

Kevin Boyle, author of 'Arc of Justice,' on a divided city and the march of civil rights

By Jeff Baker, The Oregonian

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Kevin Boyle's "Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age" tells the story of an African American doctor, Ossian Sweet, who moved his family into a white working-class neighborhood in Detroit in 1925. A mob tried to force the Sweets to leave their house, and Sweet had friends inside for protection the police would not provide.

Gunfire from inside the house resulted in one man's death, and 11 people, including Sweet's wife, were charged with first-degree murder. The trials, with famed attorney Clarence Darrow providing a full-throated defense, were a sensation and a landmark in the early history of the civil rights movement. The Sweets were acquitted and the case helped establish the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, but as Boyle notes, it did not stop segregation in northern cities.

Detroit, Boyle's hometown, remains one of the most segregated cities in the country. There are many reasons for that, including self-segregation, but "what's fundamentally different for African Americans is the way race is linked to the dynamics of the real estate market," he said. When African Americans move into a neighborhood, whites often move out. Their motive for doing so isn't necessarily racism but often is a perception that real estate values will decrease. When their departure, not the arrival of new neighbors of a different ethnicity, does cause a decline in housing prices, perception becomes reality and the cycle is reinforced.

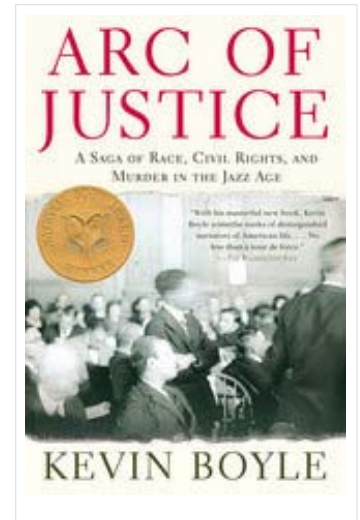
Boyle teaches history at Ohio State University. "Arc of Justice" won the 2004 National Book Award for nonfiction and Boyle will discuss its themes as the keynote speaker at an April 23 luncheon sponsored by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon. He said the civil rights movement and the laws that resulted from it eliminated many of the institutional practices of housing discrimination such as redlining, when banks, insurance companies and others would withhold services to poor and minority neighborhoods.

Segregation in cities is a complicated issue, however, and gentrification "adds another complication," he said. "Whites moving back into the city can be a wonderful thing, revitalizing neighborhoods and increasing the tax base that pays for services, but poor people are often displaced in the process. Something that happens with the best of intentions can have results that weren't intended."

In Detroit, "white flight" and the collapse of the industrial economy has resulted in a sprawling city that has lost half its population. There has been very little gentrification. "It's been gutted," Boyle said. "There are big stretches where all the buildings are empty and there might only be one or two houses that are occupied on a block. The challenge there is how do you provide basic services and what do you do about all the buildings?"

Detroit's economic base has left the city limits for the suburbs. There is a plan to convert large areas within the city to open fields, an irony in that farmland and open space once surrounded it. Boyle remembers the drive from Detroit to Ann Arbor, Mich., as one of leaving the city and traveling through a rural setting. Now there is urban sprawl all the way to Ann Arbor, and much of Detroit is going back to a rural setting.

Boyle speaks at a Fair Housing Council of Oregon luncheon at noon April 23 at the Ambridge Event Center, 1333 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. The registration deadline is April 14. Registration forms may be obtained at information@fhco.org or by calling 503-223-8197, extension 108.



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