

RACE STORIES

Revealing the Lives of Black Fathers

By Maurice Berger

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When Robyn Price Pierre walked down the street with her husband and newborn baby, she often noticed the curious stares and smiles her spouse received from strangers as he pushed his daughter's stroller. She soon realized why: It was the surprise of passers-by encountering a scene that's mostly invisible in mainstream culture — a black man as a devoted parent.

This realization inspired Ms. Price Pierre, creative director of the publisher Twenty Eight Ink, to explore black fatherhood in depth and has resulted in her book, "Fathers," which uses personal photos to depict the relationship between fathers and children. The first in a series of photo books about fatherhood to be edited by Ms. Price Pierre, "Fathers" serves as an important corrective, challenging a dominant culture that tends to disparage, discredit or underestimate black men.

"Though I was inspired by the relationship between my daughter and her father, I saw mirrors of that relationship all over my life — from men that I saw every day, to men on my social media feed who I had gone to high school with and hadn't seen in years," Ms. Price Pierre wrote in an email. "They were fathers, vulnerable and present, and their lives were full and important. None of this fullness, however, was reflected in mainstream media or the broader culture. These men, in the context of fatherhood, were almost invisible."



Darnell and Darnell Jr. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Harreld and Harreld III. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Eric and Dominic. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink

To find her subjects, Ms. Price Pierre, along with her husband and Francesca Epps, the project's director of production, looked to their family, classmates, friends and social media contacts. "We didn't have to go far to secure over 400 pages of content," Ms. Price Pierre wrote. "So the fact that these men are absent in mainstream media and the broader culture says more about who is at the helm of these media companies."

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The book, which includes short texts by some of the fathers and an introduction by the writer and educator Jelani Cobb, explores the many facets of its subjects' lives: Eric, protectively embracing his children, expresses joy knowing that he helped his children become "sensitive, caring, empathetic, thoughtful human beings"; Darnell, posing with his son on his birthday, proudly wears a Superman T-shirt emblazoned with "Papa"; Jermaine, fearful of "messing up," dotes on his daughter; and Pernell, walking hand in hand with his child, affirms that raising "a young lady is not the sole responsibility of the mother."

In contrast to these images, American culture continues to perpetuate a largely negative view of black men in general and black fathers in particular, even as Barack Obama, as the nation's first black president, served as a potent symbol of black male achievement and familial responsibility. Mr. Cobb wrote, "To be both black and a father, is to be seen by much of the world through a haze of stereotypes and half-truths; to be damned by the faint praise of people who expect so little that merely showing up is regarded as a minor miracle."



Michael and Michael II. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Javone and Jasir. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Jermaine and Janaya. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink

The myths of black fatherhood as dysfunctional or failed prevail despite ample evidence to the contrary. A 2013 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics affirmed that African-American fathers were just as, and by many measures more, responsible care givers than men of any other racial group. Yet, rarely do the findings of these studies — or the reality of the full and rich lives represented in “Fathers” — appear in mainstream portrayals of African-American men.

Ms. Price Pierre, who is also working on a book about the legacy of violence in the United States, said that this inability to acknowledge the humanity of black men ultimately endangers them.

“When you don’t see someone’s humanity, it allows you to do very unconscionable, and often violent things to them,” she wrote. “It allows you to separate children from parents and put them in cages; it allows trained officers to use excessive force that often leads to death; it allows a vigilante to kill an unarmed young boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt, denying him a future that may have included the rite of passage into fatherhood; and it allows regular citizens to stay silent and therefore complicit in all of it.”



Kobby and Landry. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Groesbeck and Elijah. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Mitchell and Manning. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink

“Fathers” is among a number of recent projects devoted to honestly portraying black masculinity and fatherhood — including Zun Lee’s powerful photo book, “Father Figure: Exploring Alternative Notions of Black Fatherhood” (2014) and Barry Jenkins’s Academy Award winning film, “Moonlight” (2016), a tender coming-of-age drama and lyrical meditation on masculinity. In the end, these works exchange mainstream culture’s simplified and fearful view of black life with rich and complex depictions meant to inspire, empower and educate.

Ms. Price Pierre says that as she worked on the book, her understanding of its nuanced representations of black fatherhood became more salient and urgent. In the end, “Fathers” does more than challenge a troubled present. It imagines a more just and dynamic future, one liberated from damaging stereotypes and misconceptions.

“Ultimately, I began to understand ‘Fathers’ in a different way,” she wrote. “It began to feel almost like an archival project — the archiving of our humanity. Because when future generations, or civilizations look back, if they look at our

media, our newspapers, what will they know of us? Will they know that we, black folks, black fathers in this case, lived and loved?”



Jason, Callie, and Caleb. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink



Aaron and Aaron Jr. Courtesy of Twenty Eight Ink

Race Stories is a continuing exploration of the relationship between race and photographic depictions of race by Maurice Berger. He is a research professor and chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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