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Review – Clarence Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir*

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MY GRANDFATHER'S SON: A MEMOIR by Clarence Thomas. Pp. xiii + 292. HarperCollins, New York, 2007. \$26.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper). ISBN: 0060565551 (cloth), 978-0-06-056556-5 (paper).

The concept of one's identity, particularly one's racial identity, is complex and mediated by many factors. Our identity is not merely determined by family dynamics; where one is from; our time in history; how we think others see us and how we would like to be seen. Clarence Thomas's story is one filled with issues of identity, pain and struggle. His is a story of individual identity versus group identity; of race, inheritance, internal struggles with self doubt, change and transformation, and a loss of faith. His is the story of a black man's rise to high profile leadership positions, the power of association, and the experience of racial and religious heterodoxy. These and other related struggles and tensions make *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir*, both an insightful and worthwhile read into the complexities of black identity.

For most readers this will be a venture from the known to the unknown world of Clarence Thomas, a one-time educated and professed Catholic who became Supreme Court Justice. While carrying a glossy hard cover copy of the book around in plain view, I thought of the review I should write based on lessons I learned from casual on-lookers and their unsolicited comments about the author. Initially any black Catholic reading Thomas might learn that it is risky to be seen in his company, even if only in print.

At times I found myself quickly explaining to others why I was reading *My Grandfather's Son*—explaining that I was indeed a faculty member at a nearby university and that I was thinking about using it for a class. Surely I was first and foremost an individual who should be able to read whatever and whomever I liked, without judgment. Not the case. I was a black man reading the story of a high profile ultra-conservative black man who represents to some what is inherently wrong with black folks who rise to the top. They are seen as elitists, haters of other black folks who cannot seem to get their act together, Uncle Toms, whitish blacks and sell-outs. In that regard, Thomas's story is not unique.

Thomas, a one-time professed Catholic, is sharing his story in his own words; for example, stories of individuals and events in his life that strongly influenced his transformation from a left-wing political liberal to a right-wing political conservative. He shares stories of disappointment that drove him from the larger Church. The stories of Thomas, who once believed that “the whole of the American culture was irretrievably tainted by racism” (p. 50), to the Thomas who later became one who rejected supportive programs that specifically targeted African Americans. These points of departure and their justification make his story a compelling read.

Thomas's accounts of his transformational years at Holy Cross and Yale Law School and his growing association and relationships with black conservatives like economists Thomas Sowell, Journalists, Juan Williams and Walter Williams, and Jay Parker (founder of the Lincoln Review),

along with past presidents Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush are thought-provoking. Although some of us might disagree with their right-wing political positions, and especially their positions on the significance of race, when we read about them we never fail to learn something deeply important about ourselves, even if only to affirm our own opposing positions to theirs. Like us, Thomas is greatly influenced by our setting and our associations.

Memoirs and autobiographies should be a particular draw and make a particular contribution to our understanding of the black experience in America and to our understanding of why some of us leave the Church for good. Nearly a century ago, black sociologist W.E.B. DuBois claimed that there is not enough known of the Negro experience in America. Memoirs offer a unique glimpse into the minds and hearts of those who write them. Theirs are sacred stories which offer insights into the author's search for truth and they reveal important life-changing experiences and events shared in their own words.

Dorothy Day wrote in her own 1952 memoir, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (HarperOne 1996), that, "When one writes the story of his life and the work he has been engaged in, it is a confession too, in a way" (p. 10). Thomas' establishes a confessional tone early when he writes,

"It [his story] is the story of an ordinary man to whom extraordinary things happened. Putting it down on paper forced me to suffer old hurts, endure old pains, and revisit old doubts . . . Part of

the reason for wanting to tell my story was to bear witness to what these people [my grandparents] did for me, though I also wanted to leave behind an accurate record of my own life as I remember it” (pp. ix-xii).

Thomas’s story lies somewhere between Henry Louis Gate Jr.’s *Colored People: A Memoir* (Vintage Press, 1995) and Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (Three Rivers Press, 2007), yet not in the same league as either. Like Gates, Thomas appears direct in sharing intimate family stories and painful encounters with his grandfather whom he called Daddy. Like Obama, Thomas barely knew his biological father and a grandparent played a major role in his formation in the Deep South. Although race and inheritance are not in the title of Thomas’s book, they should be. His story, like Obama’s, has everything to do with race, inheritance, identity, and a search for truth. Knowing that Thomas was a Catholic who was educated in Catholic schools through college was what initially drew me to his story.

The book could be divided into three parts. The first is a story of young Thomas and his early upbringing as a Catholic, first educated by Missionary Franciscan Sisters and later at Conception, a minor Seminary in Missouri where he flirted with the idea of becoming a priest. The second part begins with his experiences at Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA and the events that lead up to him walking out on mass halfway through and for the last time. It was at Holy Cross

where he claims he had his first brush with “racial heterodoxy.”

One would assume that Thomas’ story would include more on his experience of being a black Catholic and how the Church informed his outlook on life. Unfortunately, Thomas spends much more time on why he left the Church rather than on what he believed as a Catholic. Thomas then shares with the reader the beginning events and people who influenced his conversion to a hard-line Republican.

The third and final part of the book focuses on Thomas’ political career; his politically conservative associations and relationships; and last but not least his high profile confirmation hearing. Here he names his harshest political critics and frustrations that ultimately led him to accuse members of the Committee of a “high tech lynching . . . caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree” (p. 271).

It is not to say that we should read every book written about or by a black person, however, we should take special note of those who have or are leaving a mark on history. Good, bad, or indifferent, we are them and they are us. *My Grandfather’s Son: A Memoir* is indeed a worthwhile read if one is willing to take the risk of being seen with Clarence Thomas, even if only in print. Indeed, in the spirit of DuBois, we can never know enough of the black experience in America. Many of us can relate to this unlikely storyteller made famous by his controversial appointment to the highest court in the land and his memoir told only as he remembered

it. His is a story of race, inheritance, identity, internal struggle with self doubt; pain; change; leadership; and a loss of faith in the broadest sense. His is a story of black identity in America.

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