

FINDING A WAY OUT; FINDING YOURSELF

a review by *Olivia Cash*

Marshall Moore. *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing.* Rebel Satori Press, 2022.

OLIVIA CASH grew up in Arkansas and earned her MA in English with a specialization in Southern literature and culture from the University of Arkansas, where she is currently a PhD student.

MARSHALL MOORE is the author of four novels, four short story collections, and three nonfiction works. Moore has an MA in applied linguistics from the University of New England and a PhD in creative writing from Aberystwyth University in Wales. Moore has lived and taught in numerous places around the US; in Seoul, South Korea; and in Cornwall, England, currently at Falmouth University.

In his memoir *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing*, Marshall Moore plainly lays out the peculiar dangers of his childhood and his path to adulthood in Greenville, NC. The memoir unpacks the specific trauma he experienced as a gay child raised by an ex-Marine and his mother, Laura, who claimed to be psychic. Growing up in North Carolina in the 1970s and 1980s – where rigid gender roles and expression were expected and enforced – young Moore could never be sure he performed the “correct” norms and behaviors. In every page of this engrossing memoir, I was concerned for Moore as he grew up and, eventually, found his own way.

Moore begins the book by discussing a routine part of development, potty-training, and how difficult and complex that process became through his parents’ scrutiny and abuse. It is immediately apparent that his parents demonstrated an overabundance of interest in his genitalia that extended beyond typical parental concern. Moore’s father, referred to only as “the Marine,” takes his son’s inability to “shoot straight” as a personal insult. Both parents resort to spankings with a belt before taking their child to a doctor. Moore’s mother displays an inappropriate interest in her son: as he enters puberty, she demands to see his developing pubic hair and pouts when she is denied the opportunity. The parental obsession and monitoring of Moore’s body



FROM ECHOES, E.B. AYCOCK JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK

and behaviors, especially from Laura, continues throughout his adolescence.

Moore’s difficult home life necessitated a psychological escape. Young Moore realizes his great intellectual ability, and he uses this gift to facilitate his getaway. He easily meets the requirements to enroll in the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM), which requires him to move away and live in a dormitory on the campus in Durham, NC. At the school, he begins to develop friendships with peers and takes control of his physical appearance. Though Moore found a little freedom from his parents, his peers were still able to spot the damage from his childhood when they interacted with Moore’s parents. After meeting his family, his roommate tells him, “I think I understand why you’re here” (116). Moore was able, for a time, to engage with his peers and express himself with slightly less scrutiny; however, he was expelled from the school for accidentally start-

ing a fire in his bathroom. He experienced rare solidarity and support from his parents amid his expulsion, at which time he moved back into Laura’s house, as the Marine had filed for a divorce, putting him in the middle of a different kind of conflagration.

The remainder of the narrative follows Moore through college as he explores his sexuality for the first time and continues to separate his life from his parents’. It has been clear to him through most of the book that his interest in boys is non-normative, at least by Greenville standards of the time, and this concealed interest costs him a close friend as a young teenager at NCSSM. However, when Moore enters college, he becomes friends with Adam, a fellow student in his Latin class, who introduces him to the nightlife in gay bars in Washington, DC. It is clear that Moore is continuing the self-discovery that started during his residential high school experiences, and he begins gradually establishing some healthier boundaries with his parents. It’s easy to feel a sense of pride for Moore as he finds a group of friends who understand him and ultimately graduates from East Carolina University. Moore settles into a sort of equilibrium as he finally starts dating, moves out of Laura’s house, and begins to develop a tentative peace in his relationship with his father. Moore’s move to Winston-Salem for his first job is a welcome moment of closure in the narrative.

Moore masterfully uses clear descriptions (the patchwork carpet at his aunt and uncle’s lake house and his Depeche

Mode-inspired hair as a teenager) within the stories of his youth. His approach to harrowing childhood trauma is candid and direct, allowing the reader to feel deep genuine pain for him, as well as his sister, as they endure the abuse of their parents. The few moments of joy in his childhood are vivid and act as anchors for the emotional narrative of Moore’s life. His coverage of his awkwardness in making friends and the self-determination that fueled him illustrate that these responses to trauma provided him with the ability to develop beyond the rigid demands of his parents. Moore portrays how complicated the experience of abuse can be, both in the moment when it is first experienced and throughout adulthood.

In the narrative, Moore also subtly lays bare the changing norms in the South. Overt social racism was on its way out among Moore’s Gen-X peers, but structures of racism were very much alive in places like the public school system, which, in Moore’s telling, was desegregated in name only. While the text focuses on Moore’s personal experience, it is apparent that he is dedicated to situating his experiences in larger social and cultural conversations.

Moore’s book may bring to mind *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) by Dorothy Allison. Although they are set in different Carolinas, Moore’s memoir deals with similar issues. While difficult to read, such stories of childhood abuse are important to understand the impact abuse can have on a developing

person. Survivors of all types of abuse are currently more emboldened to speak publicly about their experiences than has historically been encouraged, which seems to be a net positive for humanity at large. I particularly find immense value in voices from the South telling these stories. It has been concerning to me in the past that certain “trauma porn” texts set in the South present familial abuse in the Southern states as a sort of regional quirk, endemic to the culture. However, one of the points Moore makes clear in his book is that the treatment from his parents was not the norm, as he comments several times on his peers’ age-appropriate relationships and boundaries with their parents. I appreciate the choice to highlight this discrepancy, even as it opens up further questions about community accountability, since the abuse in the Moore household was so apparent. Moore skillfully makes space to discuss the complex and damaging nature of familial abuse, while avoiding framing it as intrinsically tied to Southern culture. ■



FROM VISA, ROSE HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK

ABOVE Marshall Moore, an E.B. Aycock Junior High School student in Greenville, NC, 1983

OPPOSITE Moore, a Rose High School student in Greenville, NC, 1985