

Arc of Justice

by Kevin Boyle

About the Book

An electrifying story of the sensational murder trial that divided a city and ignited the civil rights struggle

In 1925, Detroit was a smoky swirl of jazz and speakeasies, assembly lines and fistfights. The advent of automobiles had brought workers from around the globe to compete for manufacturing jobs, and tensions often flared with the KKK in ascendance and violence rising. Ossian Sweet, a proud Negro doctor-grandson of a slave-had made the long climb from the ghetto to a home of his own in a previously all-white neighborhood. Yet just after his arrival, a mob gathered outside his house; suddenly, shots rang out: Sweet, or one of his defenders, had accidentally killed one of the whites threatening their lives and homes.

And so it began—a chain of events that brought America's greatest attorney, Clarence Darrow, into the fray and transformed Sweet into a controversial symbol of equality. Historian Kevin Boyle weaves the police investigation and courtroom drama of Sweet's murder trial into an unforgettable tapestry of narrative history that documents the volatile America of the 1920s and movingly re-creates the Sweet family's journey from slavery through the Great Migration to the middle class. Ossian Sweet's story, so richly and poignantly captured here, is an epic tale of one man trapped by the battles of his era's changing times.

Arc of Justice is the winner of the 2004 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

Praise for the Book

“A cracking good yarn of murder, mayhem and courtroom drama... A model of literary nonfiction that holds the reader like a fast-paced detective novel. Stories that matter should be told as though they mattered. This Boyle has done with uncommon success.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Told with exemplary care and intelligence, this narrative chronicles inflammatory times in black and white America and pays tribute to those heroes who struggled to get Old Jim Crow where he lived. The way history should be written.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

Courtesy of Macmillan.

About the Author

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American Historian (1960 -)

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CAREER:

University of Toledo, Toledo, OH, assistant professor, 1990-94; University of Massachusetts, Amherst, assistant professor, 1994-97, associate professor, 1997--; Ohio State University, Columbus, professor of history; University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, Mary Ball Washington chair in American history. Member of advisory board, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; executive board member, Labor and Working Class History Association.

AWARDS:

Fellowships from Rockefeller Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Sciences, and Guggenheim Foundation; National Book Award, National Book Foundation 2004, for *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, NY), 1995.
- (With Victoria Getis) *Muddy Boots and Ragged Aprons: Images of Working-Class Detroit, 1900-1930*, Wayne State University Press (Detroit, MI), 1997.

- (Editor) *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994: Labor-Liberal Alliance*, State University of New York Press (Albany, NY), 1998.
- *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*, Holt (New York, NY), 2004.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Diplomatic History*, *Journal of American History*, *Labor History*, and *Michigan Historical Review*. Editorial board member, *Labor*.

Sidelights

Kevin Boyle, a professor of history at Ohio State University, garnered the 2004 National Book Award for his nonfiction work *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. Boyle, who writes widely on American history, race, class, and politics, is also the author of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, and he served as the editor of *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994: Labor-Liberal Alliance*.

In *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, Boyle provides an "exhaustively researched and lucidly written study of post-World War II labor liberalism," according to Robert H. Zieger in *Labor History*. In the work, Boyle highlights the legacy of United Auto Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther, one of the most powerful figures in the history of trade unionism. Tracing the development of Reuther's social democratic agenda, the author "insists that into the 1960s the Reuther-led Auto Workers remained a vigorous and principled advocate of structural change in the political economy," noted Zieger. "Indeed, Boyle sees the mid-1960s rather than the immediate postwar years as the period of social democracy's greatest promise and accomplishment." Boyle also discusses the failures of Reuther's vision, particularly his reactions to the sweeping changes in American society during the late 1960s. "Reuther's support for the war in Vietnam long after his closest associates had broken with it, his often-imperious power brokering role in his dealings with black activists, and his misreading of the nature of the New Left challenge to conventional labor liberalism helped to fill his last years with uncertainty and anguish," Zieger stated. "Boyle has done a commendable job in this rigorously researched and carefully crafted work," Judith Stepan-Norris commented in *Labour/Le Travail*. "He has provided us with a powerful analysis of the important role the UAW and Walter Reuther played in post-war liberalism and substantial insight as to the reasons for its shortcomings. And importantly, he captures the largely ignored and forgotten contributions that this important union made to the civil rights movement and the liberal agenda."

