

## GLORY IN THE DUST by Stephan Shaw

### The Story Behind the Book

My four-times-great-grandfather Henry Thomas Blythe founded a small delta town in the northeast corner of Arkansas in the late nineteenth century called Blytheville.

The town sits on land that was devastated by earthquakes two hundred years ago. Land once full of hills and countryside that became flat and damaged, prone to swamps and flooding. Land later settled and changed again into the land it is now. A land of vast fields, filled with row upon row of crops.

My mother grew up there and, though I did not, she and my father brought my siblings and me to the state often. For family, Razorback football, and horse races. Many of my earliest and most enduring memories are from those long-gone days of my youth.

Blytheville was the place I got to experience life in a way I never could anywhere else—spending time at our family farm, eating barbecue at the Dixie Pig, swimming at the Blytheville Country Club, and browsing for books at That Bookstore in Blytheville. It was another world to me. A world of different rhythms, habits, and thinking. A world that made sense at first glance but not always if you looked again. A world for me and my family but not for everyone.

My love for Arkansas—its land, its people, its history—springs from this place and these memories and led me to dig into its shadowed heart and soul and tell its stories.

Arkansas possesses no shortage of settings I could have used and stories I could have told. But I knew before I wrote my story it would be set in a town loosely based on Blytheville. The part I didn't know was what it would be about. Then I discovered “the lost year,” which was the year after Little Rock Central High School integrated when the governor of Arkansas declared Little Rock's schools closed for the 1958-59 school year to prevent further integration. I thought it was a fascinating, terrible, and largely forgotten part of Arkansas' history, even for those who knew about the “Little Rock Nine.”

I used the events in Little Rock as a guide for my story, knowing it wasn't implausible that a town in the northeast corner of the state could integrate its schools because in 1955 the town of Hoxie, little more than an hour's drive from Blytheville, did just that.

As I stitched my story together, the school's integration and closing allowed me to join black and white characters together in experiences I knew would otherwise be almost impossible in such a time and place, experiences that would ultimately lead to a tragic event befalling them.

Sully Slyke, a fearless but extremely flawed lawyer, is the central figure of my story. He is inspired by a real lawyer I worked for many years ago. A lawyer who is brave and unorthodox in

and out of the courtroom. A lawyer who has had real struggles with addiction and used them to help others. A lawyer who is one of the most decent and dynamic people I've ever known. The kind of person we should all hope exists, and we should all hope we know.

*Glory in the Dust* is particularly personal to me. There are the easy, obvious reasons. It is my first novel and it is about Arkansas. But then there are the ones that carry even greater weight and might mean something not just to me but to others. It is about tragedy and injustice, second chances and redemption. It takes on difficult events from the past and explores what it means for us as a people to continue to work through them. And it gives hope that one day we can overcome the lines drawn generations before that still divide us.

#### About the Author

Stephan Shaw lives with his wife and their two children in Texas and Arkansas. He graduated from Texas A&M University, and when he is not watching SEC football, coaching Little League, or hosting toddler tea parties, he finds time to write and practice law.

