Steve Majors

A MULTIRACIAL EXPERIENCE

One Man's Search for Race, Identity, and Family

Collection Editor
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Abridged from

High Yella: A Modern Family Memoir

The Black Studies Collection

Collection editor

Dr Christopher McAuley

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Abstract

This memoir follows the story of a white-passing boy who grows up in a Black family that is grappling with poverty, addiction, and abuse. In this poignant account, Steve Majors looks at the impact of generational trauma on his family while shedding light on the difficulties that multiracial people like him face in the US and even within their own families.

Key words

Abuse; Biracial; Gay; Identity; Mixed-race; Multiracial; Poverty; Trauma; White-passing

To Todd and our daughters,

Thank you for being my forever family.

Contents

Content warning		**xi**
Learning objectives		**xiii**
Introduction		**1**
Note on language		**3**
Chapter 1	The music man	**5**
Chapter 2	Ole cat eyes	**13**
Chapter 3	Light, bright, and almost white	**21**
Chapter 4	Oreo	**27**
Chapter 5	Pops' blood	**43**
Chapter 6	Queens of the hill	**49**
Chapter 7	A shadow of myself	**63**
Chapter 8	Making do without	**69**
Chapter 9	The house on the hill	**81**
Chapter 10	Neecie	**87**
Chapter 11	Wild child	**97**
Chapter 12	Don't trust that bitch	**107**
Chapter 13	One step forward	**113**
Chapter 14	Ole hot ass	**123**
Chapter 15	The traveling salesman	**133**
Chapter 16	Sissified	**143**

Chapter 17	White lies, dark secrets	**149**
Chapter 18	There's no place like home	**155**
Chapter 19	Shit happens	**165**
Chapter 20	The secret inside her	**171**
Chapter 21	Dead or in jail	**179**
Chapter 22	A family of choice	**189**
Chapter 23	The wounds that won't heal	**197**
Chapter 24	Blood is thicker	**203**
Chapter 25	Sins of the fathers	**211**
Chapter 26	All the dirt	**223**
Chapter 27	One last time	**229**
Suggested discussion topics		**235**
Further reading		**237**
Index		**239**

Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress, as well as language that some may find distressing. This includes:

- Uncensored use of the N-word;
- Uncensored slurs and pejorative terms based on gender, race, and sexuality;
- Child sexual abuse;
- Child neglect and endangerment;
- Acts of violence, violent self-defense, and sustained patterns of violence;
- Emotional and physical abuse, domestic abuse, and coercive control;
- Alcohol and drug use, abuse, and addiction;
- Terminal illness;
- Both overt acts of aggression and microaggressions borne of racism and homophobia.

Please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur **frequently** and **throughout** the book.

Learning objectives

- Exploring the roots of generational trauma;
- Understanding the multiracial experience and how it differs between individuals, across families, and within communities;
- Seeing intersectionality within rural, Black communities.

Introduction

A Multiracial Experience: One Man's Search for Race, Identity, and Family is abridged from my memoir, *High Yella*, originally published by the University of Georgia Press. That manuscript recounts the intertwined stories of my birth family with that of my family today, which includes my white, Jewish husband and our two adopted Black daughters. In *High Yella*, I attempted to explain how generational trauma affected my own life and, decades later, affects the children I'm currently raising.

This abridged version, like the original, also focuses on themes of race, class, family, identity, and trauma. But it excludes those chapters related to my family today. Every chapter included in this manuscript, except the last, is true to the original version. Chapter 27 was edited to exclude several references to my husband and children who were present during the portrayed events. The decision to edit them out of the final chapter was made to avoid confusing the reader. The choice to not include their stories in this narrative was made to comply with the length requirements of this publication. Nonetheless, I believe *A Multiracial Experience* stands on its own as the story of my journey to finding myself as well as my place in the world and within my own family.

Note on language

The terms "high yella" or "high yellow" are slang used to describe a light-skinned person who is Black or comes from a multiracial background. Its use as a benign descriptor is common in some parts of the Black community, though its association with class distinctions and the privileges associated with lighter skin tones can make it a pejorative.

This work employs a common Afro American vernacular when referring to particular ethnic groups as "Blacks" and "whites."

1
The music man

In 1971, Pops took me for a drive in his beat-up Ford station wagon. It felt like I was riding in a parade. We were at the head of a long line of cars on Main Street, and as we sailed through the yellow light, I could hear horns give out polite toots, annoyed honks, and a few blind-rage blares. Pops loved the attention, but for all the wrong reasons.