Boyle presents a selection of articles concerning union efforts to shape both public policy in *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994*. According to Timothy N. Thurber, writing in the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, "this engaging collection of nine essays analyzes the formation and development of the political alliance between organized labor and the Democratic party during the twentieth century." The work is

divided into two sections: the first, "Building the Labor-Liberal Alliance," focuses on topics of relevance before 1945, and the second, "The Labor-Liberal Alliance at Work," covers the post-World War II era. "Together, the authors probe the strengths and weaknesses of the labor-liberal alliance, particularly in its New Deal variant, and suggest the reasons for the dual decline. Their overall assessment is at once more sober about the alliance's historic possibilities and less critical of its leadership than several earlier interpretations," observed *Business History Review* contributor Aaron Brenner. *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994* "strikes a refreshing balance on the important question of who gained what from this political marriage," Thurber noted. "As Boyle points out in his fine introduction, labor sacrificed some broader goals to gain access to power, but it also won some important victories." As Brenner concluded, "Boyle has brought together an explicitly 'eclectic' collection of essays and case studies, which does not present a perceptible single, comprehensive alternative interpretation. Instead, the contributions paint the century-long labor-liberal alliance as an intriguing mosaic: one can see the overall image, but the outlines of the individual pieces remain no matter how far one steps back to get perspective."

Boyle tells a true story of racial tensions in his award-winning *Arc of Justice*. In 1925 Ossian Sweet, an African-American physician, moved with his wife, Gladys, into an all-white neighborhood on Detroit's east side. Just after their arrival, the Sweets were surrounded by a large mob of angry whites who began pelting the couple's house with stones. Though he had been promised police protection, Sweet had taken no chances, stocking his home with guns and enlisting the help of nine friends and business associates, who now watched the crowd from the home's second floor. When a rock broke an upstairs window, shots rang out; one white man in the crowd was killed and another was wounded. Everyone in the house, including Sweet and his wife, were arrested and charged with murder. "The ensuing trial, in which the legendary defense lawyer Clarence Darrow gave one of his most spectacular courtroom performances, was in a sense a struggle over Detroit's future, and arguably one of the great civil rights battles of the century," *New York Times Book Review* critic Robert F. Worth stated. According to a critic in *Publishers Weekly*, the author "has brilliantly rescued from obscurity a fascinating chapter in American history that had profound implications for the rise of the Civil Rights movement." Boyle's "gift is to frame the story just right--large enough to encompass lynching, the immigrant experience in urban America, the politics of black uplift, the automobile explosion, ethnic politics in our cities, and so on, but small enough to permit one family's story to keep the reader enthralled," wrote *Washington Post* reviewer Timothy B. Tyson. "Here is a model of literary nonfiction, a fine piece of scholarship that challenges our preconceived ideas about civil rights, speaks to many of our current predicaments and holds the reader like a fast-paced detective novel."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *American Political Science Review*, March, 1997, Stephen Amberg, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, p. 181.
- *American Prospect*, March-April, 1996, Harold Meyerson, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, p. 79.
- *Booklist*, September 1, 2004, Vanessa Bush, review of *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*, p. 26.
- *Boston Globe*, October 31, 2004, Paul Butler, "Detroit Burning," review of *Arc of Justice*.
- *Business History Review*, summer, 1999, Aaron Brenner, review of *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994: Labor-Liberal Alliance*, p. 285.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, September 10, 2004, Raymond Fiore, review of *Arc of Justice*, p. 168.
- *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, July, 1999, Timothy N. Thurber, review of *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994*, p. 658.
- *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, spring, 2000, David Montgomery, review of *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994*, p. 716.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2004, review of *Arc of Justice*, p. 668.
- *Labor History*, February, 1999, Robert H. Zieger, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, p. 111.
- *Labor Studies Journal*, fall, 1997, Ken Fones-Wolf, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, p. 103.
- *Labour/Le Travail*, spring, 1998, Judith Stepan-Norris, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, pp. 290-292.
- *Library Journal*, October 1, 2004, Thomas J. Davis, review of *Arc of Justice*, p. 93.
- *Michigan Historical Review*, spring, 1999, Warren Van Tine, review of *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994*, p. 142.
- *New York Times*, August 26, 2004, Patricia Cohen, "When a Moving Van Could Spark a Neighborhood War," review of *Arc of Justice*, p. E8.
- *New York Times Book Review*, September 12, 2004, Robert F. Worth, "I Swear It Was in Self-Defense," review of *Arc of Justice*, p. 30.
- *Political Science Quarterly*, spring, 1997, Amy Bridges, review of *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968*, p. 172.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 2, 2004, review of *Arc of Justice*, p. 60.
- *Time*, November 29, 2004, Richard Lacayo, "And a Taut Account of a 1920s Race Trial Gets the Nonfiction Prize," p. 146.
- *U.S. News & World Report*, December 6, 2004, Marc Silver, "The Bitter Tale of Dr. Sweet" (interview), p. 20.
- *Washington Post*, December 1, 2004, Timothy B. Tyson, "Jim Crow in Motor City," review of *Arc of Justice*, p. C1.

