

BOOKS REVIEW

Beauty survived, thankfully, in writer and poet George Elliott Clarke's new Africadian memoir

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By James Grainger Special to the Star
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WHERE BEAUTY SURVIVED



AN
AFRICADIAN
MEMOIR

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

“I now offer this contradictory statement. I had a happy childhood; I had a hellish childhood.” So begins the third chapter of poet, novelist, and academic George Elliott Clarke’s memoir of his often unsentimental (but no less beautiful) education growing up Black in the segregated-in-all-but-name city of Halifax and rural Nova Scotia in the 1970s.

That “contradictory statement” in “Where Beauty Survived: An Africadian Memoir,” comes after two lyrical chapters on Clarke’s early childhood and his deep family roots in the area. His father’s lineage boasted many an overachieving autodidact (including the first non-commissioned Black officer to serve in the British army), while his mother’s people were largely farmers, entrepreneurs, and skilled labourers. Clarke’s fondest memories

are of weekends spent with his mother's family, who were uncomplicated in their love for him and his two younger brothers.

His father was a different story. Though a self-educated artist, intellectual, and model provider — the “*Work Ethic* made flesh” — Bill Clarke was forced to work manual labouring jobs largely reserved for Black men, in his case, a railway porter. Like many Black men of the time, Clarke senior was “gentle and genteel with whites, but brusque and brutal with his family, ruling with iron fists and casting off any notions of velvet gloves.” This meant, in practice, brutal beatings for the Clarke boys and their mother, and an anxious family dynamic attuned as minutely as a Swiss watch-work to the mood swings of the *paterfamilias*.



A lesser writer (and son) could have spun out his parents' seemingly opposing personalities and hierarchical roles — angry, dominating father; nurturing but brutalized wife and mother — into a sentimental misery memoir. Clarke has higher aims, and his restless intellect will not allow him to make easy judgments on his extended family.

He also has no desire to reconcile the oppositions and contradictions that formed him. Take his father. For all of his epic faults, Bill Clarke offered a model of a man who, against all odds, was “committed to making art — for himself, on his own terms,” a model that later emboldened his oldest son to pursue a calling as a poet dedicated to sussing out the beauty from an often brutal world.

As the narrative moves into Clarke's youth, he adroitly untangles the roots of oppression and relative privilege that both united and separated his parents. Despite his esteemed lineage, Bill Clarke was fatherless and suffered terrible privation during the Depression, subsisting at times on soup and gruel and forced to chase rats from his dingy sleeping quarters before turning in. Clarke's mother Geraldine (Gerry), who was lower middle-class and

lived on a farm, never went hungry. Gerry could also “pass” as white while Bill was undeniably Black, their differing skin tones demarcating their relationships to the white majority.

Clarke lets these and other dichotomies of race, class, gender, culture (high and low), and ancestry (including Indigenous) contest for space in his often rollicking narrative, the competing voices mimicking the larger Africadian community (or Nova Scotian Black) of his childhood. “Africadian culture,” he writes, “was never only one type of specifically (stereotypically) Black cultural interests or practices. Rather, our ‘blackness’ could slide toward Nashville by way of Charlottetown, P.E.I., or tap the Metropolitan Opera by way of Truro, Nova Scotia.”

Clarke’s parents divorced when he was barely a teenager, a split that he describes as nothing less than catastrophic. From there, he finds his way, via a series of intellectual and artistic mentors, to an awakening to the social and historical forces that hobbled his communities and made beauty such a noble and elusive goal.

James Grainger is the author of “Harmless”