

AN EPISTOLARY MEMOIR

I Do Believe in People. Michael Harper. Providence: Effendi Press, 2005.

Heather Treseler

Personal letters, as the ligatures—and written artifacts—of relationships, structure Michael Harper’s memoir of his late father, Walter Warren Harper (1915-2004), whose life’s story provides a portal into nearly a century of African American social history. W. Warren Harper’s biography also provides the familial background of a premier American poet, as Michael Harper has written some of his most poignant and popularly anthologized poems on domestic themes. In Harper’s poetry, the family is often a metonymic structure, a gathering of parables for the larger body politic. Hence, in the tales of a neighborhood, in the “psychographs” of a family, readers encounter miniature mythologies that begin in the particular, the personal and the local, and arc towards history’s annals and the Greek theater of timeless themes. Consider these lines from “My Father’s Face.”

at this late date
in the March snow,
how much the past costs;
how much the health
of one’s nation
as neighborhood,
is stored in the family,
the archives,
the handwriting
of our saints & sinners,
and the forgiveness
of sin’s remembering. (from *Honorable Amendments*, 1995)

In describing the cultural work of poetry, Harper refers to Ralph Ellison’s adage that a poem is fundamentally “shorthand.” His poems typically fulfill this definition, showing how complex, entangling circumstances can be caught up—and distilled—in the weir of the lyric form. The poet’s original hand, or handwriting, can enact “the forgiveness/ of sin’s remembering,” turning a personal remembrance, apercu or confession into literary art.

I Do Believe in People, as a collaborative, *sui generis* memoir of Harper’s late father, W. Warren Harper, operates in the redemptive, commemorative economy that governs so many of his poems. In this case, epistolary correspondence is a particularly fitting conceit, since Warren Harper served

for over thirty-six years as a supervisor for the United States Postal Service and was indeed the originator of overnight mail. The letters of this volume carry the pressure of “special delivery” in the twinned urgencies of grief and gratitude that can attend a death. With a multiplicity of perspectives rarely afforded by memoir, *I Do Believe in People* includes letters from Warren’s children and grandchildren; remembrances from visitors who lucked into the Harpers’ legendary hospitality on Orange Drive; notes of tribute from a British architect, Turkish intellectuals, literary critics Robert Stepto and Ronald Sharp; poems from well-known novelists Gayl Jones and Rachel Harper (a granddaughter); accolades from a Boston lawyer and a university president; and a law degree from St. John’s University, where Warren took night courses.

Collectively, these recollections séance Warren Harper for the reader. We meet the self-taught intellectual; the protective father and loyal husband; the dedicated, nurturing grandfather; and the genial, lively host. By all accounts, guests who were invited to the Harpers’ dinner table dined on both Katherine’s cuisine and on a lively discourse of politics, literature, history, and music. In his somewhat elliptical, densely valanced prose style, Michael Harper writes of his parents: “...they raised others as well at their table, white, black, all aspects of the rainbow. They did this by an accomplished belief in custom and ceremony with a heartfelt stamp of their own as the best currency. For many: it took” (ixx).

What fairly sings from the pages of this book, from the assembled letters, vintage photographs and poems, is Warren Harper’s human legacy: how many lives were guided, deepened, or set right by one individual. By including Warren’s own letters, *I Do Believe in People* also reveals the inscape of its subject: the tenderness that seems to have fueled a rather exceptional regard for others. He writes feelingly to his late son, Jonathan, and to his late wife, Katherine. With the latter, he shares the new loneliness of living alone, of reading the *Sunday Times* without any contest for his favorite sections of the newspaper. In the habituated idioms of a long marriage, Warren tells Katherine of his unchanged habits; the unflinching ache of her absence; and the look of the house, the flowers, and of a backyard jacaranda tree.

When you discovered that lilacs would not grow in Southern California, you planted the Jacaranda tree... Then I watched you talking to your tree because you swore that your voice would get through to the tree and it would respond... I ended up believing that your voice was responsible. This year, somehow, it does not appear to be prospering, the blooms are sparse and the foliage does not seem as healthy looking. Can it be that even your tree misses you? (159-160)

Letters, now a dying technology, have a long history of supplementing intimacy or recreating it when distance intervenes. Here the testing distance is death, the “Universal Transition,” and the defiant vitality of the letters enact a community, a contrived occasion of speech between the deceased and the living (192). Saskia Hamilton notes in her introduction to Robert Lowell’s collected letters, “. . . [Letters] carry the particular voice of the social person in relation to a specific other” (ix). The intelligence of an epistolary biography, whatever its lacunae, is that it evinces the individual in a variety of roles, which together limn the dimensions of a personality. Hence, while Warren’s letters do the real work of recording family history and seeking posthumous reconciliations, they also tell jokes and secrets; they kiss and reprimand. In the tonal shifts of Warren’s letters and those written to him, as a final farewell, he is shown as the enduring caretaker of an extended family tree.

