

Book Review - Not a Genuine Black Man Or, How I Claimed My Piece of Ground in the Lily-White Suburbs
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Do you like the place where you hang your hat?

Whether they're two feet away, or two miles down the road, everybody has neighbors. Would yours drop everything and come running if you needed them? Or do you share your space with the leave-me-alone, go-away kind of people?

And what if your neighbors were the sort who tried everything they could to get you to leave town?

If you're a kid, you don't have much choice. You have to live where your parents put you. In the new memoir "Not a Genuine Black Man Or, How I Claimed My Piece of Ground in the Lily-White Suburbs", author Brian Copeland writes about his childhood in what was then considered America's most racist city.

When Brian Copeland was a small boy, he lived with his mother, grandmother, and three sisters in Hayward, California. Copeland says his father left the family in 1970, but Dad came around now and then. When he did, Sylvester Copeland abused his wife and children.

In 1972, Copeland's mother moved her family to a town nearby, to escape the abuse. Instead, unwittingly, she moved the family into a different sort of bad situation. San Leandro, California was just outside of Oakland and it was almost completely populated by white people.

Almost every one of them wanted it to stay that way.

Even before the boxes were unpacked, Copeland says that neighborhood boys threatened to beat him up. He was the only African American child in school, and he was ostracized. It was no better when his mother sent him to Catholic school. The racism he endured there was particularly ironic, Copeland says, because the patron saint and namesake of the school was an African American woman.

Service people were rude and condescending. Neighbors made unfounded accusations of trouble. The apartment super tried to evict the family several times. But eventually and in small ways, a few kindnesses eked out to the family, giving Brian's mother the courage to take the bullies to court.

Author Brian Copeland is an award-winning writer, actor, and stand-up comedian. He's performed as the opening act for lots of big names and he's been on radio and TV... but this book is not as funny as I had expected it to be.

Copeland writes about his descent into depression and his attempt at suicide. He tells of his mother's struggles with racism, her grace when greeted with nastiness, and her serenity in the face of bigotry. He writes that, many times in his life, he hated being brown and he admits, to his own horror, that his four-year-old son had the exact same feelings.

Chances are, if you are African American, many of Copeland's experiences will regrettably be all-too-familiar to you. If you're white, you absolutely need to read what he says in order to get a mere inkling of understanding about racism.

Find this book somewhere. Order it. Borrow it. Read it, read it, read it. "Not a Genuine Black Man" is genuinely one of this year's don't-miss books.