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Life and Leisure - Friday, November 17, 2006

Books: Boy 'n the 'hood

Brian Copeland—black and white and read all over

by Cary James

NOT A GENUINE BLACK MAN: OR, HOW I CLAIMED MY PIECE OF GROUND IN THE LILY-WHITE SUBURBS, by Brian Copeland. New York: Hyperion, 2006. 250 pp. \$22.95.

Brian Copeland is black. In 1972 he was 8, and that year, after living in other East Bay cities, and after his father beat him up once too often, his mother found the family a new apartment in San Leandro. At the time San Leandro was a bastion of self-righteous whiteness. East Oakland's notorious 14th Street changed its name to International Boulevard at the city line, and San Leandro patrolmen often waited there, ready to turn back anyone whose skin was the wrong color.

That first Saturday morning Brian took his baseball bat and ball and went out to play. A car full of teenagers stopped beside him. "Go back to Oakland," they said, moving on eventually to, "Let's kick his ass." Brian ran. In fact, he ran straight into a cop whose first question was, "Do you have any identification?" And then, Copeland writes, "He took my bat and ball, put them on the hood of the squad car, and then I was officially baptized as a black male in this society. He had me raise my hands over my head and he patted me down. I was 8 years old."

Not a Genuine Black Man is a cry from the heart. Copeland is a very funny comedian, but the jokes he tells, the jokes in this book, are a shield and a distraction against his life, the life of African-Americans in America. San Leandro in the '70s may have been the most bigoted city in the Bay Area, but both the place and the time are only a matter of degree. Copeland, however, still lives there, and he is certain things have improved. Not long ago his daughter was called "nigger" by one of her eighth-grade classmates, a white boy she'd known since kindergarten. It was the first time she had been called that, and it didn't bother her. But Copeland went ballistic. He phoned his sister in Sacramento, who told him, "She's 13 and living in San Leandro and that's the first time it's happened? Wow! Things really are better!"

But an enormous price has been paid, and Copeland still carries the internal wounds. In his mid-30s he went through a severe depression, and after the suicide of a co-worker realized that he, too, was in danger.

It was not enough that his stand-up routine made fun of the situation. That was his "funny mask," which was only skating over the surface. He had a radio talk show that drew its share of weird mail, mostly from old ladies and kooks. One day he got an unsigned letter: "As an African American I am disgusted every time I hear your voice because YOU are not a genuine black man." It wasn't the first time he'd heard the accusation, but somehow that letter stung.

What did it take to be a *genuine* black man? Was it because he didn't talk ghetto, that he thought the word "ax" was a noun and not a verb, that he'd even been a Catholic altar boy? His skin is black, and people looking at him always see a black man. He has been the target of a lifetime of bigotry. But he had become successful, had married and fathered children and, unlike his own abusive father, Sylvester, still supports and shelters them.

That letter made him write *Not a Genuine Black Man*. Copeland firmly believes that he *is* a genuine black man. The black experience is "not one lifestyle, one viewpoint, and one agenda." But most importantly, he's genuine because he's resilient. "I have the fortitude of my mother and my grandmother," he writes. "I stayed on my feet through taunts and harassment, through police intimidation and bigoted nuns, through schoolyard bullies and Sylvester, through my mother's death and bouts of sometimes crippling depression. I am still standing."

He offers his thanks to the writer of that anonymous letter: without it he would never have faced his own life. And I thank Copeland for giving those of us born with different skin this vital glimpse into the life of a black American man.

Brian Copeland's staged monologue, *Not a Genuine Black Man*, opened at the Marsh Theatre in San Francisco in April 2004 and ran continuously until April 2006 (the longest running one-man show in S.F. history). After a successful Off-Broadway appearance, he's back at the Marsh until the end of November.

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