

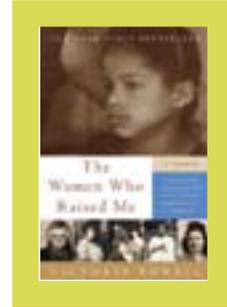
Book Review

The Women Who Raised Me

By Victoria Rowell

William Morrow Publishers

Reviewed by Shannon Gibney



The narrative of triumph over adversity is a powerful one; in fact, some would say that it is the archetypal American story. In the context of adoption and child welfare this triumph story is especially potent, as a child's ultimate success "proves" the legitimacy of the system. There is a well-established genre of personal narratives by children-who-made-it-despite-the-odds, and Victoria Rowell's new memoir *The Women Who Raised Me* falls into it nicely.

Detailing Rowell's experiences in the numerous households of her youth (and beyond), *The Women Who Raised Me* stays close to its title in theme and intention, paying homage to the biological mother, foster mothers, teachers, mentors, friends, and child welfare workers who helped Rowell grow into the person she is today—a successful actress, dancer, activist, and mother. Rowell's first paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the book: "For anyone who has spent any portion of their childhood as a ward of the state, the notion of emancipation has multiple meanings. Though I was legally and financially emancipated at the requisite age of eighteen and had always been fiercely independent, it wasn't until I was forty-three years old and a working mother of two that I finally set myself free."

Rowell's freedom, she intimates, is predicated on her reckoning with her complex history, in which so many people—mostly women—took part. Ultimately, the most difficult part of this reckoning is with her birth mother, a white woman suffering from schizophrenia, who was relentless in her belief that her three [biracial] daughters should be kept together and raised in a Black home. This is a part of Rowell's story about which I would have liked to learn more. Where did her mother's conviction on this issue come from?

Transferred from home to home, family to family, from Maine to Massachusetts, Rowell finds that the one constant in her life is ballet. After she wins a scholarship to the Cambridge School of Ballet, Rowell goes on to an accomplished career in ballet, thus proving the "hard work always pays off" maxim that is central to the positive personal narratives of so many previously fostered adults who have overcome their tumultuous beginnings and found success. This happened, Rowell argues, because of the relentless efforts of numerous women on her behalf.

Equally relentless, however, is Rowell's need to end every section and every scene with some sort of analysis and lesson for the reader. I found the endless insistence on positive outcomes, the recurring exposition on the various good qualities of Rowell's women, absolutely exhausting. Rowell writes, "Esther taught me life lessons that went beyond the ballet studio. I learned that I was loved and welcomed, as were we all. I learned the simplest, most universal truth: that one person could make a world of difference in someone else's life, even if only by caring enough to make sure carfare was available for getting to ballet class." And later, "Inside the Turner household, there was another kind of fight to learn. If I wanted something, I had to speak up for myself, and I sure as hell had better put things back where they belonged. Rosa ran a kind of pawn shop or pound operation, charging twenty-five cents to get back personal items from her that we didn't put away. If I couldn't afford to buy them back, she tossed them after a certain amount of time. ... Rosa was my heroine. Fatherless, she made her own way in spite of the odds stacked against her."