ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Intimidating Shades: Why Does My Sister Hate Me?
Norvelle Traylor Walker
Xlibris
978-1-4415-8934-7
One Star (out of Five)

Norvelle Traylor Walker's novel, Intimidating Shades: Why Does My Sister Hate Me? tells the saga of the Mays, a deeply Christian African-American family. Their trials stem from the fact that Verna hates her younger sister, Viola Grace, because her skin is darker.

This potentially trenchant exploration of a painful issue suffers from many problematic issues. From the outset, it is unclear whether this story is fiction or memoir. Walker claims it is as novel, yet she writes in the acknowledgments that her granddaughter, Viola Grace, inspired her to write the book. Further, key characters possess the author's maiden name, Traylor, as well as Viola Grace's married name, Lalugba. The characters attend a church with the same name as the author's. This confusion over the story's genre will distract readers.

There are more distractions to come, including an introduction that details every event in the upcoming story, thereby making it unnecessary to read the novel itself. The author calls the family patriarch "high yellow." This description of a black man's complexion conjures images of a time when terms like mulatto and quadroon were common, even though mentions of the Internet and DVDs indicate that the story takes place in the present.

Readers expecting compelling dialogue and intense drama will be sorely disappointed. Walker routinely summarizes key conversations such as Verna and Viola Grace's fights, family meetings, and Viola Grace's courtship. Yet readers are treated to blow-by-blow dialogue of phone calls between characters and their introductions to each other. By speaking about her characters instead of letting them speak for themselves, Walker dulls the impact of her story. Unfortunately, when the characters have a worthwhile conversation, they all possess the same false-sounding voice. Every character says exactly what they are thinking, and everyone's speech is full of platitudes. There is no difference between the diction of the children and that of the adults. The author also includes excruciating minutiae about matters not germane to the main family drama, such as drives back to college, picking out housewares, and settling in with roommates.

Moreover, the main characters are one-dimensional; Verna is demonized, without any explanation of why she might feel the way she does. In contrast, Viola Grace and the rest of the Mays are portrayed as saintly. Viola Grace and the rest of her "good" siblings are unbelievably obedient.

It is unfortunate that a book about the worthwhile topic of skin color in African-American families suffers from such poor execution.

Jill Allen