



Colored People

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In the preface to this memoir, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states his objective explicitly: “I have tried to evoke a colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties and the advent of a black world of the later sixties, from the point of view of the boy I was.” Gates brings his world to life through image and narrative, as opposed to using it to make a point about race relations. The point of view, however, is not consistently that of a boy; the adult author looks over his shoulder, offering perspectives of which his younger self was incapable and information of which he was unaware.

One such paradoxical perspective lies near the heart of the book. In the 1950’s and earlier, Gates writes, life for black people in Piedmont held “a sort of segregated peace.” Segregation is a basic affront to human dignity; ending it deals a crippling and in some ways fatal blow to a life-giving black community. The deepest paradox is embedded in the two words of the title: the blacks of Piedmont are colored, and race means everything; they are people, and it means nothing.

The book rambles along smoothly. Under the easy-going manner, however, lies a sharp intellect, surfacing from time to time in barbed irony, and a deep emotional awareness of loss and waste in the lives of his people.

A striking feature of this memoir is that it is so very brief. Given the twenty-year time-span, and the number and richness of the lives which crossed that of the author, it could easily have been spun out to two or three times the length. Moreover, Gates’s approach has its costs: The emotional potential of many events, lightly touched on, remains largely untapped. Nevertheless COLORED PEOPLE remains a major accomplishment. Gracefully told, it is an amiable tale with a darker subtext: a pleasure to read, a boon to the understanding.

Sources for Further Study

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