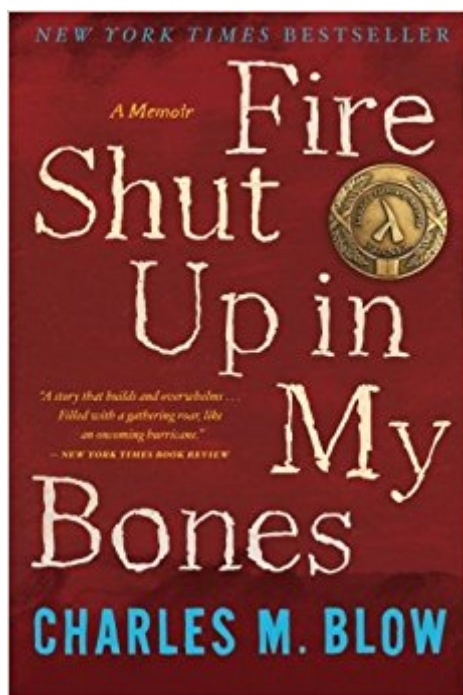


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Fire Shut Up In My Bones



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book | Lambda Literary Award Winner | Long-listed for the PEN Open Book Award
“Charles Blow is the James Baldwin of our age.”
Washington Blade “[An] exquisite memoir . . . Delicately wrought and arresting.”
A New York Times Universally praised on its publication, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is a pioneering journalist’s indelible coming-of-age tale. Charles M. Blow’s mother was a fiercely driven woman with five sons, brass knuckles in her glove box, and a job plucking poultry at a factory near their segregated Louisiana town, where slavery’s legacy felt close. When her philandering husband finally pushed her over the edge, she fired a pistol at his fleeing back, missing every shot, thanks to “love that blurred her vision and bent the barrel.” Charles was the baby of the family, fiercely attached to his “do-right” mother. Until one day that divided his life into Before and After—the day an older cousin took advantage of the young boy. The story of how Charles escaped that world to become one of America’s most innovative and respected public figures is a stirring, redemptive journey that works its way into the deepest chambers of the heart. “Stunning . . . Blow’s words grab hold of you . . . [and] lead you to a place of healing.”
Essence “The memoir of the year.”
A. V. Club

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Fire Shut Up in My Bones is a luminous memoir that digs deep into territory I've longed to read about in black men's writing: into the horror of being submerged in a vast drowning swirl

of racial, spiritual, and sexual complexity, only to somehow find one's self afloat, though gasping for breath, and then, at long last and at great cost, swimming. I believe both Ancestors and Descendants will cheer."

•ALICE WALKER "Some truths cannot be taught, only learned through stories - profoundly personal and startlingly honest accounts that open not only our eyes but also our hearts to painful and complicated social realities. Charles Blow's memoir tells these kinds of truths. No one who reads this book will be able to forget it. It lays bare in so many ways what is beautiful, cruel, hopeful and despairing about race, gender, class and sexuality in the American South and our nation as a whole. This book is more than a personal triumph; it is a true gift to us all."

•MICHELLE ALEXANDER, author of *The New Jim Crow* "Fire Shut Up in My Bones is a profoundly moving memoir of Charles Blow's coming of age as a black boy in the Deep South; of the way his sensitive and gifted intelligence slowly begins to kindle, becoming ablaze with wonder at the world and his place in it. Above all, this is the story of a courageously honest man arriving at his decision to stop running like the river . . . and just be the ocean, vast, deep, and exactly where it was always meant to be." Blow has written a classic memoir of a truly American childhood.

•HENRY LOUIS GATES "Fire Shut Up in My Bones is a heart-stopping memoir: a portrait of the artist the exceptionally talented columnist Charles Blow that also puts a searing face on all sorts of abstractions, like poverty, race, sexuality, and a human persistence sometimes known as courage. So particular yet gracefully timeless is this evocation of childhood that I sometimes felt as if I were reading an update of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which the poor, black protagonist's moral education destines him to endure, and prevail."

•DIANE McWHORTER, author of *Carry Me Home* "Stunning...Blow's words grab hold of you like a fever that shakes you up at first but eventually leads you to a place of healing."

•Essence "[Fire Shut Up In My Bones] is the most compelling read of the fall and the kind of book that will inspire you to turn off the TV and curl up in front of the fire instead."

•BET.com "Blow masterfully evokes the sights, sounds and smells of rough-and-tumble, backwater Louisiana...a well-written, often poetic memoir"

•Kirkus "Page by elegant page, Charles Blow has constructed an eloquent and courageous memoir that explains why black and white is never just that whether it comes to race or the rich, conflicted stew of childhood memory."

•GWEN IFILL, moderator, *Washington Week*, and co-anchor, *PBS NewsHour* "Brave and powerful . . . a singular look at a neglected America."

•Publishers Weekly "Powerful...so well-written."

