Privilege and Prejudice: The Life of a Black Pioneer

Clifton R. Wharton Jr.
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This is the awe-inspiring account of one barrier-breaking man’s remarkable life.

Accomplished leader and statesman Clifton R. Wharton Jr. delivers an autobiography packed with impressive accomplishments following a lifetime of achieving firsts. This story of a Renaissance man tackles topics of racism, faith, politics, and family, and the respect which Wharton commands only seems more warranted as the story progresses.

Wharton was born into a family of barrier breakers as the descendant of slaves freed long before the Emancipation Proclamation. Both of his parents attended and graduated from Boston University when their very presence was a rarity in higher education, and his father went on to be the first career African American diplomat abroad. His posts afforded young Clifton the opportunity to compare responses to people of color across the globe, from relative acceptance in Spain just prior to Franco, to the prejudice that permeated the American South.

Clifton’s parents raised him not to let racism win, though, pushing him to value education and remain aware of his own worth. He matriculated from Boston Latin to Harvard, one of four African Americans in his year. He trained at Tuskegee during World War II before returning to school. From Harvard, he moved to a flagship school that later became part of Johns Hopkins, then to pursue a PhD at the University of Chicago, breaking ceilings as he went.

Race plays an interesting role in Clifton’s chapters: he is aware of the “malign proscription” of racism’s actors at all times, but rarely does he let it slow him. He recalls the pain of hearing about race riots and enduring lowered expectations, but always rises above: to become the first African American president of a public research university; to pioneer economic theories in developing Asian countries; to run the whole of SUNY; to accept a role in President Clinton’s cabinet.

He meets and impresses luminaries along the way, sitting with dignitaries, advising presidents, participating in events at Camp David. Into his intelligent and nuanced prose he winds bits of lyricism. Scenes from the Canary Islands to apartheid South Africa come alive under his direction, resulting in a work both moving and edifying. Privilege and Prejudice is the awe-inspiring account of one barrier-breaking man’s remarkable life.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2016)

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