

The Red Kitchen: A Memoir

Barbara Clarke

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The Red Kitchen is an inspirational memoir about finding a way out of family drama.

Through her memoir *The Red Kitchen*, Barbara Clarke opens up key moments in her life to find healing.

On the surface, Clarke's family was an average middle class one. She grew up in St. Louis in the 1960s. Her father was an up-and-coming real estate agent, and her mother raised the children and kept the home. Both Clarke and her brother were well-behaved, eager students. But underneath this calm picture, the adults' rocky marriage spelled conflict for the siblings, even set the groundwork for marital strife in Clarke's own adulthood. Through therapy and travel, Clarke later sought to understand, and recover from, the wounds of her childhood.

The book tracks Clarke's growth with clarity. Divided into four parts, its focused chapters move in a linear fashion, covering Clarke's childhood curiosity, her adolescent angst, and her time spent working and going to college during her busy, early married years. Making use of punchy, visceral descriptions, the narration balances action with contemplation well. For example, Clarke recalls the racial tensions that she witnessed as a child during a trip to Mississippi, but also accounts for her rivalries with her brother. Later, a life-changing trip to Kenya is covered alongside other vignettes of discovery, capturing new foods, wildlife, cultural practices, and harrowing adventures.

As it nears its end, the book becomes more intentional, focusing on lessons learned, and how they can contribute to devising a better future. Clarke's grit is seen paying off in the later portions of the work, which are also devoted to truth-telling and reconciliation with her mother. Returning to early scenes with a new sense of perspective, the conclusion brings closure.

In a sense, the book is an exercise in coming to terms with the strong personalities of others, including Clarke's mother, who memorably painted the kitchen bright red as an expression of her anger. Such bold representations of internal emotions, combined with verbatim, recalled conversations, help to portray Clarke's parents in stark, realistic terms. The adulthood realization that Clarke is good at describing others and pinpointing their desires, even as she shuts down her own feelings, leads her to find her own voice, and to help others do the same.

Within the book, writing itself is presented as an integral part of the healing process. Citations of works including *Catcher in the Rye* and Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* complement Clarke's desire to change, with the help of a therapist. Her own poetic turns of phrase and biting metaphors brighten the work and deepen its impact, illustrating mindful ways of navigating one's circumstances.

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MARI CARLSON (January 22, 2021)

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