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Clarion Review

A Shot in the Dark...
Willie Mack
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Willie Mack's book, A Shot in the Dark, has all the makings of a thrilling novel: race riots on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi, a boy dead on his twenty-second birthday, a grieving mother, an investigation full of holes, and public outcry against an apparently corrupt police force. Sadly, the story he tells is a true one.

In May of 1967, Benjamin Brown was shot and killed on Jackson's Lynch Street during a riot. Witnesses, including random onlookers, members of the police force, and members of the press, were interviewed, but no one was charged. Brown's mother believed a police officer shot him, possibly because of his work for civil rights. For more than thirty years she worked tirelessly to keep her son's name on the public's radar, and finally the case was reopened.

Heading up the cold case was Willie Mack, who was no stranger to the effects of bigotry on the police force. As a young officer, Mack was accused of selling drugs and was subsequently removed from his position. Luckily, a few important people believed in his innocence and insisted on an investigation. No evidence of wrongdoing could be found, and Mack was reinstated. At the latter end of his long career, Mack is able to give Mrs. Brown a certain amount of peace by uncovering what happened on Lynch Street in 1967.

The writing in this book occasionally feels like poetry. For example, when Mack describes what the night of the riot might have looked like, he writes, "Occasional gunfire echoed in the morning hours. When the eastern sky began to grow pink, the traffic light at Dalton and Lynch was still automatically blinking its different colors. But for a while, there was only mob law on Lynch Street." Delicate lines like these contrast well with the gritty subject matter.

However, the narrative relies heavily on police reports which slow the pace of the book to a sluggish trudge. Readers also may become confused by the onslaught of names, dates, and descriptions. A better tactic may have been to parse out the conflicting information and present it in a clearer format, much like Mack does towards the end of the book when he sums up his findings.

The book also suffers from a tendency to switch perspective, from third-person to first-person. Sometimes Mack speaks directly to the reader using the pronoun, “I,” while at other times he is called “Mack.” This discrepancy occurs within the quoted police reports as well, rendering them even more confusing for readers.

Mack has an important story to tell, but the book would have more of an impact if the writing had followed a less confusing path. He should be commended, though, for trying to expose systemic racism in an atmosphere of misguided loyalty.