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A Grim Reality, a Good Hope: A Review of Fortune

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Abstract

"Harper's family tree takes us into the very real and specific effects that racist laws have on individuals."

Posting about the book *Fortune* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-grim-reality-a-good-hope-a-review-of-fortune/>

Keywords

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Comments

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A Grim Reality, a Good Hope: A Review of Fortune

Howard Schaap

June 16, 2022

Title: *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—and How to Repair It All*

Author: Lisa Sharon Harper

Publisher: Brazos Press

Publishing Date: February 8, 2022

Pages: 256 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1587435270

By the title of Lisa Sharon Harper's book, *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World and How to Repair It All*, it might seem she's exaggerating. Actually, it's hard to describe just what kind of book *Fortune* is. The back cover describes it as "an epic and true story of race religion, history, and identity."

I might just call it biblical.

That claim might sound just as brash and hyperbolic, but the Bible is the first book that comes to mind when I think of a book that mixes genres (memoir, history, horror, prophecy) with the goal of rightly remembering the past, so that we might be able to see the present and prophetically imagine—or biblically imagine—the future.

For the record, Harper is not exaggerating in her subtitle. *Fortune* is a kind of "theory-of-everything" book when it comes to history, race, politics, and theology in America, but then again, Christians are definitely a theory-of-everything kind of people.

Fortune uses Harper's own family line to explore the history of race in America and the Caribbean. From Virginia colonial law to the Jim Crow laws in the South and redlining in the North, Harper's family tree takes us into the very real and specific effects that racist laws have on individuals.

What was especially harrowing was the reality of race laws that opened the way for rape.

"Fortune" is the name of the first relative Harper explores. As a daughter born in 1687 to a black man and white woman, Fortune should have been free under Virginia colonial law—except that a white judge looked at her and decided not to uphold the law. In retelling Fortune's story, Harper uses the tools of history to recount the details of the case and the tools

of creative nonfiction to imagine Fortune's experience and the life it condemned her to. "I imagine Fortune, awaiting the judge's decision," Harper writes, "looking out a window to her left, just behind the prosecutor offering his closing argument for Fortune's indenture."¹

The ruling against Fortune has the darkest of ramifications:

- "According to the 1715 race law and its 1728 amendment, if Fortune bore illegitimate children by a White man, the children would be indentured for twenty-one years. If the man was Black, the children would be indentured for thirty-one years. Fortune indentured her first three children, Rose, Sud, and Perlina, to Mary Day as apprentices for twenty-one years—evidence that their father(s) were White."²

In looking into her own DNA history, Harper finds likely genetic connections to the white households in which Fortune serves and concludes that "Fortune (was) likely serially raped by members of the households (she was) ordered to serve."³

In light of stories like these and of the current news cycle, a certain set of potential readers of this book may ask, "Why do we need to read these stories that happened so long ago?" Harper's book answers that question directly in several important ways.

One of the answers follows wider Black thinking in response to injustice in the tradition of "saying their names." In his book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son, "I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own."⁴ While Coates' thinking reflects his belief that this life is all we have, Harper roots her thinking in the image of God. Similar to Wendell Berry's idea that we cannot love our neighbor in the abstract but must love the neighbors we have, so too should we look at the faces of historical injustice and not blur individuals into abstraction. Thus, Harper includes specific stories at every turn.

Another answer to "Why history?" for Harper is to again make clear the line of generational trauma up to the present. Harper traces the line of sexual abuse from Fortune through Harper's own mother. She connects family stories and local neighborhoods to historical realities like redlining and urban removal. As such, the point of these stories is to trace trauma in specific black communities and specific black lives. The connected stories leave us no possibility of saying, "That happened in the past, but we dealt with it." Rather, Harper leaves a direct line of breadcrumbs from Fortune to today, pointing us toward the need to act.

However, no matter how dark the book gets—and it gets very dark, reminding us again why horror has been such an effective genre to explain African-American experience—there's a

biblical throughline to *Fortune* that roots the story in ideas like the image of God and the beloved community. This line explains the impossible—scratch that, biblical—hope of the book.

This is another answer to the question, “Why history?”

Lisa Sharon Harper is a former columnist at *Sojourners* and a woman of profound faith. One subplot of *Fortune* includes her own spiritual journey, including a detour into white evangelical spaces and then out of them and back to her roots, a vision truer to the faith of her ancestors and to biblical justice. Toward that end, Harper separates *Fortune* into three parts: “The Roots,” “Degradation and Resistance,” and “Repair.” Where Coates’ *Between the World and Me* is often frustrating to white readers who inevitably want to know “what we can do,” and where Coates’ basis for reparations in other works is rooted in logic and history, Harper details specific actions we can take in each of her last three chapters and roots those actions in scripture. Memorably, Harper explicates David’s response to the Gibeonites’ call for justice in 2 Samuel 21, and then a bereft mother’s grief as a result of that justice.⁵

Harper’s point is clear: scripture gives us plenty of insight about what we can do; we just have to have the will and the imagination to carry it out.

As I write this, we in the U.S. are once again in shock and mourning. We seem doomed to a cycle of violence and political impasse. Scripture, too, is full of people who felt that the conflicts they faced were impossible: Job, Moses, Elijah, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Saul who became Paul. The reality is that the issues we face are bigger than us, and will demand a response that will cost us, that will seem more than we can bear.

The bigger reality is that God is a God of imagination, who has created answers we can be a part of, if we only open ourselves to what he’s asking.

This is the grim hope of today, and this is the grim but good hope of Lisa Sharon Harper’s, *Fortune*.

This weekend, many neighbors and friends will be celebrating Juneteenth. As we seek to honor our POC brothers and sisters, pick up a book, read an article, or listen to a conversation and make biblical steps to engage well with one another. Maybe this article could be a starting point: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/juneteenth-truer-independence-day.html>

2. 50

3. 51

4. 69

5. 200-202