



River, Cross My Heart

Breena Clarke

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The acclaimed bestseller--a selection of Oprah's Book Club--that brings vividly to life the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC, circa 1925, a community reeling from a young girl's tragic death.

Five-year-old Clara Bynum is dead, drowned in the Potomac River in the shadow of a seemingly haunted rock outcropping known locally as the Three Sisters. *River, Cross My Heart*, which marks the debut of a wonderfully gifted new storyteller, 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, ten-year-old Johnnie Mae, who must come to terms with the powerful and confused emotions stirred by her sister's death as she struggles to decide what 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.

River, Cross My Heart Details

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Author : Breena Clarke

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From Reader Review *River, Cross My Heart* for online ebook

Shirley Graf says

I really enjoyed this historical fiction novel about the segregated Washington DC neighborhood of Georgetown circa 1925. I particularly liked the spunky 12/13 year old Johnnie Mae who loved to swim but was not allowed to swim in the public pool because of the color of her skin.

Carolyn says

although the setting was intriguing and I learned some things about the history and culture of the time, the writing was so mediocre, I didn't even finish this one...

Patty says

This is really a great book. I actually picked it up while strolling through the flea market one Saturday morning. I enjoyed it so much, I plan on reading it again.

JDR says

I really, really, really, really wished the whole damn book was like its first chapter, its *beautiful* and *haunting* first chapter. It feels as though the whole story isn't coherent, I mean after a while it becomes fairly obvious that it is a story about the community and it doesn't actually have a plot of some sort but still, it still couldn't been great if it had focused on the characters more.

It didn't need to have a plot. Plot isn't necessary for a great novel. However, the community aspect of the story was what could have made this book worth reading. And, it wasn't.

With the characters, the author discusses too many of them for too little and whenever we get into the perspective of Alice or Johnnie Mae, we switch to irrelevant side characters. I WANTED MORE OF THEM and ultimately, the book wasn't satisfying.

And her writing isn't even bad, I saw the sheer potential in the first chapter. Hell, read a sample of it. If the whole book couldn't have been as atmospheric and effective as that first chapter, it could have been an 8/10 book, but the writing wasn't used to its fullest. Missed potential, the worst kind of disappointment.

- + Writing
- + Main Characters
- + The Memorable Moments are *memorable*

- Some Supporting Cast
- Boring when it rambles

- Feels meaningless to read (as in, there's no feeling of satisfaction by reading it. I finish the book and I am not at all affected by having read it in any way shape or form.)

SKIP/BORROW/BUY: Skip

Final Rating: 3.6 / 10

Keyshia Dorsey says

i read a few reviews were people were saying the story has no plot, and i guess thats true. it was like i had a glimpse into someones (mostly Johnnie Mae) life. it was a trip and i enjoyed the journey. i find my self wanting to know how johnnie mae turned out as a full adult, did she go to schoool, are her and Pearl still friends. How did her brother turn out? it was a good read i enjoyed it a lot.

Steph says

River, Cross My Heart is a quiet, thoughtful story of facing tragedy and its aftermath. Although set in a black community in the early 1900's, Clarke focuses much less on ideas of prejudice and its repercussions on the black community than may be expected. Instead, this is a story about families, about mothers and daughters, about life, death, rebirth, and why it is all worth celebrating.

The patchwork intricacies of storytelling that Clarke uses meander back and forth throughout the cast of friends and relatives, emphasizing the significance of seemingly small happenings.

This was an enjoyable read, much like watching the lapping of waves along a calm shoreline or listening to ones grandparents talk about the olden days.

Tony says

The first thing to know about this book is that it basically has no plot -- it's more a series of loosely connected vignettes that, when taken as whole, combine to give the reader an impression of African-American life in the 1920s in a particular neighborhood in Washington, D.C. So, while the book does open with a beautifully rendered chapter in which the 12-year-old protagonist's sister drowns in the Potomac river, that tragedy doesn't lead to the kind of linear story with clear resolution many readers might expect.

In that respect, the book is a bit of a failure -- but to my mind, it more than makes up for it by presenting a compelling roster of leading and supporting characters who bring alive the social history of pre-Depression black Washington. To be sure, the little girl's death hovers over the entire book, and the author does a great job of showing how the community rallies to support the family, but it's really about the community, not the tragedy itself. We get little peeks into everyday life, rituals, habits, social mores, and so forth. And of course, racism and it's economic and social consequences are woven throughout the book in a seamless manner.

