

## Other Voices

### Tony Blenman

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*This brave and heartwarming memoir shows that common secrets can have lasting implications.*

In *Other Voices*, Tony Blenman recounts his childhood in Barbados, which was blighted by poverty and abuse. This inspirational memoir reveals how he “chose to alter the script” of his life through training to be a counselor for victims of domestic violence.

Blenman was raised in a large family in Bridgetown, Barbados. His parents scraped together odd jobs: his father loaded sugar for shipping; his mother did masonry. When Blenman’s mother leaves for another man, his single father is forced to make do in a crumbling house. Domestic abuse was rife in the community yet never addressed. Escape comes through further study in Canada, where Blenman later meets his wife and trains as a social worker.

The book is organized into short chapters, often around disturbing moments, like Blenman’s father beating the family dog to death for eating unattended food. Two sad themes recur in early chapters: on multiple occasions the author suffered sexual abuse and false accusations of stealing. This causes him to question why he was a repeat victim: “I don’t know if there was something about me that caused some people to think that I was their...prey.”

The memoir has a satisfying narrative arc, particularly since Blenman gets a social work degree and puts his unfortunate experiences to good use by counseling others who have been abused. The middle section of the book drags, however, due to the overly inclusive nature of the documentation and the strictly chronological framework. This commitment to the time line hurts the dynamism of the narrative.

In places, the book resorts to generalizations instead of presenting individual scenes with dialogue, and it does not focus enough on its most illuminating, or sometimes amusing, anecdotes, like the author’s idea to prepare for Canadian winters by turning the air conditioning up high at the Barbados laboratory where he worked.

Chapter titles can be prosaic or information-heavy, often revealing exactly what happens in a spoiler-ish fashion, as in “The Death of Clyde My Friend.” On the other hand, the black-and-white family photographs are a nice addition.

The memoir is at its best when it boldly uncovers how common secrets take a toll on people’s lives. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, and racism experienced at a Bible college all play a role in Blenman’s life, yet he insists that “Past experiences don’t define us.”

Although the subject matter can be harrowing at times, *Other Voices* is a heartwarming read suited to anyone who can sympathize with dysfunctional upbringings or who enjoys survivors’ tales.

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