**Clarion Review**

Autobiography & Memoir

**A Tragedy of a Broken Heart**
Willie Pilgrim
iUniverse
978-1-4620-1009-7
Two Stars (out of Five)

Willie Pilgrim's memoir, *A Tragedy of a Broken Heart*, is heartwrenching, but it feels sadly familiar. Written during his incarceration in federal prison, Pilgrim's book is a distressing tale of a life lived in difficult circumstances under the class divide of today's society. His is both a cautionary tale and a story of the consequences when family support is lacking, abuse runs rampant, and life spirals out of control.

Born into poverty in 1961 in rural South Carolina, Pilgrim is the youngest of eight children. In 1962, his father abandons the family. Welfare checks eventually kick in, and circumstances improve, albeit minimally. At twelve, Willie moves with his family closer to the city, and by sixteen, he has "three bad habits…smoking marijuana, making love, and smoking cigarettes."

Pilgrim claims that his mother and older siblings broke his heart by making him the black sheep of the family, falsely accusing him of lying and theft, beating him, and doing "everything possible to hurt [him] every way they could." His mother not only does nothing to intercede but at one point pulls out a gun and threatens to shoot him. Willie meets a girl who soon claims to be pregnant by him, and two grades behind already, he decides to quit school and get a job. Unsure until after the baby's birth that the child is really his, he ultimately marries the girl but soon realizes that she is a crack cocaine addict. It is not long before he, too, is addicted.

There is much blame and even more tragedy in Pilgrim's story. Often "dangerously angry," he finds and loses numerous jobs, fathers three more children, and ends up on probation for buying crack for his wife, justifying the purchase by saying, "if I didn't she would probably slip out and go selling herself in order to get [some]." He sees everything as his wife's fault and feels that "she must pay for what she [has] done." He declares that years of "pressure, pain and suffering" cause him to snap, and he attacks a man he has known since childhood, stealing his

money and gun, so he can go out and “finish what must be done.” His incarceration follows.

Pilgrim declares great love for his children, and in an afterword, he maintains that during his years in prison, he always wanted to one day “return to society and prepare a life and future” for them and himself. He says he is a “stronger and wiser person” now, and anyone reading his story will hope that the days ahead are better for him.

His tale is decidedly unpleasant, but his writing is clearly heartfelt, if not particularly polished. There is a fair amount of raw sex and disturbingly degrading language concerning women, as well as rather graphic talk about men “turning pervert” in prison. The grammar and syntax are rough, but they lend an undeniably appropriate tone to the book. The text would benefit from the correction of certain errors to clarify the author’s intent. For instance, every time the author means to say “if I,” they appear as “if!”, and the expression “point in time” is always written as “point and time.”

*A Tragedy of a Broken Heart* is not an easy read. Between the subject matter and Pilgrim’s writing style, it is often uncomfortable, sometimes horrifying, and nearly always depressing. Even so, Pilgrim does have a valid story worth telling, and those who read it will understand that its reality is indeed a tragedy.

*Cheryl Hibbard*