

Clarke brings poignant memoir, *Where Beauty Survived*, to life at Aurora Public Library

It may not have happened directly to him, but the thought of it is still searing to poet George Elliott Clarke.

The Nova Scotia native, who has achieved worldwide fame through the written word, recalls a time and a place not too removed from our own, when his father, who died in 2005, was driving a White couple home one night.

‘He mentioned to them he had a son who was a poet,’ Clarke says. ‘This was all very well and good. He delivered them to their address, I am sure they gave him a nice tip, and he left – but when they entered their home, they burst into laughter. The reason? They didn’t believe my father when he told them he had a son who was a poet.’

‘It was sometime later that maybe they heard me on the CBC or something like that, that they put two and two together and realised he had told them the truth. They had to feel a little bit of shame for the fact they had allowed a racist stereotype to colour their – pun intended, I think – their acceptance of what their taxi driver was telling them about his own child.’

This story stuck with him as Clarke sat down to write his memoir, *Where Beauty Survived*, which covers the first 20 years of his life in Halifax’s Black community, which he calls ‘Africadia.’

Through this vignette, Clarke illustrates an instance in father’s life – but one that was not necessarily extraordinary in the community.

‘I talk about what an accomplished, intellectual man my father was, how powerful he was in his thought and his grammar, his vocabulary – this is a man who sold the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and knew it inside and out. For these persons to decide that because he was Black there was no way in hell he could have produced, along with my mum, a poet. I found that to be one of the most appalling episodes of bias I could know about. What a shame for them that they could not imagine that their taxi driver could be someone of such superior acumen.’

It is a difficult subject, but a hard truth that Clarke is not afraid to explore.

Nor is he afraid to share how these biases, some of which were engrained generation to generation, had on his family.

‘I recognize the fact that we are all flawed human beings,’ he says, ‘and I put myself up front as one of those flawed human beings. So are my parents and other relatives I talk about in the book. I don’t say any of that to be critical of them, to put them down, or to chastise or overly criticize. My interest is in understanding so I can understand myself better.’

These challenges experienced by his parents are still being felt today.

Where Beauty Survives looks at domestic abuse experienced by his mother, his siblings and himself at the hands of his father, a subject that is still very raw. He does so, he says, recognizing the love and respect for his father he carries with him to this day.

‘There was so much there to honour and respect, and I do, but at the same time, I couldn’t not be truthful about the harm, the hurt and the pain of his child-rearing methodology,’ Clarke says, ending his statement on an upswing that suggests a question. ‘One of my brothers thought that was very good, the other didn’t say anything about it. The one brother who said he thought it was okay said that other relatives were then able to talk about how abusive their fathers had been. In other words, my talking about it gave others permission to talk about their experiences with their fathers or their mothers. At the same time, I emphasize that these are my perceptions and I am not trying to tell anyone else’s stories.’

There are some in his family who might feel like he did ‘the wrong thing’ in sharing his first 20 years in *Where Beauty Survived*,

but it is his story, he says, and within it are 'beautiful aspects of our community writ-large and our culture writ-large' the historic African Nova Scotia culture, which has existed for more than 200 years.?

'I like to think of Black Nova Scotia as 'Africadia' and we have a distinct Black culture in the world as part of the African diaspora,' he says. 'I am very proud of those roots. At the same time, in talking about my story, I needed to reflect on the ways White racism impacted our families and our community in ways that were destructive and ways that distorted personal relationships.

'When I talk about the abuse of my father and other Black men inflicted upon their families in my community when I was growing up in the 1960s, I also put that in the context that these grown, adult men were treated like boys and were treated with disrespect by their employers, that they had to suck it up, that they had to suffer that degradation in order to make sure their families had roofs over their heads, that their wives could be at home with their children, and not subject to physical or sexual abuse working for some White family in a better off part of Halifax. Those are the conditions that led to some of the distortions in family life I talk about in the book.?'

George Elliott Clark brings 'Where Beauty Survived?' to life at the Aurora Public Library this Thursday, February 3, at 7 p.m. via Zoom. To register to be a part of this conversation, visit aurorapl.ca.

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