•ANDERSON COOPER "When you finish Charles Blow's mesmerizing memoir, you will cry. And you will better understand poverty, the south, racism, sex, fear, rage, and love. Then you will miss being in his authorial grip. Then you will start

reading this stunning book again." —•LAWRENCE O'CONNOR "Charles Blow is a fellow Louisianan. His memoir, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, warmed and tickled my bones. The memoir takes its title from a passage from the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament: "His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot." I am supremely glad Blow can no longer hold his own story inside and has chosen to share it with us. From a small town kid growing up in extreme poverty in the segregationist Deep South to a columnist at *The New York Times*, Blow is an absolute treasure and his powerful story deserves to be heard." —•DONNA BRAZILE "Fire Shut Up in My Bones is a masterwork of remarkable power, authenticity and honesty. Blow writes with passion about coming of age in a rural Louisiana community suffering from the ravages of racism and poverty. His riveting memoir frankly takes on sexuality, religion and social hierarchy in the African-American community and reveals the inner soul of one of America's most intriguing public intellectuals." —•DARREN WALKER, president of the Ford Foundation "Fire Shut Up in My Bones is an instant classic of American letters. Charles Blow's eloquent memoir is haunted by surges of pain and suffering that rarely escape into the open with such searing honesty. Blow's brilliant and self-critical narrative contains truths which no American can afford to ignore, and which few black men have dared to tell. In this irresistible story of the journalist as a besieged boy and determined young man, one of the nation's foremost social critics bares his soul and speaks his mind with redemptive clarity." —•MICHAEL ERIC DYSON "I missed him the moment I read the last word. Charles Blow's delicate, dangerously vulnerable journey from boyhood to manhood to himself, takes hold of you like a long lost friend you don't ever want to let out of your sight again. *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* finally, exquisitely gives voice to the complex and gloriously diverse Black American male identity. A modern memoir that reads like a great classic novel, it's the kind of masterful storytelling that divides folks into those who have read and those who have not. I am forever grateful to be among the privileged haves." —•MICHAELA ANGELA DAVIS "Charles Blow has given us an enormous gift with this penetrating and honest memoir. I could not put it down, riveted by the journey, with no idea where it was taking me but deeply illuminated by the end. Blow opens up his life, growing up in the Deep South, and shines a light on the complexities and diversity of sexual identity in a way that can only help advance the march toward equality." —•MICHELANGELO SIGNORILE, author of *Queer in America* "It takes a great deal of courage to divulge your deepest secrets to the world, but Charles Blow shares the story of his personal journey from a rare place of honesty, especially for such a celebrated public figure. In *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, Blow has constructed a beautifully crafted, timeless story of coming of age in

the face of betrayal, adversity, and self-doubt. I expect this memoir will not only resonate today but will also enlighten and inspire readers for years to come." —KEITH BOYKIN "This book is an elegant heartache. Charles Blow's story is by no means an easy one, but he tells it beautifully, a gorgeous read about a gorgeous little boy striving to become himself amidst a world discouraging him from doing so. Blow does an astonishing job of intertwining hardship with humor, pain alongside pleasure, revealing his signature talent for prose that is transcendently poetic at the same time it's grounded in microscopic details of life and insight." —SALLY KOHN "Charles Blow is one of the most astute literary voices we have in America today. His is an eye that sees inside our communities, inside our world, inside himself, in a way that not only makes us think, but permits us to feel, to be, to change." —KEVIN POWELL "Boldness shines through." —Shreveport Times

HMH hardcover, 2014, 978-0-544-22804-7 --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

A memoir's job is to bring the lifestyle, upbringing and choices made by the author into stark focus for unfamiliar readers. Without melodrama or sentimentality, Charles Blow's memoir succeeds - working as an anti-nostalgic look at the 1970s, and a look at how events in our youth make us the adults we become. I read this book because of, not despite, a few negative reviews. I think those readers expected the light, maudlin nature that many memoirs fall victim to. I understand the desire for levity and laughs, but not all stories can contain them. Here, Blow gives a tour through Louisiana not-quite-full-poverty, with a family struggling along. It's hard and isolating, and when the young Blow is targeted by a predatory cousin, it's not funny at all. What I appreciated most was Blow's blunt, honest tone - he doesn't rely on frilly adjectives to try to force meaning, but lets the events do the job. His newspaper background is clearly the root of his strong writing. One of my peeves is melodrama, and I didn't find much of that here (except the first few pages, actually). Lots of dramatic events, but I never felt I was being preached to (except the very ending, but that works as a powerful conclusion). Even during the most brutal accounts of his fraternity hazing, he doesn't make any false stretches for overwrought "I felt my childhood fading away" conclusions. The scenes make the point all by themselves. Here's an example of what I mean. A lesser writer would have overwritten this until it lost all effect (though it may lack impact out of context): "All I knew was that in my heart, in my bones, I no longer believed. I figured that she had probably placed a safe bet after a bad one, and maybe after the fact she had thought better of it." When you read the scene I hope you agree with me that that is plenty - that all the hard emotion of the moment is captured

