

Review – Finding Me: A Memoir

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, JUL 15 2022

Finding Me: A Memoir

By Viola Davis

HarperOne, 2022

I am an enthusiastic exponent of autobiographical sources for better understanding the experience of international relations. Apart from every other virtuous epistemological reason to harvest these often-beautiful memoirs, this writer sees it as baby steps in the noble task of, 'writing international relations from the bottom up'. For example, I have long been an admirer of US Secretary, Antony Blinken. A besuited, diplomatic supremo he may be now, but his majestic sanctions study, *Ally V Ally*, is crafted from the Yonkers NY coalface, long before his secretary rank. In the international relations field, a more important issue is the equity of international society. To tell that story with a rare happy ending, what better example than the brilliant actress Viola Davis, who overcame grinding poverty and now offers an account which shows just how tough it is to be a world's stage internationalist. Davis demonstrates the spectacular – winning the American dream – and the reality that in the wealthiest country in the world, the global top of the GDP tables, few break these impossible odds. It is a story of domestic misery but also of *de facto* international slavery.

Oprah Winfrey lauds this “breath-taking memoir”. However, hard-won celebrity should not obscure a candid struggle against domestic and international inequity. Born in 1965, Davis endured destitution, dysfunction, and abuse at a young age in 1970s Central Falls, R.I. and a childhood nothing like her subsequent elevation as one of Hollywood's citizen-diplomats. As she puts it herself, “that's a level lower than poor” and:

Our stories are often not given close examination. They are bogarted, reinvented to fit into a crazy, competitive, judgmental world. So, I wrote this for anyone who is searching for a way to understand and overcome a complicated past, let go of shame, and find acceptance. For anyone who needs reminding that a life worth living can only be born from radical honesty ... My hope is that my story will inspire you to light up your own life with creative expression and rediscover who you were before the world put a label on you (link).

Nowadays Davis evokes show-biz, and she champions numerous international charities. Her name frequently appears alongside Meryl Streep's in any serious conversation about “greatest living actresses”, coined by her role as first lady Michelle Obama in the new Showtime series, *The First Lady*. But Davis' raw memoir reveals anything but glamour on her path to fame and glory, through overt school-room racism and dysfunctional poverty. When her family relocated to Central Falls, Rhode Island, they moved into a dilapidated home where they frequently went without electricity, gas, hot water or a phone. “The rats were so bad, they ate the faces off my dolls.” For all her trauma, Davis writes with loving forgiveness of her family: they “did the best they could with what they were given”.

There is an emotional abandonment that comes with poverty and being Black,” Davis writes. “The weight of generational trauma and having to fight for your basic needs doesn't leave room for anything else. You just believe you're the leftovers (link).

This is precisely why Black stars have to date featured so obliquely as international role models or as ambassadors of international civic causes. In international relations we should be the first to understand that to help the world one

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must first 'find oneself'. Pathetically few of our talented minority communities have been able to breach those high walls of inequity to find themselves and then help others. This is actually a book about international tragedy. The odds are Casino-risky that one in a million from Viola Davis's community could become international role-models.

So how was the author able to overcome adversity in a system rigged against her to crystallize a celebrated international actor? It began with fellow Black impresario, Cicely Tyson who encouraged her into acting school. That validation of her Black beauty came at a crucial time, but was a real fluke. When she got into acting school at prestigious Juilliard in New York, she was one of only 30 Black students, among an elite enrolment of 856. Later, with numerous credits to her name, she had smashed the glass ceiling, and found in Meryl Streep a kindred artistic friend. By then she was already a celebrity! The myth of overnight success blinds us to the rigidity of the international system in 'the land of plenty'.

One of our first apartments was 128 Washington Street. My sisters and I ominously refer to it as "128 ... code for Hell"! ... On the first day of the month food stamps would come and we would make a huge grocery run at BIG G market. In less than two weeks, the food would be gone (link).

She continues:

You need to have a really clear idea of how you're going to make it out [of chronic poverty] if you don't want to be poor for the rest of your life. You have to decide what you want to be. Then you have to work really hard...

To an observer, Davis had courage even if she didn't know it. She had the potential to be a spectacular international personality, representing rights-based causes across the globe. She just needed a few vital nudges to overcome that gulf in the American social system. The introvert won a college scholarship and entry to Juilliard. The small-town girl endured life in New York with all the auditions and rejections. Working with the best when she was unsure of herself — Meryl Streep! And when love finally opened its door, she stepped inside. "I felt I was living through those moments with every word I spoke".

This writer recalls all too well the special sense of homesickness that comes from your family having no phone, and being abroad at university in the pre-internet era. Letters from my mom to college in England were special, sometimes even glittered by little packages of home-made tray-bakes. A phone at home was still a luxury in the rural Ireland of the 1980s. Every month my mom would borrow our neighbour, the priest's phone, and ring Oxford at the pre-arranged day and time. Almost like something out of a spy movie. I truly do not think the teenage me appreciated just how elaborate was the planning that went into that effort, which to me involved just taking the trunk call. And that's why I particularly recommend Viola's memoir as an example of the challenges to advancement which is still part of American and international society today. She appreciates the small things that her family did for her despite their poverty, and forgives the pathetic things that were done to her by street racists, and prejudiced set directors. For international relationists, Davis's story is the foil to JT Adam's myth of the American Dream. It is the antithesis to post-civil war writers like Horatio Alger where through pluck and determination everyone found 'good fortune'. Davis's success even defies the best hopes of Dr Martin Luther King's speech. At a time of increasing inequality, hers is an incredible story.

This memoir has a resonance for us as international relationists which is far more than the success of one talented Hollywood actress. It is that the basic inequality which pervades our societal structure needs to be challenged at every opportunity. This writer could not care less for your politics, but it is a civic duty to stamp out racism and structural inequality, wherever it is still masquerading as normal life. Poverty isn't the burden of the poor, it is everyone's responsibility not to rest until there is no child without electricity, or living among rats or without a phone. In our twenty-first century international society we ought to take a rain check on just how unevenly divided remains the pie, and that's an obligation for those of us with enough to give some away. International relations also have to be about international fairness.

It is a sickening fact that the illustrious careers of national treasures like Viola Davis, hard wrested from a rigged and often subtly racist industry, are just a drop in the proverbial ocean. The streets of Times Square in the wealthiest

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nation of the world, are this evening still lined with the many homeless who should have got a better deal. I'm not calling it your Christian or your Buddhist or even your Humanist duty – it should be part of the natural instinct which makes us fitting international citizens. It is Lesson 101 of Everybody's IR. Only with that sense of common citizenship can we ever model a righteous IR, 'from the bottom up'. Viola Davis's story and her rise to international stateswoman, brand and charity ambassador, and rights campaigner, is actually so incredible. What is suffocatingly credible is that zero healthcare, chronic homelessness and medieval levels of poverty remain the norm among Black and minority communities in America today. This is the real story behind *Finding Me* – that the myth of social betterment and financial success is achievable, flies in the face of all those trapped in the American nightmare and never experiencing the American Dream.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.