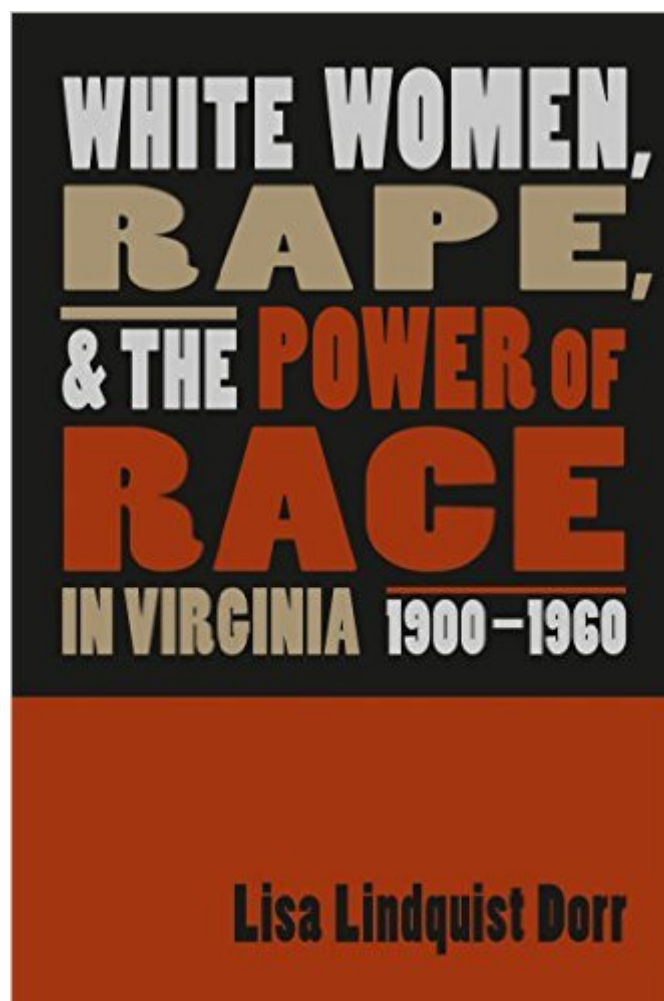


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# White Women, Rape, And The Power Of Race In Virginia, 1900-1960



## Synopsis

For decades, historians have primarily analyzed charges of black-on-white rape in the South through accounts of lynching or manifestly unfair trial proceedings, suggesting that white southerners invariably responded with extralegal violence and sham trials when white women accused black men of assault. Lisa Lindquist Dorr challenges this view with a careful study of legal records, newspapers, and clemency files from early-twentieth-century Virginia. White Virginians' inflammatory rhetoric, she argues, did not necessarily predict black men's ultimate punishment. While trials were often grand public spectacles at which white men acted to protect white women and to police interracial relationships, Dorr points to cracks in white solidarity across class and gender lines. At the same time, trials and pardon proceedings presented African Americans with opportunities to challenge white racial power. Taken together, these cases uncover a world in which the mandates of segregation did not always hold sway, in which whites and blacks interacted in the most intimate of ways, and in which white women and white men saw their interests in conflict. In Dorr's account, cases of black-on-white rape illuminate the paradoxes at the heart of segregated southern society: the tension between civilization and savagery, the desire for orderly and predictable racial boundaries despite conflicts among whites and relationships across racial boundaries, and the dignity of African Americans in a system dependent on their supposed inferiority. The rhetoric of protecting white women spoke of white supremacy and patriarchy, but its practice revealed the limits of both.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Frankly, I'm flabbergasted by the shallow and inaccurate reviews of this book that have appeared on this site. Dorr does not excuse all black men accused of raping white women. Nor does she commit the "Harper Lee Fallacy." Lee's novel popularized the notion that all black men in the South lived, constantly, under the shadow of lynching. If they even looked at a white woman, they were doomed. While this fear was a cultural truism that held great power in the black community, it simply was not an accurate representation of reality--not every case, every time, (although it did, tragically, occur all too often). But we've known that since Ida B. Wells proved that less than 1/3 of lynchings resulted from charges of rape. Dorr instead provides a vastly more nuanced argument. She PROVES, through fine-grained research in court records and newspapers, that the interactions of black men and white women that resulted in rape trials became important theatrical spectacles that ultimately upheld the culture of segregation. White male legal officials orchestrated trials to calm local tensions in the short term. Often (roughly 75% of the time), convicted black men were later pardoned. These men were not all lynched. They also were not all executed in a "legal lynching." Instead, complex negotiations--that were seldom about justice--determined their fate. At the same time, white female accusers fell under intense scrutiny--their race provided no immediate shield against questions about their morality. And, while the alleged assailant might be convicted, he might also be pardoned and released back into the community to warn other women whose "respectability" placed them beyond the pale of protection.

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