perfectly. His mother is a great "character," but she's not perfect, that's for sure. And obviously the fact that she was unaware of the abuse directed at her son is a tragedy. One thing that makes me uncomfortable is Blow's suggestion that his abuse may have led to his own adult questions of his sexuality. I personally do not believe homosexuality works that way, and I don't like the suggestion that any gay person can "turn" someone that way. But - those are his own personal questions based on this bad experience. It's not supposed to make a reader feel good - it was abuse! I have no idea if it was deliberate, but the fraternity scenes had a "Invisible Son" vibe and a throwback to the infamous battle-royal scene in that book. But 1980s fraternity hazing was brutal for all colors, so I'm likely externalizing from one of the few other books about the "black experience" that I've read. And while the hazing is bad, it's not horrible - I was actually more surprised that the Grambling community wasn't as "all in it together" as I guess I expected. This is a book about the African-American experience in the 1970s-80s culture. So if anyone calls it a "racially-oriented book" you might as well call books by 20-something white kids in New York City "racial books." It's a culture of people in a part of the United States that different audiences will have little knowledge about, thus the value of nonfiction accounts (I was in the Army in Georgia in 1987, and as a young northerner, the entire place was/is culturally bizarre to me). Bottom line - I know a book is strong when I start reading, blink, and 50 pages have gone by. It's a powerful story - not for the faint of heart, maybe, but a good look at the choices we all make and how we all navigate our own rough water.

I was fortunate to get my hands on an advanced copy of *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* by New York Times Op-Ed columnist Charles M. Blow. From the very first sentences of Charles Blow's memoir, I was captivated. So much difference between our lives and, yet, so much sameness. His story telling perfectly exemplifies the connection Maya Angelou spoke of when she said, "I am human, therefore, nothing human can be alien to me." However, the ability to capture the depth of this connection is a gift that few writers have actually given me. I feel like he pulled thoughts right out of my head and channeled them through his fingers and onto his keyboard. Charles Blow's memoir can be succinctly described as an account of growing up in the South, but as a person from such a very distinct geography from the South - as Southern California, I don't think that captures the connections, the bridges of human experience that his story provides. As a Chicana (Mexican-American woman) who grew up in poverty in Southern California, my experiences resonate with those of a Black man who grew up in poverty in Louisiana.

And that is the mark of truly breadth-reaching and breath-taking writing. When he speaks of growing up in the South, there is little of that physical location that I can relate to, but his descriptions of his surroundings bring me there. My senses captured sights and sounds through his words from descriptions of the landscape that I could see in my mind's eye to the packed earth that I could smell, feel, and taste with the keen appreciation that children possess. It was the emotion palpitating from each sentence that carried me lyrically from one to the next. Many passages sang out so beautifully that I read them over and over, like I was playing my favorite song. I savored each word and lingered on each one. His memoir also speaks of pain with an incredible bravery. Those of who are survivors of childhood abuse will feel a strong connection. The anger, pain, and healing are all palpable. He describes the complexity of psychological, social and emotional formation from childhood into adulthood with a clarity that is intensely relatable. I found myself thinking a number of times, "I was like that as a kid" or "I did that when I was a kid." And when I read about the kittens, well, my heart filled with a warmth of knowing, "I knew that was what he'd do." I'd leave it at that. Not only will you know about Charles's life and character after reading his memoir, but you may very well know yourself more profoundly as well. It's his writing that emanates from the soul and made my heart both ache and sing. That's what great writing does - leaves us mesmerized, fulfilled, and yet, contradictorily wanting more, and, in the end, we don't quite know exactly how all of that was accomplished.

I have been reading Mr. Blow's work in the N Y Times for years. I never miss his column and I follow him on Twitter because his voice and his perspectives are so valuable, thoughtful, and needed in our society. I preordered this book a while ago and immediately started reading it when it arrived in my Kindle app on Tuesday. Thank you, Mr. Blow, for a courageous look at yourself and at very complex human dynamics, especially those in families. This is a book that should be read by all Americans because while it is a profoundly personal story, it touches on the topics of love, loss, betrayal, fear, and how we have to come to terms with our lives so that we can be the person we want to be, that we need to be, that we deserve to be.

This wonderful memoir is worth reading on so many different levels. Many passages are as eloquent and evocative as anything Faulkner ever wrote. Charles Blow's family members and

friends come alive on the page, and the reader acquires a vivid understanding of what it was like to grow up African American in the South during the last decades of the twentieth century. The author writes with candor and sensitivity about his childhood traumas and their lingering effects on his mind and heart. I have been recommending "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" to all my Facebook friends and to everyone else within earshot.

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