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White Soul

Phil Clore
Chicago Spectrum Press (April 2001)
Unknown $14.95 (112pp)
978-1-58374-034-7

Thoreau remarked that he would not write so much about himself if there were anyone else he knew as well. Readers who understand what he meant, but still find themselves fascinated by the endless efforts we make to explain ourselves to each other, will enjoy these poems. A loosely structured, episodic autobiography in verse, the book offers witty and unassuming glimpses into a life that is, like so many others, both representative and distinctive.

The author's short-lined poems move quickly and economically. They often read more like monologues that might be overheard in a smoky bar than "worked" verse, and that is part of their charm, along with their refreshing bluntness.

Clore is an entrepreneur, activist, volunteer, and humanitarian. His two previous books are Crossing The Street By Myself and Thank You For Not Having Sex With Me, and he wrote the play "Black People Don't Ride The Conch Train."

His parents' troubled relationship figures largely in these poems: "Mom / stopped having sex / with Dad / because the / minister / said they / lived in sin / having been / previously / married," he announces early on. After his parents' breakup and various other difficulties, Clore finds a protector named Jane during his college years: "she assured me / I wasn't / going to hell / and / what's the big / deal / being attracted / to all God's children // she was the first / person I called / when I got / crabs."

As the collection's title hints, Clore's attraction to "all God's children" includes people of color, who he says "have guided my life." Many of the poems turn on his search for a wider and more adventurous life than his parents would have approved of; such a life, of course, is not hard to find in contemporary America, and Clore writes winningly and without excess sentimentality about friends, contacts, and lovers. The second half of the book veers away from the vaguely chronological narrative of the first section, but the untitled lyrics there are similarly engaging and unpretentious. Who can resist a poet who, after noting that a friend is finding his "inner child," remarks "I found / mine /several / years / ago / but / we / just didn't / get / along?"

JEFF GUNDY (February 13, 2002)

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