"Goddamn pale faces," he laughed.

I kneeled on the bench seat in the front of the car to peek in the rearview mirror. Behind us, I could just make out the rusted muffler that had dropped off our car a half block away. It sat there like a turd in the heart of our small town of Batavia, New York. Pops might have been too crocked to notice, or he could have just looked back and determined something he often told us kids—*he didn't give a damn what whitey thought.*

Pops had also told me that "whitey" couldn't be trusted. I glanced over at his brown face glistening with sweat and then back at my own pale reflection in the mirror. Am I a whitey?

I let the strange thought go when I felt my bare knees scorching on the sunbaked plastic upholstery. I plopped back down on my butt and scrambled over to the passenger window to hang my head out and catch a breeze. Before I leaned against it, I made sure the creaky door was latched shut. Even at five years old, I

knew Pops might take a wild turn that could fling me out onto the street. He might leave me behind like the muffler.

The whoosh of the wind felt good on my face and brought some relief from the sweet stink of the exhaust that now came from the back of the station wagon. Hanging half out the window, I could also see the sights. We only visited town when we had money to spend, overdue bills to pay, or trouble to resolve with the police. On this day, Pops was headed to the liquor store. I was excited. A trip to the liquor store meant I'd get free candy from the owner. But I also knew that he might look at my face and crack a joke: "What, you the mailman's kid?"

As Pops guided our station wagon down Main Street, I looked out at the small town of Batavia. There were big two-story department stores, old brick banks, and a single-screen movie theater. Living out in the country, "town" seemed like a big place. Later as an adult, I'd realize that Batavia was just a small ugly dot on the map exactly halfway between Buffalo and Rochester. It was built around cornfields, dairy farms, and a few factories. Bought (or stolen) by Dutch investors from Native Americans, it was settled by the English and then populated in waves by Irish, then Italian and Polish immigrants who had all come looking for work in the town's fields and factories.

But back then, the people in town all appeared the same to my five-year-old's eyes. They just looked white.

I looked at the places where my Black family was familiar to those white folks, if maybe not always welcome. There was the dry cleaner's, where Pops had a job working for the white owner when he was sober. It sat a three-minute walk from the jail where

he spent time when he wasn't three sheets to the wind. Both were in direct sight of the department store where Ma and Grandma were sometimes allowed to buy a few things on credit. Grandma was "trusted" there because she cleaned their owners' big homes on her hands and knees. And then there were the elm, maple, and birch-shaded neighborhoods that sprouted off in both directions from Main Street. I knew that's where the white people lived—families with Italian and Polish names that I couldn't pronounce.

Maybe one or two Black families lived somewhere in those tree-lined middle-class neighborhoods. The rest, a few hundred, could only afford to buy older, cheaper homes or rent neglected apartments on the south side of the city. My family was even more isolated, way out in the country among the cornfields.

"Boy, hand me the rest of my grape juice," Pops bellowed over the now unmuffled engine.

I reached onto the trash-strewn floor where a small bottle sat in a wrinkled paper bag. As I handed it over, Pops expertly grabbed it with one hand, slid it between his bony thighs, unscrewed the top, and emptied what was left in it. He smacked his lips at me, and I laughed.

I wasn't completely afraid of Pops at times like these. He was fun and silly. I knew all it took to keep him in a good mood was just a little of his grape juice, just not too much. Earlier that summer, he was liquored up just a little when he loaded my three older brothers, my sister, and me into the car and drove for miles in search of illegal fireworks. After he found them, he brought the stash home and set them off in our backyard. Each exploded,

eliciting quick popping noises. Pops said the white people down the road called the police on him because he was Black even though Ma tried to explain it was because the fireworks sounded like gunshots. You couldn't blame the neighbors. The 4th of July was still weeks away, and he'd set them off at midnight.

A few weeks later, he pitched tents for all us kids in the backyard then built a huge bonfire. Pops danced around it wildly without his shirt, until it got out of control and threatened a farmer's hayfield. That time the neighbors called the county fire department.

While Pops railed against the white man for always killing his dreams, there was one area where he thought they had no power over him. That involved his music. Pops had a used electric guitar and a few dented amps that he hauled around town for drunken, out-of-tune jam sessions with his regular drinking buddies. He said that one day he might be as big as James Brown, and he hoped us kids could learn to be his backup band.

