

Morgan Jerkins Should Write Us More Often

BY JASMINE KIRBY

Morgan Jerkins, *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*. Harper Perennial, 2018. 272 pp. notes. pap., \$15.99, ISBN 978-0062666154.

Rarely do I read a book that speaks directly and clearly to my experiences of growing up as an upper-middle-class African American woman in the U.S. and the challenges and privileges that come with that. But *This Will Be My Undoing* is that book and so much more.

Jerkins writes with clarity, and she provides statistics, history, and horror stories to support what would otherwise be a limited narrative of one life. Although in some ways stylistically similar to the types of

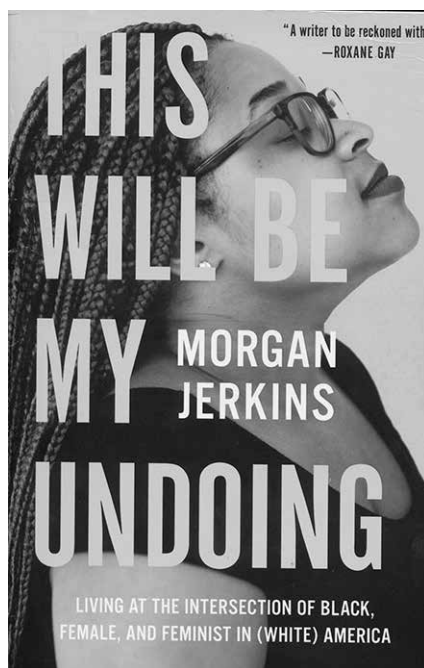
thought pieces people share on social media (hoping this will finally be the article that makes their Trump-supporter family members see the light), each essay in this collection weaves together multiple topics like a conversation, and the language is more poetic than the text of a social media post meant to go viral and raise instant awareness about a particular injustice. Media about — and marketed as — the African American experience tends to deal with trauma, whether the horrors of living in a racist society or the dysfunction within our own communities, and it is often a constant barrage of violence and death. The essay “Who Will Write Us?,” which discusses the controversy around the book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, addresses the issues of how African Americans are represented in media

and how to sensitively portray more quotidian forms of resistance that can arise under the most horrific of circumstances, as well as the complexity of African American experience without diminishing the impact of trauma. So it’s nice to find a book that talks about other aspects of black womanhood, such as feeling bad about being single in college, figuring out what to do with your naturally curly hair, and struggling with painful and frustrating physical and mental illnesses when you are supposed to be

strong. Part of the alienation that comes from living and working in majority white environments is the isolating experience of having your cultural reference points treated as foreign and your experiences as unimaginable by people who are your neighbors, coworkers, and even friends who don’t understand — and worse, don’t care — that they are missing information you managed to pick up on in the same environment. “Representation matters” might be a cliché now, but it’s nice to read a book that leaves you feeling, “It’s not only me, I’m not completely weird, and I’m not the only one who has gone through this.”

Jerkins’s writing explores what it means to be Black American when America keeps trying to stop us from being great. Does succeeding in white spaces make you less authentic to your cultural heritage? Especially when said heritage is a massive diasporic population held together by an idea of blackness but without the full trappings of nationhood such as a common language, land, or religious identity to tie it together? We’re Americans with some but not all of the benefits that come with that, and American culture borrows much from what we create; but even after living here for generations we are still not fully considered a part of the only homeland we know.

Even though it had already been the subject of an essay she published at *HuffPost*,¹ I wish Jerkins had elaborated more in “Human, Not Black” about what it means to be a gentrifier. I also feel that she overemphasizes the divide between black and white, and at times she seems to take too formulaic a view of black culture. It’s tricky to find a balance between recognizing shared experiences without making blackness into performative behavior and even stereotypes. However, I do sympathize with navigating



BOOKS

what it means to be authentically black and how being able to adapt to different spaces (whether Princeton or Harlem or Japan) affects that authenticity — themes explored throughout this collection.

Because of its content about sexuality, alcohol, and witchcraft, I would potentially have difficulty teaching with this book in my academic library in the Middle East. Jerkins's memoir is both an honest and, at times, all-the-gory-details account. In "Black Girl Magic," for example, she explains her decision to get a labiaplasty and shares the experience of having the procedure. Is this sort of honest sharing what she means by the book's title, *This Will Be My Undoing*? Still, she doesn't put *everything* out there, and I end up wondering how much I really know about her. She throws in blink-and-you'll-miss-it details like the fact that she has four sisters. Throughout the collection, she balances protecting people's privacy and leaving them the opportunity to tell their own stories while sharing her own story that they play an integral part of.

Will this book be Jerkins's undoing? Hardly. She is certainly brave for sharing some of these details. The book could have been titled *My Mom Is Definitely Cringing Reading This*, but it contains nothing she should be embarrassed about publishing or believing or having felt or experienced, and she creates a space for others to embrace their own truths. Even if someday she reverses her political and social views, she'll be able to say her earlier work is well written and interesting and speaks to her experiences at the time. At the same time, in "Black Girl Magic," she talks about how clean-cut black women have to be for mainstream white audiences to relate to them; she is also very clean-cut herself. Now hear me out — yes, she describes masturbation and sex and her own legal use of drugs and alcohol, but ultimately, she's still a woman who goes to church, who excelled at an Ivy League university, and who might get tipsy once in a while. It is unclear whether she could have gotten a platform or published anything about illegal drug use like the white girls whose memoirs she describes. There is also a disconnect between the cover of the edition I have, which shows her hair in braids, and

the essay "The Stranger at the Carnival," which goes into detail about how wearing her hair in an Afro changed her life for the better. Perhaps this is an indication that Jerkins is still limited in how she can present herself; there is still work to be done.

Is that what the "undoing" in the title means? Probably not. The main things being undone in this memoir are faulty beliefs and stereotypes Jerkins had about herself and the way things were supposed to be. Beginning to live at the intersections and being fully present in her identities is doing the undoing here.

It's a shame that this book may have trouble reaching more conservative audiences; it would be great to offer it as a resource, for example, to students from abroad studying at our main campus in the U.S., who might have particular ideas about America, Americans, and cultural differences that could be challenged by this. My STEM-background students might not have the critical theory knowledge needed to recognize some of the work Jerkins references, though I'm sure most would be at least somewhat familiar with decolonial and postcolonial discourse from learning their own national histories. Even Jerkins acknowledges that her experience is not universal. But we need more memoirs like hers, and more essays like "Black Girl Magic," which explore how other experiences, such as disability, can shape people's worldview.

This book is a great conversation starter. It could be used in classes and book discussion groups to get people to share their own experiences with difficult-to-discuss topics around race and gender in contemporary American society. I could also see excerpts being used to discuss topics such as mental health, cultural appropriation, and beauty standards in U.S. minority studies courses. The essay "Human, Not Black" would make good required reading for pre-departure study-abroad workshops. Finally, *This Will Be My Undoing* offers useful insights about the student experience for those working in higher education, such as my fellow academic librarians. This is a highly recommended — if not essential — book for any gender and women's studies collection.

Note

1. "I'm a Black Gentrifier in Harlem—and It's Not a Good Feeling," *HuffPost*, August 25, 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/25/black-gentrification-harlem-not-a-good-feeling>

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