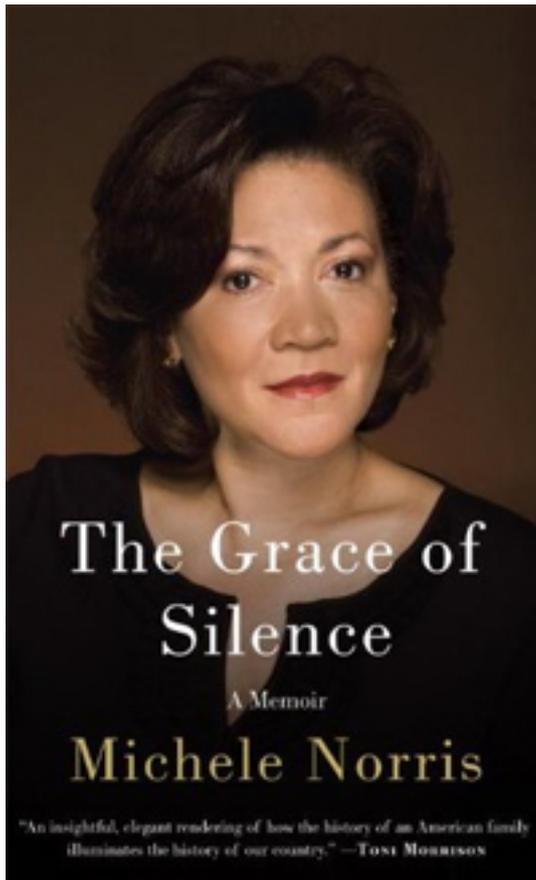


The Grace of Silence

Written by Book Review by Kam Williams
Thursday, 30 September 2010 10:41



“As a young man, my father had been shot by a white policeman, but never spoke about the incident after leaving Alabama and moving north. He never even told my mother. He took the story to his grave... Every household is different but in my childhood home the window to that painful past was never widely opened.

Our parents felt we needed to know only so much. No time for tears. No yearning for sympathy. You see, you can't keep your eye on the prize if your sight is clouded by tears. How can you soar if you're freighted down by the anger of your ancestors?”

-- Excerpted from the Introduction (pgs. xi-xii)

I'll be honest, I've listened to Michele Norris for years on National Public Radio in her capacity as host of All Things Considered without knowing that she was black. After all, I couldn't see her, and she speaks in a fairly nondescript Standard American English accent which makes it difficult to discern her ethnic roots.

But when I received a copy of “The Grace of Silence,” it was easy to see from her picture on the cover that she's a sister. Still, I have to admit that I was a little skeptical about how frank her autobiography might be in terms of embracing her African-American identity, given that it doesn't play a role in her professional persona.

Quite surprisingly, it turns out that her heartbreaking memoir moved me to tears, as she wistfully recounts her family's quiet, dignified way of dealing with racism and discrimination. Whether it was her parents having to witness a mass exodus of their neighbors via white flight after integrating a neighborhood in Minnesota in the early Sixties or, decades later, her father

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Belvin's being teased for being drunk when he was actually suffering from a malignant brain tumor during the last days of his life, Michele describes lives painfully limited in certain respects by the color line.

She further recalls a litany of humiliations endured by relatives before she was born, such as her maternal grandmother who was employed by Quaker Oats to travel around the country dressed as Aunt Jemima in bandana and apron to give pancake cooking demonstrations at State Fairs and the like. Particularly poignant is the painstaking lengths she goes to resurrect the besmirched name of her father long after being falsely accused of a crime.

For following his honorable discharge from the military after serving in World War II, he returned to his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, reasonably expecting to enjoy equality. He and his fellow veterans felt that they had earned the right for black folks to vote by fighting and dying for their country, so they began making the trek to the courthouse downtown to politely attempt to register.

In an incident which was subsequently covered-up by a falsified police report covered with lies, her father was shot while wearing his Navy uniform by a police officer who charged him with attempted robbery and resisting arrest. The truth unearthed by his intrepid reporter daughter during a return to Birmingham belatedly clears Belvin's name, even if his innocence had been impossible to prove back in the Jim Crow South.

Though railroaded and shamed, Michele points out that he was actually very lucky to have survived the confrontation at a time when whites felt, "We have to have a good lynching every once in a while to keep the nigger in his place." A very intimate, riveting and revealing cultural keepsake apt to resonate deeply with any African-American family inclined to reflect honestly on the oft-unspoken legacy of coping for generations in a world where whites knew they could get away with anything.

The Grace of Silence

A Memoir

by Michele Norris

Pantheon Press

Paperback, \$24.95

176 pages

ISBN: 978-0-307-37876-7

To order a copy of The Grace of Silence, visit:

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