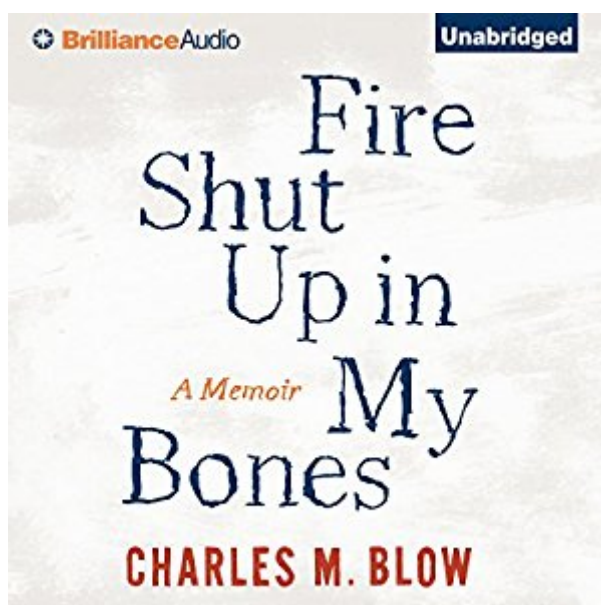


The book was found

Fire Shut Up In My Bones: A Memoir



Synopsis

A gorgeous, moving memoir of how one of America's most innovative and respected journalists found his voice by coming to terms with a painful past. New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow mines the compelling poetry of the out-of-time African-American Louisiana town where he grew up - a place where slavery's legacy was felt astonishingly close, reverberating in the elders' stories and in the near-constant wash of violence. Charles's attachment to his mother - a fiercely driven woman with five sons, brass knuckles in her glove box, a job plucking poultry at a nearby factory, a soon-to-be-ex husband, and a love of newspapers and learning - cannot protect him from secret abuse at the hands of an older cousin. It's damage that triggers years of anger and searing self-questioning. Finally, Charles escapes to a nearby state university, where he joins a black fraternity after a passage of brutal hazing, and then enters a world of racial and sexual privilege that feels like everything he's ever needed and wanted, until he's called upon, himself, to become the one perpetuating the shocking abuse. A powerfully redemptive memoir that both fits the tradition of African-American storytelling from the South, and gives it an indelible new slant.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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."

What a glorious memoir! It is as exquisitely beautiful as it is devastatingly raw in certain places. The vivid picture of life as it is lived in the rural south as painted by Mr. Blow is one that readers will at once recognize as universal and familiar in certain aspects, but also see as very distinct and unique in others. Those among us who, like Mr. Blow, were victimized as children, are certain to identify with the devastating trials and tribulations that follow sexual abuse. Charles methodically takes us through the stages of self-blame, shame, anger and social withdrawal. But then, Charles' unique combination of gifts, in the form of precocious wisdom, intellectual curiosity, and the drive to apply lessons learned pull him through life experiences that have devastated many a child. The reader is guided from stage to stage in Mr. Blow's path to self-discovery and healing. My first reading focused on the sexual abuse and hazing. The second reading was for the pure joy of Mr. Blow's exquisite writing, the vivid scenery and rich cultural tapestry of a Deep South I just didn't know. I will read this book at least twice more. As a long time fan of Mr. Blow's work at The New York Times, I've always appreciated his very nuanced approach to race and race relations and wondered about his experience as a person of color. His first person account on race relations in this memoir gives the reader a full appreciation of Mr. Blow's thoughtful nature, innate sense of fairness and generosity of spirit, as well as a very honest look at how segregation is practiced. I will read again for the purpose of discussing this book with my teen. We are reading Mr. Blow's memoir as a family and plan on discussing it as a family.

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