To its credit, *I Do Believe in People* does not avoid the broken boughs. Some of the more heart-breaking materials include Rachel Harper’s poem about the divorce of her parents, “The Myth of Music”; Michael Harper’s poems about a train ticket sent by a lost love interest named “Millicent” and the legendary punch of his Irish great-grandmother in “Homage to Maimie Owens.” The collection also contains Warren’s letter to his late son Jonathan, who was only thirty-six when he died after a motorcycle accident not far from his parents’ home. Warren describes a parent’s most harrowing moment.

I was the first one to see you, I was the one who told the doctor that you would not want to live as a vegetable, helpless, lifeless, not recognizing your surroundings—a battery of machines, not you. I held your remains at eye level, such a small jar, my son, my son—it was bearable, only because your mother said, “Warren, he wanted to leave, he was tired of the life he was leading.” (62)

I Do Believe in People does not shirk from describing the great struggles that Warren Harper encountered as a father, as a husband, or as an educated African-American man in twentieth century America, a country his son diagnoses as “still stalled in the aftermath of the Civil War” (xxi). Indeed, the story of Warren’s success includes the nightmare of its beginning, a tale that begins in Catskill, New York, in his family’s home on the western side of the Catskill River, when a white mob inspired by the film “Birth of a Nation” tried to burn down the Harpers’ home. Joseph Harper, Warren’s father and a storeowner in Catskill, was able to talk the rioters away from their murderous intentions. Although *I Do Believe in People* does not record the eloquence that saved Joseph Harper and his family, it is a framing incident

for Warren Harper's canny survival in an overwhelmingly white town in upper state New York. In his poem, "My Father at 75," Harper syncopates these defining years:

He was born in a small town
and is still uncomfortable
with his people;
discomforture hones standards.
He refuses to budge. (121)

As a young boy, Warren worked alongside his father, using his free time to read every newspaper and magazine sold in his father's cigar shop. When he graduated from high school in 1934, a distinguished scholar-athlete, Warren dismissed the prospect of a scholarship to Syracuse University in order to help support his family. He found work first in Virginia, in a segregated branch of the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and two years later at a haberdashery shop in New York, where he met his future wife, Katherine Louise Johnson. The couple was married in St. John's Catholic Church in August of 1937. In 1951, Warren took a position with the U. S. Postal Services in Los Angeles, hoping to find a stable neighborhood in which to raise his three children: Michael, Jonathan, and Katherine.

The secondary—but quite audible—biographic thread of this memoir is how Warren sought to overcome the limiting forces of racism in his career and in raising his family. Literary critic John S. Wright writes about Warren's profession with the Postal Service, a career path his own father and many other educated African Americans took in the 1950s.

[Warren Harper and Boyd Anderson Wright were both]... young black men who would defy the odds and win their way to college and through the war, yet find their professional prospects in the world at large ultimately circumscribed to the civil service confines of the U. S. Post Office by an unseeing, unyielding field of social force... Like my father, I could sense, Warren harbored a deep, justifiable anger over this unearned fate; and for him and their generation, a special brand of reticence and reserve became necessary... (49)

Facing external limits to his professional ambitions, Warren Harper redoubled his commitment to his family. Years later, when the promotion board at the Los Angeles Post Office asked him what he was most proud of, he put this motivation on public record.

My son, Michael, who is now a Professor of English at Brown University [...] who worked as a part-time clerk at the Los Angeles Terminal Annex in order

to pay his expenses. He always said that working with and talking to so many colored clerks, talented, yet denied the opportunity to fulfill their dreams, urged him to stay in school... (104)

I Do Believe in People commemorates the upward climb of the Harper family in the Pax Americana, an imperial nation fused in its contradictions. In telling Warren's story and, to some extent, the tale of the Harper family, this volume enriches the narrative of American social history, a legacy that began, as William Carlos Williams once wrote, "with murder and enslavement, not with discovery."

Like other epistolary collections, *I Do Believe in People* evinces the hybrid nature of the letter as an extended address akin to a dramatic monologue; a miniature casting of one's life narrative; and a conversation of ultimate privacy. In the variety of its interlocutors, *I Do Believe in People* might best be described as "an evolving and passionate miscellany," a phrase John Matthias coined to describe the rich heterogeneity of John Berryman's *Freedom of the Poet*. Like Berryman's collection, *I Do Believe in People* reveals its subject by degrees. Framed by a dedicatory festschrift of poems from Michael Harper, the memoir's coordinating muse, it intimates the lessons of service, self-education, and dedicated ambition that a father bequeathed to his son.