

Reading

Anne Moody, "Coming of Age in Mississippi"



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*African American author Anne Moody (b. 1940), born Essie Mae Moody, grew up in Centreville, Mississippi, and was 14 years old when she learned about the murder of Emmett Till. As a student at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, Moody engaged in grassroots civil rights activism, participating in lunch counter sit-ins and voter registration drives. In her memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, she recalls her attempts to make sense of Till's murder and the responses to her questions from the adults in her life.*

I was now working for one of the meanest white women in town, and a week before school started Emmett Till was killed . . .

"Mama, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old Negro boy who was killed a little over a week ago by some white men?" I asked her.

"Where did you hear that?" she said angrily.

". . . I heard Eddie them talking about it this evening coming from school."

"Eddie them better watch how they go around here talking. These white folks git a hold of it they gonna be in trouble . . . You go on to work . . . And don't you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed . . . Just do your work like you don't know nothing . . ."

On my way to Mrs. Burke's [Anne's employer] that evening, mama's words kept running through my mind. "Just do your work like you don't know nothing."

[Anne went to work at the Burkes' home, where she served dinner and cleaned the house.]

When they had finished and gone . . . Mrs. Burke called me to eat . . .

"Essie, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed In Greenwood?" she asked me, sitting down in one of the chairs opposite me.

"No, I didn't hear that," I answered, almost choking on the food.

"Do you know why he was killed?" she asked and I didn't answer. "He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything . . ."

“How old are you, Essie?” she asked me after a pause.

“Fourteen. I will soon be fifteen though,” I said.

“See, that boy was just fourteen too. It’s a shame he had to die so soon.” She was so red in the face, she looked as if she was on fire . . .

I went home shaking like a leaf on a tree . . . Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was Black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn’t have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn’t know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.¹

Reflection Question

1. Why did the murder of Emmett Till galvanize a generation of activists to pursue racial justice?

¹ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 121–26.