Ultimately, it's a very personal book -- the author lost her child to an accident, and it's hard not to read the book as part of her grieving process. Also, her parents grew up in Georgetown during the era the book describes, and the book began as a story based on their reminisces, so in that sense it honors their history. It's

definitely a book worth checking out if you have a connection to Washington, D.C. or just want a good fictional glimpse of African-American social history -- just don't expect much of a story.

Holly says

I just couldn't get into *River Cross My Heart*. The story opens with the tragic death of a young girl, and the following plot always comes back to that scene, and how a family and neighborhood are changed because of the death. I don't know if it is because the reader doesn't *know* the character that passes away, but because there were so few details I couldn't sympathize with any of the characters, but rather felt that I was reading the news.

Breena Clarke writes beautifully about 1920's Georgetown, nearly to an extent that you feel like you're there in the Bynum's kitchen as the smells of Thanksgiving dinner take over the house. I truly commend the writing style of this first novel.

The protagonist, Johnnie Mae, lives a troubled life from the point of her sister's death, and many of the scenes with the pool, river, and her friend Pearl left me puzzled. I feel like this book left a lot of things unresolved and walk away somewhat scratching my head.

I would give this book a 2.5 star rating.

Maya says

I almost gave *River, Cross My Heart* one star, but decided that since I actually bothered to finish it, it deserved more than that.

The book is about the impact of a little girl's drowning on her family, notably her big sister. It's a bit like a coming of age story, we follow the big sister through her preteen years and see how the family deals with the loss of their youngest daughter as well as the surviving daughter's changing ways.

The idea seemed like it could work, but the lack of dialogue made it hard for me to stay focused. There were a lot of random lengthy descriptions of insignificant characters. I feel like if they all were connected to the family in some important way, these descriptions would make sense. But they just seemed out of place, especially the ones that came at the end.

Anyway, I wouldn't recommend this one, folks.

I would like to share the fact that the book allowed for me to have a very funny interaction with my French-speaking physical therapist to whom I explained the definition of "cross my heart" ! Way to go, Bruno. You got more out of this book than I did.

Kristine says

I gave this book 5 stars for the gifted writing, which so brilliantly tells the story of the devastating loss in the

Bynum family. The story gives special focus into the grief of mama, Alice, and older sister, Johnnie Mae, as they deal with the death of their daughter/little sister. Along the way, the reader is introduced to endearing characters; family members, friends, and neighbors, and how they are also affected by this tragic event.

I loved the setting of the novel, which gives an interesting glimpse of a more improved, yet still segregated life of a black community in 1920s Georgetown.

The author includes throughout the book some wisdom worth pondering on, such as at the beginning of the novel, when Alice tells Johnnie Mae, "Just go on about your business and hoe the row that God has given you. If looking after your sister is your obligation in life, then be thankful you have a sister."

So glad to have found this book at the library.

Victoria Smith says

I am a bit perplexed by this book. On the one hand, it's a beautifully written glimpse into 1920s Georgetown's black community, and the interwoven lives of the various characters. On the other hand, it's a story about a child tragically lost to the Potomac river, and the impact this has upon her parents and older sister, twelve-year-old Johnnie Mae.

The overall effect is that it shifts around between styles, neither one thing nor the other. The writing is flawless, but I constantly found that just as I was getting into the mind of Johnnie Mae, the perspective would shift and another (often fairly irrelevant) character would be introduced. While it gave a wonderful overview of the community as a whole, I felt that I didn't stay with any one character long enough to really get to know them. I wanted it to be Johnnie Mae's story, and found myself frustrated with the different detours it kept taking. Did Johnnie Mae know that Willie wasn't her real father? Did Willie have some resentment that the child that survived wasn't his? These are things I would have liked to have seen explored in more depth, rather than the arrival of the beautician, or the incident of the injured cat (which I spent the rest of the book wondering about, since it was never followed up).

That said, there are some wonderful and/or heartbreaking moments in the book, such as the opening when Clara drowns and Johnnie Mae tries desperately to save her, and when Johnnie Mae and Pearl break into the whites only swimming pool in the middle of the night.

It's definitely worth a read if you're interested in black American history, but don't expect much of a plot.

Marie says

Hard to stay with at first. Then it was a page turner. Ending, I didn't get.

Kate Gray says

Apparently, I liked this book more than the average reader. Beautiful writing in spots, confusing in others... but that didn't make me dislike the book. This is a memorable community. I loved watching the women

interact kind of above Johnnie Mae's head.

Lucinda Porter says

This is an incredible book. Beautiful story-telling and deftly written. If you liked "The Help" or "The Secret Life of Bees" you will probably like this.

Christi says

This was a good book. The lives of the characters were illuminating but at times the characters seemed only partially formed. That didn't detract from the telling of the story, just left me wanting more.
