

## I Am Not My Mother's Child: A Memoir of Pain & Triumph

**Andrale Jean-Louis**

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*I Am Not My Mother's Child* motivates others with traumatic pasts to leave pain behind.

Pride. Determination. Resilience. Andrale Jean-Louis claims these talismanic words as her guide through an abusive childhood in Haiti with her stepmother, years in Brooklyn with her callous mother, and a purposeful life in the military. A familiar narrative that highlights the energizing quality of forgiveness, *I Am Not My Mother's Child* motivates others with traumatic pasts to leave pain behind.

Presented in loosely chronological fashion, the work is divided into sections that focus on the absence of maternal love, the author's search for love as a young adult, and the love she now experiences in motherhood. Opening scenes that describe Haiti set a fair-minded tone for the book. The balance between love for the country's vibrancy and acknowledgment of its shortcomings is mirrored by the approach to the main figures in Jean-Louis's life, who are drawn without excessive adulation or villainy. Relatives and lovers are presented in a matter-of-fact style that avoids dramatizing even the tensest situations. Setbacks are mentioned not as confessions, but as catalysts for renewed determination.

The writing is at its best when it takes a leisurely pace that engages the senses, as it does in scenes that are set in Haiti. With a series of "I remember" statements, the first chapter immediately captures salient memories, from the author's grandmother, an Episcopal priest, to daily moments on the island. Such paragraphs contain potential for elaboration. Less engaging chapters chronicle disappointments with romantic partners. In these instances, the emphasis is placed on relating a succession of events, without fully capturing the individuals in ways that enliven them on the page.

Minor proofreading errors include inconsistency in names, among others. One section, for instance, introduces a nanny as Jesabel but later refers to her as Nicole. Other distractions appear in the form of a postscript at the end of chapter 15 and a lengthy, direct address to an aunt. Both sections are penned in a heartfelt voice that seems more fitting for a journal. Secondary topics, such as racism in the military and the bewildering jealousy of certain women, serve as examples of trials to learn from, but also shift the focus away from the main arc.

If the memoir is at times uneven, its message remains vital. The closing section enumerates wisdom gathered from a variety of sources; it crisply reveals a mind steeped in gratitude and faith. "You become what you believe," Jean-Louis remarks—a fitting mantra for healing.

KAREN RIGBY (November 19, 2015)

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