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*This Here Flesh:
Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*
by Cole Arthur Riley

The text *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* by Cole Arthur Riley is a compilation of meditations, stories of her childhood, and the influential roles that both her father and grandmother played in shaping her into the woman she is today. Often addressing some of life's most challenging questions, Riley is raw in her stories. Despite years of insecurities and illness, she has developed into a powerful woman due to her family.

In the first few pages of the text, Riley bluntly states, "And as a Black woman, I am disinterested in any call to spirituality that divorces my mind from my body, voice, or people. To suggest a form of faith that tells me to sit down alone and be quiet? It does not rest easy on my bones. It is a shadow of true contemplative life, and it would do violence to my Black woman soul."¹

Riley's text is broken down into chapters that delve into some of the deepest parts of the human experience. Each chapter is centered on themes such as "Rest", "Lamenting", "Dignity" and "Rage". Within these chapters, the author magically uses stories from both her grandmother and father, references and draws from the wisdom of some great minds such as Howard Thurman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Toni Morrison (whose book *Beloved* served as inspiration for the naming of the text) in addition to drawing biblical evidence to support her storytelling.

One of the primary strengths in *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* is how honest and candid Riley is about how she feels. She does not make any

¹ Cole Arthur Riley. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. Convergent Books: New York, 2022, ix.

attempt to sugar-coat her feelings or present a water-downed version of the emotions she is feeling. She makes no apologies for anything. A perfect example of this is in the chapter entitled “Rage”. She states, “It should be no secret that Black anger has been demonized by a white-dominated society- white Christianity playing no small part in the subjugation”². Acknowledging that “white Christianity” plays a significant role in “black anger” is an issue that needs to be addressed and brought up in conversations.

Although the author was very articulate and raw with her emotions, struggles, and experiences, I don’t think that I got a clear understanding of her religious beliefs; several times when referencing God, she uses “She”. Although Riley *does* make biblical references, I could not seem to get a clear picture of what she truly believes in.

As the author states, “This is a book of contemplative storytelling. The pages you hold are where the stories that have formed me across generations meet our common practice of beholding the divine..... As you cradle these pages, it is my sincere hope that they might serve as conduits of mystery, liberation, and the very face of God”³. Her insight into such heartwrenching topics is penetrable and her use of imagery to convey her feelings allows the reader to not only hear what she is articulating but to also feel it. For example in the chapter “Joy” when describing how her soul felt, she compared it to slouching. That gave me such a clear picture of the state of her soul during her experience.

From the very beginning of the text, I was able to make a connection with the author. She states, “ As a default, I imagine God as a white man. Even now that I know the tragedy and the lie in the image, it seems to be branded on my soul. I used to feel guilty about this, but what else should be expected of me with all the stained glass and oil paintings?... It has damaged many to

² Cole Arthur Riley. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*, 110.

³ *Ibid*, xi.

think that the holiest being that ever was looks precisely like the man who kept our ancestors in bondage”⁴. Within the pages of this book, the author has caused me to dig deep within myself and acknowledge the pain of my past and the beauty and hope of where I come from. It has made me proud to be a woman of color deeply rooted in her faith and deeply proud of how the people in my life who raised me and made me who I am today.

⁴ Ibid, 5-6.

Bibliography

Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. Convergent Books: New York, 2022.