

Clifford: A Memoir, A Fiction, A Fantasy, A Thought Experiment

Harold R. Johnson

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Acclaimed First Nations writer Harold R. Johnson returns with *Clifford*, a stirring family memoir and a tribute to Johnson's beloved brother, whose funeral was the impetus for returning to their childhood home. Through wispy images of Boreal gardens teeming with temporary fruits and flowers, and accounts of his six-years-senior brother edging his way through creativity toward disaster, Johnson reaches out to identify and understand the determinative moments in his large family's life.

One such pivotal moment was the death of Johnson's father. Johnson was eight when it happened, when his father's daily heart attacks developed into something more final. Until then, his father was the force around which he orbited. Clifford was fourteen, just as reliant on their quiet father, and—as Johnson remembers with surprise—absent at his funeral.

Was that the moment in which Clifford's balance shifted? Did the lights dim irreparably for the boy who crafted airplanes out of wire and paper, who once aspired to the stars but who no longer had the touchstone of his father's perennial question to center him: "have you thought about how you're going to use that idea to make things better?"

Johnson's short chapters are threnodial, tactile, and moving. He preserves moments: Clifford thwacking into the house on a speeding motorcycle he'd built from scratch; injuries and experiments; the absolute confidence that his brother's love instilled in him. Early adulthood conversations are a hallucinogenic swirl of astrophysical questions and wonder. Moments build toward something grander. In puzzling over Clifford's fracturing, Johnson is also able to address and redress his own wounds.

Clifford is a glittering and haunting account of returning home to places and people long avoided, of finding peace in the knowledge that your atoms are wound into the walls of abandoned places, and of learning to say "I love you" through the act of letting go.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January/February 2019)

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