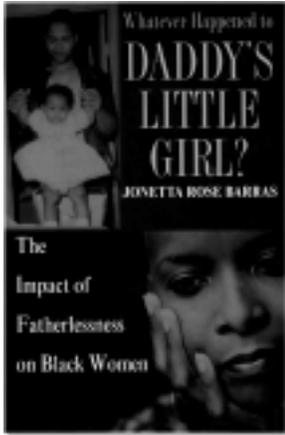




Book Reviews



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Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl? The Impact of Fatherlessness on Black Women

by Jonetta Rose Barras

Review by Paul Jimenez

“Truth! Truth; Truth! Truth,” tolled the bell (or is it “*told the bell?*”) as its chorus echoed and reechoed from mountainside to mountainside across the valleys and plains of psychological insight. And the ring of truth, distinct and distinguishable, is to be found in the book *Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl? The Impact of Fatherlessness on Black Women*. The author has brought rays of light to the subconscious and magnum doses of warmth to help break up the submerged portion of that iceberg.

The book's theme, and the problem it delineates, is fatherless daughters—specifically as it relates to African-American women. But it would be remiss to exclude the book from any type of study relating to the effects of parental deprivation (eg, fatherless sons, motherless daughters, motherless sons). With the huge increase of single-parent, nuclear families in this country, this condition merits urgent attention before it becomes an epidemic, if it isn't already. With many characteristics of a disease, this dis-ease of fatherlessness is intergenerational. Mom passes the values and attitudes that define the condition to her daughter, who in turn wills it to her daughter—something like a family heirloom.

The source of this particular disease is the absence of the child's father. The reason for the absence, at least initially, does not matter. It could be the father's death; the parents divorcing; a workaholic father; or a father who is so emotionally withdrawn that he doesn't display any care, attention, or affection toward his daughter. She, in her undeveloped reasoning, interprets this absence as rejection or abandonment and wonders why she was so singularly expelled from her father's life and denied his gifts. The best answer that her immaturity can come up with is that she is not worthy of her father's attention, or that she is in some manner defective or unlovable, or that she is deficient in some quality her father admires. She blames herself and promptly proceeds to hide the pain. Burying the pain and at the same time wishing to earn her father's attention (but not having the vaguest idea of how to do this), she compromises her integrity, her sense of worth, and her self-esteem—in other words, her very sense of self.

The pain, which is the consequence concomitant with the sense of loss, becomes the prime mover (though subconsciously) of her existence—of her need to survive. This pain—sometimes sensed as a void—defines, colors, and controls virtually every facet of her life—from the attitude she projects onto people, to how she interprets her life events and experiences.

The fatherless daughter might react with aggression or suspicion to a neutral or even a positive remark. Everything becomes tainted with the potential of another loss, more pain, and a greater void—something that fatherless daughters try to minimize. The author says, “They sing a fatherless song.” I'll play on a word and say they do “a-void-dance.”

The book's author identifies five characteristics of the Fatherless Woman Syndrome. First, the “un” factor. The fatherless daughter feels unworthy and unlovable. And though she may have buried (denied) these feelings, her unconscious guides her into relationships and circumstances where these dormant feelings are awakened—to her surprise and anguish!

The second factor is the “triple fear” of rejection, abandonment, and commitment. Rejection and abandonment we have touched on, but the fear of commitment is explained by once being so badly burned by commitment to her father, or father-surrogate,—she is reluctant to experiment with commitment again.

The third factor is sexual healing, which may range from promiscuity to abstinence, but the consistent element throughout is the lack of intimacy. In true intimacy, a person loses momen-



tary control. The fatherless daughter knows she has absolutely no control over her loss, so she embarks on an endeavor to control the relationships and circumstances in her life. This endeavor often gives rise to the fantasy that a baby will fill the void and resolve her sense of loss.

The author next describes the “over” factor. The fatherless daughter tries to survive by *overachieving*, *overcompensating*, *oversaturating* to the point of, and often crossing over into, addiction—not only the acknowledged addictions like alcohol, drugs, and food, but psychological ones like compulsions, obsessions, and “unfounded” fears.

The fifth and final factor the author calls “RAD,” which is her acronym for rage, anger, and depression. Rage, she states, is anger turned outward, and, depending on its attire (indignation or hatred), could be a power for positive, constructive achievement or negative, destructive violence. Depression is the result of anger turned inward.

There is a chapter of questions for fatherless daughters to ponder about how fatherlessness has affected their lives. There is also a chapter on “should dos” for the daughters to heal themselves and another such chapter for the fathers to help heal their daughters—and themselves, too.

The author concludes that whatever healing takes place, the healing will be in direct proportion to the individual’s maturity. Because the problem began when an immature child had to deal with a negative situation that was beyond her ability to reason out or accept as well as beyond her powers to affect or alter, she relegated the problem (pain) to her subconscious. This way, at least, she could survive consciously (physically), albeit superficially. Yet, though buried, the negative experience (like Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart”) lived and breathed down there, swaddled in all the irrationality of her immature understanding, sporadically reminding her of its omnipotence and its need to be unearthed. Once that incident is brought to the light of her mature adult consciousness—the ability to reason and understand as well as the power to make and adhere to choices—her nemesis becomes somewhat controllable and manageable; it ceases to be an ambusher-in-the-dark.

I was swept up by the author’s power of persuasion. Every conclusion and explanation seemed rational and logical to me. I did not perceive any holes in the tapestry she wove. But I did wonder: Is this parental deprivation the Pandora’s box that unleashes all sorts of ills upon the world? Is this void what drives humans into addictions and health-risk behaviors? Are the roots of crime and inhumane behavior tied into the disease of parental deprivation? Is criminal activity merely the resolution to the problem of feeling unworthy and unlovable that is caused by incomplete and/or inadequate parenting? And if this supposition is not 100% true, is it 90% or 80% true?

Ancient religions and current social thought stress the sanctity of the family. But somehow that message has fallen on the barren soil of modern man’s materialistic heart. Unlike the clever bumper sticker that says: “Who should be responsible to the children? The answer is apparent” (a parent), the author makes the point that *both* parents should be involved in the rearing process. Perhaps in respelling “parents,” the meaning of the word would be better understood. If people saw the “pair” (two, together) in *pair-ents* instead of the “pare” (cut, trim away) of pare-[e]nts, a positive, subliminal message might be communicated. ❖