



Affection and Estrangement: A Southern Family Memoir

Preston M. Browning, Jr.

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Affection and Estrangement by Preston M. Browning Jr. is a memoir that is more than just the story of one single life. It is also the tale of a time and place, and a study of how each person finds identity in his or her unique existence.

Browning's "Southern family memoir" is just as charming as one might hope, but its depth—of research, of emotional intelligence, of conveying life's complexity—will give readers a welcome surprise. Browning's voice is warm and friendly, without being overly folksy.

The book started as simple, nostalgic sketches intended to preserve memories for Browning's family. While his work may still be most keenly interesting to his relatives, Browning successfully engages a broader readership by crafting a compelling narrative, weaving in relatable themes, and reminding readers of their own life stories.

Browning begins with his childhood during the 1930s in Virginia, in a humble home called High Acre. He goes on to create sketches of "Virginians from vastly different backgrounds," calling them his "very extended family." He ends with a chapter where he examines himself as a man and a memoirist. This closing section of introspection and sociological examination will resonate with readers who have also pondered their own societal and familial ancestry.

A story written by Browning's grandmother called "Ole Mammy's Story" is included in the appendix and is intriguing because, as Browning writes, "it describes fairly accurately, I believe, the sort of affection that often existed between Virginia aristocrats and their Negro servants." Race, religion, class, and education are themes that Browning explores with openness and honesty in personal and historical contexts. Though he always writes with compassion and fondness, these issues are where the estrangement mentioned in the title comes in.

The volume's gray cover featuring a few old photographs sets an antique, austere tone. Readers will find this at odds with the "humor, warmth, and candid honesty" promised by the back panel, but those who look past any dreariness they see on the cover will be rewarded by the heart of Browning's book.

Photographs are included within as well. These offer readers a sense of the people and places the author is speaking of, but due to the age of most of the images and the black-and-white trade printing, they didn't reproduce very well.

Affection and Estrangement will appeal to people of all ages, from all areas, who are interested in ancestry and the exploration of history and culture through memoir. It will hold the most interest for Southerners who grew up in a similar time to Browning and who see their own lives in his story.

Browning's three decades of experience as an English professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago are evident in the literary insight and writing chops applied to the crafting of this memoir, which earned a well-deserved rating as an iUniverse Editor's Choice title.

MELISSA WUSKE (June 4, 2013)

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