New York Times columnist writes about poverty, spirituality, race, sexuality in new book

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BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

The day after his cousin sexually abused him, Charles Blow sat outside of his “House With No Steps,” in Gibsland, La., inside the maze one of his brothers had mowed in the tall grass. Decades later, he is not sure he can describe the sound of his world crashing down.

“Maybe there is no sound,” he writes, “just a great emptiness, an enveloping sorrow, a creeping nothingness that coils itself around you like a stiff wire.”

A few months after the assault, Blow contemplated suicide, took a bottle of aspirin from his pocket, and was saved by the sound of his mother, parked in a car just outside, singing “Take My Hand, Precious Lord.” He was 7 years old.

Powerful account
In “Fire Shut Up In My Bones,” Blow, who has been a columnist at the New York Times since 2008, describes his coming of age as a dirt-poor Black kid in the Deep South in the 1970s and ’80s.

Exquisitely written, and powerfully, painfully, and poignantly honest, the memoir is an illuminating, and, ultimately, uplifting account of poverty, spirituality, race and sexuality – and of the lies boys tell, to themselves and to others.

Jed and Big Mama
Blow brilliantly recreates his world – and the people who inhabited it. Consider, for example, his portrait of his surrogate father, Jed, the fourth husband of Charles’ grandmother, Big Mama.

A chain smoker, who died at a young age from lung cancer, Jed had maple syrup sweet eyes, with “a hint of grey around the edges, sunrise yellow where the whites should be; deep enough to get lost in.”

Those eyes “saw down into the dark of you and drew up the light.”

They forgave “secret shame before it scarred the throat on the way out. It would take a man with eyes like that to make Big Mama move to the middle of nowhere [Kiblah, Ark.] and bathe outside.”

‘Act of survival’

Charles Blow opens up about his bisexuality in “Fire Shut Up In My Bones.”
And Blow understands human complexity. Billie Blow, Charles’ mother, packed a pistol, kept brass knuckles in her glove box, went to college, and became a teacher. She resolutely refused to accept charity from anyone, especially government welfare, Blow points out, and she found stealing unacceptable.

But Billie Blow believed that scavenging paper towels, potatoes, onions and meat from cargo trucks that had overturned on the interstate “was simply an act of survival” that would ensure that her children would never see a hungry day.

No one sang
Blow has a lot to say as well about racial role-playing in the Deep South. Like many older Black people, he indicates, his uncle Paul “suffered from a chronic reflex racism” that was born of “so many horrible things done at the hands of White folks.

In Gibsland, folks “danced around each other, moving to a tune that everyone knew but no one sang – warm smiles sharing space with cold stares, public platitudes dissolving into the ugly things that found voice behind closed doors.”

Helped by White family
Although most southerners had learned to hide their hate, Blow reminds us that the "n--word" remained a weapon “when it was in the wrong mouth – a missile that could be launched from the back of a passing truck.”

That said, he reveals that he was saved “from the covert racial warfare” by a White family who ran a gas station and convenience store , employed Big Mama, and showed the door to customers who insisted that a White person cut their meat.

The matter-of-fact kindness the Beales showed his family helped Blow "conceive of the beauty beyond – and the humanity between – Black and White.” It’s one of several messages, simple and yet profound, that adorn his elegant and eloquent memoir.

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