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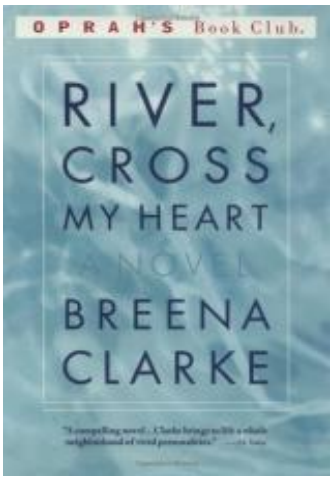
River Cross My Heart

by Breena Clarke



About the Book

Legends abound that the Potomac River is a widowmaker, a childtaker, and a woman-swallower. According to the most famous tale, the river has already swallowed three sisters--three Catholic nuns. Yet it did not swallow them, only drowned them and belched them back up in the form of three small rock islands. They lie halfway between one shore and the other, each with a wimple made of seabirds' wings.

The Three Sisters is a landmark. When you say the Three Sisters, people know you're going to tell about something that happened on the river to cause grief. And it isn't really clear whether it's the boulders or the river at that spot that causes the grief. Nobody in his right mind goes swimming near the Three Sisters. The river has hands for sure at this spot. Maybe even the three nuns themselves, beneath the water's surface, are grabbing ankles to pull down some company.
--From River, Cross My Heart

A remarkable new writer makes her debut with a novel of tragedy and triumph in the life of an African American family in Georgetown, circa 1925.

Eight-year-old Clara Bynum is dead, drowned in the Potomac River in the shadow of an apparently haunted rock outcropping known locally as the Three Sisters. In scenes alive with emotional truth, River, Cross My Heart weighs the effect of Clara's absence on the people she has left behind: her parents, Alice and Willie Bynum, torn between the old world of their rural North Carolina home and the new world of the city, to which they have moved in search of a better life for themselves and their children; the friends and relatives of the Bynum family in the Georgetown neighborhood they now call home; and, most especially, Clara's sister, twelve-year-old Johnnie Mae, who must come to terms with the powerful and confused emotions sparked by her sister's death as she struggles to decide and discover the kind of woman she will become.

This highly accomplished first novel resonates with ideas, impassioned lyricism, and poignant historical detail as it captures an essential part of the African American experience in our century.

Discussion Guide

1. *River, Cross My Heart* reveals the "hidden history" of one of the best-known neighborhoods in our nation's capital. Do you think there are neighborhoods in your town or city that have a comparable "hidden history"?

2. The whites-only pool on Volta Place represents an ideal, a seemingly unattainable ideal, to Johnnie Mae. Do you think that at the end of the novel--despite the fact that the Volta Place pool remains a whites-only facility--Johnnie Mae has in some sense reconciled herself to segregation?

3. Alice Bynum cannot swim. She recognizes that Johnnie Mae's attempts to save Clara from drowning far exceed what she herself would have been capable of. Do you think this knowledge influences Alice's feelings toward Johnnie Mae? Does Alice forgive Johnnie Mae too readily?

4. Press Parker, who builds Clara's coffin, is so moved by the young girl's death that he donates the ornate brass handles he's been saving for his own coffin. What inspires this generosity? Have you ever witnessed--or committed--a similarly selfless act of spontaneous generosity?

5. What role does work play in the lives of the novel's principal characters? Is it significant that Alice Bynum has chosen "day work" over "living in" as domestic help? How does working with the laundress Miss Ann-Martha Pendel help determine the kind of woman Johnnie Mae will grow up to be?

6. The financial ruin of Alice Bynum's employer, Douglas St. Pierre, foreshadows the crash of the stock market and the onset of the Great Depression. What effect do you think the Depression would have had on the Bynums and their Georgetown neighbors? How was your own family affected?

7. Johnnie Mae and Pearl are wary of each other for months after they first meet. How does each girl overcome her hesitation about opening up to the other? Have you ever had a relationship that began with such wariness yet developed into a close friendship?

8. Alice Bynum felt compelled to escape the humble surroundings of her North Carolina home in order to seek out new opportunities--for herself, and especially for her children. How is Alice's plight different from the plight of young people seeking opportunity in today's society?

9. Johnnie Mae Bynum is not Willie Bynum's daughter. How does this fact affect the relations between Willie and Johnnie Mae? Have you encountered situations in which stepparents have treated their own offspring and their stepchildren differently?

10. On the night of Clara's drowning, the men congregate in the Bynum kitchen, while the women gather in the Bynums' front parlor. How are these circumstances symbolic of the role that men play in *River, Cross My Heart*? Do the men in the novel take a back seat to the women? Why?

Author Bio

Breena Clarke's debut novel, *River, Cross My Heart*, was an October 1999 Oprah Book Club selection. Ms. Clarke, a native of Washington, D.C., is the recipient of the 1999 award for fiction by the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association and the Alex Award, given by the Young Adult Library Services Association. Her latest novel, ANGELS MAKE THEIR HOPE HERE, will be released in July 2014.

Breena, who has survived the death of her only child, writes with depth and clarity about grief. Her work is marked by compassion and magnificent use of language. Fascinated by the vast array of small and insignificant objects that contain finely detailed denigrating images of African-Americans, Breena is a passionate collector of Black Memorabilia.

A graduate of Howard University, Breena Clarke is co-author with Glenda Dickerson of *Remembering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, which is anthologized in Contemporary Plays by Women of Color and *Colored Contradictions*, An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays. Her short fiction is included in *Black Silk*, A Collection of African American Erotica, and *Street Lights: Illuminating Tales of the Urban Black Experience*. Her recollections of Washington, D.C. are included in *Growing Up In Washington, D.C., An Oral History*, published by The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

Breena credits having learned to swim eight years ago with changing her life. After completing a course of classes at New York's Asphalt Green Aqua Center, she has become a member of an aqua aerobics class, swims three times a week and practices Qi Gong.

Critical Praise

" A compelling novel...Clarke brings to life a whole neighborhood of vivid personalities. "

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