2014, with the elderly surviving siblings of George Stinney. Faber also consulted interviews conducted by lawyer David L. Bruck in 1983 with surviving witnesses and law enforcement officers.

Among the many strengths of this book is the fascinating socioeconomic analysis of Alcolu, South Carolina Faber employs to set the stage for this tragic story. It was a small company town dominated by the lumber mill owned by the Alderman family who had established Alcolu in the 1880s. Until the double murder and the conviction of George Stinney in 1944, there had, generally, been little racial tension according to Charles Stinney, brother of George (p. 10).

On March 24, 1944 two white girls, 11-year old Betty June Binnicker and 7-year old Mary Emma Thames, took a bicycle ride together on one bicycle, to pick flowers on the outskirts of the small town. Their bodies were found in a water-filled ditch, underneath the partially disassembled bicycle. Their heads had been bashed in by some type of metal object (variously reported as a railroad spike or a piece of metal pipe).

The identification of George Stinney as the murder suspect is somewhat mysterious. Among those investigating was state trooper Sidney J. Pratt. According to his 1983 interview with David Bruck, Pratt recalled encountering an African American man who responded to Pratt's questioning by stating that "The meanest fellow in this community is a boy by the name of George Stinney" (p. 30). Faber states in the lengthy endnote that this anonymous informant (referred to as John Doe) needs to be kept anonymous: "Revealing Doe's identity even now could cause harmful and damaging consequences to relatives who are still alive" even though Doe is now deceased (p. 137).

In any event, Stinney was arrested and jailed. He apparently (without a lawyer being present) confessed to the murders and included the incendiary information that he had sexually molested the older girl after she was dead. Incendiary because in the Deep South of 1944 accusation of rape or sexual assault upon a white female made against an African American male was the most frequent justification given for lynching. Accordingly, Stinney was spirited away from the Claren-

don County jail to the jail in nearby Sumter County.

Stinney was brought back to Clarendon County for a speedy trial and conviction. Aside from what may have been a coerced confession, Stinney was also ill-served by the two lawyers appointed by the court to represent him: James W. Wideman and Charles N. Plowden. Both had political ambitions and both knew that if they provided a vigorous defense, they would be viewed unfavorably by the local white electorate, thus, they essentially did nothing for Stinney during his trial. Some members of local law enforcement also had political ambitions and Faber argues that this too contributed to the damning testimony they provided during the trial.

Although the trial received surprisingly little publicity, the relative inaction of the South Carolina Conference of the NAACP and, in turn, the national office of the NAACP, is dismaying. Faber determines that it was both a matter of inadequate financial resources plus the fact that the NAACP was at that very moment in 1944 heavily engaged in an ultimately successful attempt to win equal pay for African American teachers in South Carolina public schools.

Finally, Governor Olin Johnston proved unreceptive to the numerous appeals to commute George Stinney's death sentence because, he, too, had further political ambitions. Indeed, Johnston defeated longtime incumbent Ellison D. "Cotton Ed" Smith to become a U.S. Senator. Both Smith and Johnston were ardent white supremacists (p. 95). Commuting the death sentence of an African American male convicted of raping and killing two young white girls was, obviously, not in Johnston's best political interests.

Eli Faber has succeeded in publishing an important historical account of a grave racially-based injustice. While George Stinney's actual guilt or innocence probably can never be determined, what can be said is that the manner in which the murders were investigated, and the progress of his case through the South Carolina criminal justice system, and, finally, his execution via the electric chair, were an egregious example of the Jim Crow criminal justice system in action. The case was revived in 2013 and 2014 and, while not ruling on the guilt or innocence of Stinney, the court "vacated the judgment" of 1944 on the

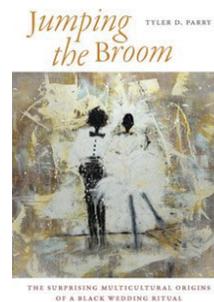
ground that "the courts have failed in a capital case to discharge their proper functions with due regard to the constitutional safeguards in the administration of justice" (p. 122-123).

Recommended for both academic and public libraries collecting in the areas of criminal justice, African American studies, and South Carolina/southern history.

Tim Dodge, Auburn University

### ***Jumping the Broom: The Surprising Multicultural Origins of a Black Wedding Ritual***

Tyler D. Parry  
Chapel Hill: The University of  
North Carolina Press, 2020  
ISBN: 9781469660868  
320 p. \$27.50 (Pbk)



This newly published book entitled *Jumping the Broom: The Surprising Multicultural Origins of a Black Wedding Ritual*, Parry reveals an historical, cultural, social and international tradition referred to as a "broomstick wedding". Parry tells us how the marginalized of society found comfort and honor in "a broom stick wedding". The act to clarify and formalize their wedding vows by jumping over a broomstick became a ritual as these acts traveled across the continents. Erica Ball cites, "ranging from eighteenth-century England, Scotland, and Wales, through the nineteenth and twentieth-century United States to the contemporary United States and Caribbean, this book offers a compelling and illuminating account of a quintessential product of transatlantic exchange—the broomstick wedding" (Cover leaf).

The broomstick wedding came to be a cultural exchange between African and European peoples. Parry explains "how the simple act of jumping the broom" became so loved and replicated as groups of people traveled the globe and included it in their wedding rites.

Parry leads the reader through a series of examples of countries, religious groups, advocacy groups, and differing sexual orientations where he gives examples of research in which "marginalized" peoples made decisions to alter or