

Books

Race, redress and the Rosewood holocaust

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

“This much is known,” writes Michael D’Orso, beginning a chilling 13-page description of the destruction of a small, black Florida town in the first week of 1923. Incensed by a white woman’s hysterical tale of being attacked by a black man, men from surrounding villages headed for Rosewood — a “black town in a white place in a white time” — shot every African American they could find, and torched every home they laid eyes on.

The carnage lasted seven days. When lawmen got around to showing up, “there was no one left to save. The town was empty. . . . A week had passed since the bells of Rosewood rang in the new year. Now those bells lay smoldering among the twisted steel and blackened ruins, the charred carcasses of cats and dogs, the smoking soot of a place that would never exist again.”

EVEN THE casual history buff repeatedly encounters similar stories from post-slavery America: grotesque murders, massacres and lynchings through the mid-1960s, committed with the grinning encouragement of white neighbors and the tacit approval of law enforcement. And yet the story of this rural community carries the power to shock anew. It was a crime against not just flesh and bone but a *community*, a crime that tore up a people’s history by the roots.

D’Orso’s beautifully drawn *Like Judgment Day* resurrects that community while it documents its destruction, showing us the faces and lives of those who survived and helping us to fit Rosewood into the quilt of our history.

After the prologue, D’Orso picks up the story nearly six decades later, in 1982, when a reporter for the St. Petersburg Times approached a 39-year-old clerk named Arnett Doctor and asked him about his family’s connection to Rosewood. Doctor’s mother had told him about surviving the killing spree, and the reporter’s questions spurred him to devote

his life to uncovering the truth about Rosewood.

Doctor, a black man “born in the ‘40s, come of age in the ‘50s and ‘60s, all in the Deep South, enough right there to fuel a lifetime of fury,” found the story true but obscured: After the initial headlines and articles (most based on the outrageously slanted local sheriff’s report), the tale had disappeared. “There was no mention of it in any book on Florida’s past, no record in any account of the region’s racial relations,” D’Orso writes. “Like the remains of a rock thrown into a pond, the record of Rosewood faded from a single splash, to scattered ripples, to stillness.”

Doctor began searching for a lawyer to seek reparations for the survivors and descendants but ran into surprising resistance — few people

LIKE JUDGMENT DAY:
The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood

By Michael D’Orso
Grosset/Putnam, 373 pages, \$27.50

“could believe there had once been a town up here in this godforsaken swamp country, a busy town filled with black people, three hundred of them at its peak, at the turn of the century, land-owning people with their own homestead businesses.”

Finally he convinced a firm to take the case to the Florida legislature, and D’Orso’s story shifts from plaintiffs to lawyers to legislators, on its way to a suspenseful legal showdown in 1994.

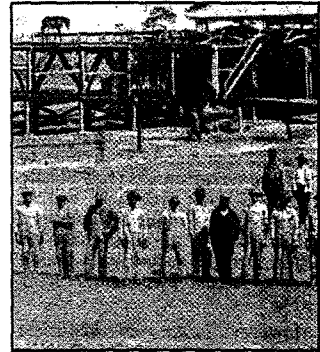
D’ORSO, a Virginia journalist, does a brilliant job of telling the story simply, movingly, without the impassioned rhetoric that often inadvertently robs books like this of some of their power. He lets us get to know his characters without canonizing or demonizing any of them.

And he doesn’t attempt to resolve

everything, noting where survivors’ recollections differed and where Doctor’s public statements outstripped the literal truth. (In a few cases, though, further definition would help; D’Orso never really clarifies who took control of the land after its black residents disappeared, or why Rosewood had slipped from 300 to 150 residents in the two decades before the massacre.)

One of the book’s most telling points is left pretty much between the lines. Unavoidably, what *Like Judgment Day* brings to mind is the cruel rhetoric of underclass-bashing politicians and pundits who seem incapable of understanding black America’s relative historical disadvantage with regard to property and wealth. As D’Orso notes, Rosewood was “unusual but hardly unique: The Emancipation Proclamation hardly put an end to forcible evictions of African Americans from homes and businesses.

And when D’Orso brings his story into the present, it is clear that times haven’t changed nearly as much as we’d like to think. He ends by quoting whites who live near Rosewood today; their hate seems to run as



Jacket photo: Cumber and Sons sawmill, Sumner, Florida, 1924.

thick as it did before Martin Luther King Jr., before World War II, before Rosewood. The nearest neighbor uses the word “nigger” over and over, even joking about turning his dogs loose on visiting black men.

It’s a shatteringly appropriate way for D’Orso to conclude *Like Judgment Day*, driving home the point that despite the white protestors’ cries that the massacre is “just history,” it’s anything but. The “redemption” in the book’s subtitle is slim indeed.

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