ONLINE

- *Ohio State University Web site*, <http://history.osu.edu/> (April 15, 2005), "Kevin Boyle."*

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Author Interview

From Michigan Humanities Council, *Arc of Justice Reader's Guide*

Q & A with the Author

Q: *How did you find out about the story of Ossian Sweet?*

A: Sweet's story is a part of Detroit lore. I'd heard about it growing up in the city—not everything, of course, but enough to pique my interest.

Q: *Why were you compelled to write Arc of Justice?*

A: I really wanted to write about the struggle of civil rights. But I wanted to look at civil rights in a place and time that didn't fit the standard story of the movement, a story that took place in the North, not in the South, and in the 1920s, not the 1950s and 1960s. And I desperately wanted to write about Detroit.

Q: *What is the story's most-compelling lesson for today?*

A: *Arc of Justice* captures the moment when the Northern system of segregation was created, a system that divides the nation's great cities into different neighborhoods—separate and unequal. We still live with that system today. I like to think that Sweet's story makes us look around us—and wonder why we continue to accept such injustice.

Source:

Michigan Humanities Council, *Arc of Justice Reader's Guide* Retrieved October 20, 2011, from http://michiganhumanities.org/programs/gmr_new/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/gmr_reader_guide.pdf

Discussion Questions

From Michigan Humanities Council, *Arc of Justice Reader's Guide*

1. How does Ossian Sweet's journey to the North differ from the hundreds of thousands of other African Americans who left the South during that time period?
2. How did life for African Americans in northern cities compare with the conditions they faced in the South?
3. Before Black Bottom became known as a primarily African American district, it was home to many white immigrants. How and why do neighborhoods change composition over time?
4. What are the consequences of the fact that many American cities continue to exhibit segregated housing patterns?
5. Imagine living in 1920s Detroit. If you were committed to racial justice, how would you work to achieve this goal?
6. Why would the Sweets decide to move to the Garland Street residence despite the threat of racial violence?
7. When do you think it is appropriate to use force to defend one's property? If you were in the Sweets' place when their house was attacked, how would you have responded?
8. How did the defense team manage to turn the trial from a murder case to a broader consideration of race, prejudice and discrimination in 1920s America?

Source:

Michigan Humanities Council, *Arc of Justice Reader's Guide* Retrieved October 20, 2011, from http://michiganhumanities.org/programs/gmr_new/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/gmr_reader_guide.pdf