

Not a Genuine Black Man by Brian Copeland (Hyperion, \$29.95)

by Anne Stephenson, The New York Times

In this funny memoir about racism (it sounds strange, but that's what this is), Copeland's wit is the spoonful of sugar that helps his sad stories go down. Now an actor and comedian, he was 8 in 1972 when he and his mother, grandmother and sisters moved to San Leandro, Calif., a city that was 99.9 per cent white and so smug about it that none of its barbers would cut a black man's hair because they claimed they didn't know how. In his first week there, young Brian was harassed and chased by a group of white teenagers, then frisked and taken into custody by the policeman who was supposed to rescue him. Growing up black in a "lily-white suburb" gave him a confusing self-image, one that wasn't helped by occasional visits from his abusive, low-life father. Copeland's book doesn't have the edginess of Chris Rock's humor, nor is it a Cosby-like paean to family values, although Copeland's mother tried valiantly to better her children's lives. Instead, it's a forum for his lingering bafflement over the insidious tactics of racism. "Can you believe these things happened?" he seems to ask on every page. We can only laugh at his jokes and wish we could say "No."