Books

Review: *Pearl's Secret: A Black Man's Search for His White Family*

By Neil Henry ’78J. (University of California Press)

By
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***Pearl’s Secret* is the story** of a fragile bridge between black and white America told by the great-grandson of Pearl, the daughter of a freed African slave and a white man. In this memoir of their family, Neil Henry, a professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, draws on his own family history to explore this country’s failure to grapple with the complexities, tensions, and consequences of its mixed-race heritage. “Both blacks and whites have shown uneasiness about this history,” Henry explains. “For black Americans, miscegenation traditionally has connoted the stigma and shame of the slavery era. For whites, the discussion has been even more muted. Were white society to publicly admit the obvious—that many blacks carry white blood—it would also have to accept their rights to fully equal citizenship.”

A number of family memoirs have staked out the territory of mixed race, among them *The Color of Water* by James McBride ’80J and *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Saga in Black and White* by Shirlee Taylor Hazlip. Pearl’s Secret brings new surprises and discoveries to that literature. At the book’s core is a 150-year-old mystery; around it a narrative shifts between Henry’s present-day search for an answer and the past where he seeks it: the waning years of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, and the civil rights movement. Pearl’s secret is that her father has a white family—thus, their descendants are family to Henry. With skills honed by sixteen years as a reporter for the *Washington Post,* he decides to find them.

Heirlooms provide clues and incentives. Henry grew up with these relics—a faded letter, an obituary, and picture of the “Englishman” whose name was A.J. Beaumont. Son of a distinguished European family, Beaumont migrated in 1859 to the American South, becoming a Confederate hero and eventually a successful businessman and landowner in a small Louisiana town. There he met and began a long-term relationship with Henry’s great-great-grandmother, Laura Brumley. Born into slavery on a Louisiana plantation, even before freedom she had gained enough education to maintain herself and establish a precedent for the family’s economic stability and future upward mobility.

The reasons for the abrupt end to the relationship between Beaumont and Brumley and her move with Pearl to St. Louis in the 1890s were never made clear to her descendants. Pearl attempted to maintain contact with her father, and in a belated response in April 1901, Beaumont acknowledged the “great injustice” he had committed in failing to claim her as his daughter. Pearl deemed this admission, his enclosed picture, and the invitation to write as an effort toward reconciliation, until news of his death reached her a few days later. Permanently saddened, she remained steadfast in her efforts to gain acceptance by Beaumont’s white family. For Henry, this poignant story, passed down through the generations, created a strong ambivalence toward Beaumont. Despite his family’s cautions, Henry was gripped by an intense intellectual curiosity about the man. At the same time, Beaumont came to symbolize arrogance, overt racism, appropriation of black womanhood—guiding principles of unrepentant white supremacy.

Beaumont touched Henry’s own life in more subtle ways as well. His parents, beneficiaries of the civil rights struggle, had successfully traded the repression of the Jim Crow South for an integrated, solid middle class life in Seattle. Yet gross misconceptions equating light skin color with beauty and success were part of his upbringing. In honest and insightful dialogue, Henry examines how a tradition of black pride and self-sufficiency can coexist with the glorification of light skin, “good hair,” and white features.

Henry’s six-year investigation ends in 1998 with the discovery of Beaumont’s descendants. With highly mixed emotions, he rattles family skeletons and confirms Pearl’s secret. Most startling is the contrast between the economic ascendancy of his black family and the declining wealth and status of his white one—the ultimate twist in stereotypical notions of race and class in America.

Critics may fault Henry’s digressions and minute, sometimes repetitious detail. But these are minor hitches on an absorbing and tough-minded journey. *Pearl’s Secret* does not conjure up happy endings or easy solutions to the barriers of race. Instead it bears witness to the possibility of change and to the transformative role family can play in this process.

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