



Pressure Makes Diamonds: Becoming the Woman I Pretended to Be

Valerie Graves

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This is an inspirational memoir about a determined woman who faked it till she made it—and made it big.

Pressure Makes Diamonds is Valerie Graves's memoir, a story about an accomplished woman who is the epitome of grit.

Graves always knew that she would leave her modest Michigan surroundings and achieve success; until she did, though, she would act as if she were already there. She was surprised to become a teenage mother, but still determined to make a better life for herself, so she worked, went to college, and embarked on a career in advertising. She eventually worked as a copy editor, a chief creative officer at an ad agency, and as a vice president at Motown.

Pressure Makes Diamonds is made up of four parts with interesting chapter titles like “Mom Drops the Nuclear Family Bomb” and “Big Pimpin’ in the Big Apple.” It covers Valerie’s childhood through the present but sometimes feels overloaded with anecdotes that slow its pace.

Vivid details and thoughtful reflective statements draw out Graves's unique experiences. She relates encounters with celebrities and important brands, though these are somewhat buried near the end of her book, coming after tangential stories about moving in with different friends, working at a hospital, and maneuvering various relationships, both romantic and familial.

Though the mention of the civil rights, women's, and Black Power movements are glossed over, Graves's own perspectives of black culture—based on internalized racism and colorism on one hand, and pride and love on the other— are compelling. She draws on her experiences and evolving points of view related to black culture when she creates ads aimed at black consumers. There is a tension here that is not fully explored but that remains a subtle theme throughout. Whether recalling the guilt she felt as a working, absentee parent, or how she came to adopt new-age thinking, the author's storytelling skills and use of humor, imagery, and figurative language is noteworthy.

At an early age, Valerie decided she would fake it until she made it. Now a success by most standards, she no longer has to pretend. Anyone who enjoys reading about those who travel difficult paths in life will find *Pressure Makes Diamonds* to be inspirational.

KAAVONIA HINTON (Winter 2017)

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