In pursuit of that dream one summer, he was temporarily willing to put aside his resentments against the white man. He signed up my older siblings for a youth marching band in our town. All the rest of the kids there were white, but Pops said we just had to beat the white man at his game—whatever that meant. He'd show up during rehearsals and try to jam along. Other times, he gave pointers from the sidelines during their competitions. But his greatest performance was during a gathering of the entire group and their parents one muggy Saturday night for a band cookout.

That's when he grabbed the fuzzy hat off the drum major, stuck it on his head and tried to lead a sing-along by plucking the strings

on his unplugged guitar. Soon, he led a mini-parade around the picnic tables—the white kids and their parents, clapping, laughing, and following along. We looked on in disbelief. Pops had once again used his slick talk, mediocre guitar playing, and false-teeth grin to trick these white people into thinking he was harmless. It didn't take long for him to knock a kid's trombone onto the ground and accidentally stumble into the campfire. As the parents slowly headed to their freshly washed station wagons and drove away, we were left behind, struggling to help Pops to the car so he could drunkenly drive us home. There, we knew, he would drink a little more grape juice, get his second wind, and be ready for his next act.

As we passed into the south side of town, Pops careened over the railroad tracks. I looked behind, wondering if we'd left behind another part of the car, but Pops looked straight ahead as he pulled up to a rotting rooming house. I recognized it as the place where Pops' family lived, alongside some of the other families who looked like mine.

"Gotta take a quick piss," Pops announced.

My stomach tightened. I feared these visits to his family. Normally if Ma was here, I'd stick to her side or try to hold on tight to one of my brothers' belt loops. Today I was on my own. I worried Pops might forget me and leave me behind.

"Open the goddamn door, I'm thirsty," Pops yelled as we neared the top of the stairs of the rooming house.

His father, a shriveled dark-skinned man we called Grandpappy, met us at the door. Behind him, slumped on raggedy chairs and

furniture, was the rest of the Majors clan—Pops' brother Clarence and his two sisters.

As we walked in, I shrank into a nearby corner. The dim room smelled like fresh pee and old throw up.

"What this bright yellow boy scare't of?" Grandpappy asked. Purple gums showed through his rubbery lips because he'd taken out his dentures again.

"I said, what you 'fraid of boy?"

He looked at me and laughed until he began to cough up brown phlegm into a dirty handkerchief. Then he looked around for his bottle of booze to clear his throat. It was missing. I could see it had fallen off a table and rolled underneath. I pointed it out and Grandpappy got down on his ancient knees to search it out. Once there, he let out a string of curses. The bottle was empty. He'd apparently taken the last swig and been too drunk to notice. As he lay half under the table to mourn his lost liquor, his grown kids staggered to their own feet to watch him. Like half-crocked blackbirds they crowed with laughter.

"Get your tired ole ass off the floor," one of my aunties yelled.

Grandpappy dragged himself up. It seemed to take forever. Once up, he moved like a cat. Before anyone could run for cover, he stretched back a wrinkled arm and hurled the empty bottle toward us. It missed. I had learned what to expect next. Fists and furniture were about to fly, like they often did at home, but here I couldn't tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys. Pops pushed me behind the couch. There, I closed my eyes and prayed God would keep him safe. If he did, I thought I could at least depend on him to take me home to Ma.

I listened to the sound of crashes and cusses move from one side of the room to the next. I squirmed around and pressed my face toward the wall, hoping to stay out of harm's way, but even here, I could feel the ratty couch bucking and sliding against my back when the fight moved closer to me. It seemed, at any minute, the breath might be squeezed out of me. Finally, the wild wrestling stopped. After a few minutes, I slowly opened my eyes and came out from my hiding place. Grandpappy and his kids lay sprawled across the floor or slumped back in their chairs. I didn't know if they were knocked out or just passed out. Pops was still standing, and I felt relieved. He grabbed me by the hand and yanked me along. As he slammed out of the door, I heard him mutter "stupid cocksuckers." I knew God wouldn't like it, but in my head, I agreed with him.

Years later I'd realize they weren't stupid. Just ignorant. A long line of trauma had passed through their blood. I couldn't trace it back to the original wound, but I could guess. They'd been trapped in this small town for at least 40 years. Generations of poor education, a lack of jobs, and housing discrimination kept them in this poor neighborhood, where their wounds just festered and their sins multiplied.

As Pops and I climbed back into the station wagon, I thought about our big adventure. I'd have a lot to tell Ma when we got home. What I wouldn't be able to explain is how I felt about Pops in that moment. There was hate for what he'd put me through and some fear because I saw what he was capable of doing, but I also felt grateful. For once he'd looked out for me. I looked up at Pops and realized he wasn't giving it a second thought. His bloodshot eyes were already staring straight ahead as he steered

the rumbling station wagon down the block toward the liquor store. He ignored me and the glares of the drivers who were caught behind us in a trail of smoky exhaust.

While we spent years talking about the ways Pops embarrassed us in public, it took much longer for us to talk as a family about the things Pops did to us when he didn't have an audience—things he did behind closed doors and not in the light of day. It took a lifetime for some of us to admit them, let alone remember them ourselves.

As Ma used to say, you have to give the devil his due. Pops managed to convince everyone around us that he was just a harmless wino, a hard-drinking musician, or just a mean drunk, but we all knew he was far more dangerous than that.

2
Ole cat eyes

It seemed like Pops was present from my earliest memory. In truth, he wasn't always there. Before I was born, he regularly moved between our tiny house, stints in the county jail, and a few boarding houses in the nearby city of Rochester. There we heard rumors that he lived with other women. Despite his wandering, we were always keenly aware of his presence. Even his worn chair that reeked of stale wine was off limits while he was gone.

When I was old enough, I asked Ma how she and Pops had first met. She avoided my eyes and murmured, "I can't remember, it was a long time ago." Looking at my mother, it was hard to imagine her choosing to live her life with him. My grandmother and my aunt didn't understand her decision either, yet they had seen it for themselves. When I asked them to tell me the story, they both sucked their teeth and shook their heads in regret.

"Virginia was purty when she met that bastard," Grandma said.

"And smart as a whip too," Aunt Bonnie added. They both bobbed their heads in agreement.

Then they told me how one day, around 1954, my mother left school in the afternoon. Instead of coming straight home from school, she decided to walk the five miles from the county school into town. In the tiny farm community where we lived, she was

among the few Black children who went to the county school alongside the white children. Maybe that day she'd grown tired of her classmates' constant stares and slurs and wanted to clear her head. Or maybe she didn't go straight home in order to avoid facing the constant hectoring from my grandmother.

Either way, when she finally made it to our tiny downtown with its Victorian- era buildings, there was no way Pops could have missed noticing her. The few black-and-white photos of Ma from back then show an almond-complexion girl with a shy smile. She also had what my grandmother called "ole cat eyes": gray–green irises swimming in a sea of white. Pops was a few years older with brown sugar skin, a slim build, and conked hair. Grandma said he looked like a "ole black rooster," strutting around with his slick, city clothes. I supposed to Ma he must have simply looked sophisticated and so different from the white farmers' sons she had to go to school with each day.

That first meeting led to a quick courtship, and within a couple of months she had married Pops and moved away from her family to Rochester. With that decision, just months from graduation, my mother gave up a shot at a high school diploma for a husband and a new baby.

I've always wondered what Pops said to her to have convinced her to choose a future with him. Her willingness to take a chance on him may have been rooted in her own deprived childhood. In the early 1950s, when the growing American middle class dreamed of a house, a white picket fence, and the latest model from Detroit, Ma still lived in an old farmhouse and walked to school wearing her older brother's shoes and carrying a tin lunch

pail of cornbread and molasses. The country was changing, but not fast enough for a poor Black girl living in the backwoods.

My mother was too quiet and shy to tell anyone what she really wanted out of life, but apparently she was willing to take a calculated risk to get it. A story from her childhood hints at how that drive was formed. Her brothers, my Uncle Raymond and Uncle Bunny could barely contain their laughter when they told me about the day my mother pulled off a major heist.

"Your grandmama had this sack of 50-cent pieces she was saving," my Uncle Raymond told me. "She had it in the back of her closet, tucked in of them glass Mason jars. We weren't allowed to touch it. But one day your mama snuck in, took the coins, and divided them equally among all five kids."

"And let me tell you, we took that money straight to the candy store and had ourselves a good ole time," Uncle Bunny continued, wiping tears of laughter from his round face. "And listen to this, when your grandmama found the empty coin sack, Virginia stood there and fessed up. She took all the blame and she took the beatin' of her life!"

"Jen-ya always did watch out for us," Raymond said, suddenly looking serious.

That Ma would gladly take the beating of her life from her mother to give her siblings a chance to buy dime-store candy also taught me something else about her. As a young girl she wasn't just deprived of food, clothes, and some of the things that kids want. She was starved for love. My mother endured many beatings and quite a bit of verbal abuse from my grandmother growing up. A