

Be Not Afraid of My Body: A Lyrical Memoir

Darius Stewart

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Darius Stewart's memoir *Be Not Afraid of My Body* is a searing account of life as a gay Black man, along with struggles with substance abuse and HIV.

Born in 1979, Stewart first realized that he was gay when he was eleven. With quiet fascination, he watched other "blackboys" playing basketball in his Knoxville, Tennessee, neighborhood, sweat "glistening" on "their skin like rhinestones mined from a cave deep within our ghetto." Bullied in school, Stewart learned to keep his sexual identity private. He also opted to transfer to a liberal white university from a HBCU to avoid aspects of anti-gay intolerance within the Black community.

Herein, Stewart recalls his initial, anxious sexual experiences and his persistent concerns about being perceived as gay. He includes quotations from poet Essex Hemphill throughout the memoir, yet his initial purchase of Hemphill's "Ceremonies" at a Nashville bookstore was furtive. Both aroused and embarrassed by the muscled, half-naked Black man on the cover, Stewart flipped the book over and hoped the clerk wouldn't notice the subject matter.

Stewart's cautious restraint would yield to more frequent sexual encounters, along with alcoholism and drug use. There were hookups arranged via the "cesspool of an AOL chatroom"; random encounters in bars and clubs; and being the "Mandingo" in a bathroom stall threesome with a white couple. Beyond Stewart's exploratory, "reckless" activities lurked the threat of HIV and AIDS; though the disease had become more treatable by the late 1990s, its prolonged effects were still severe, sometimes even fatal.

Stewart's mellifluous tone is wry and revelatory. Raw candor alternates with confessions of "chameleon trickery" and the invention of various backstories as a means of self-protection from both Black and white societies. Ravishing and compelling, *Be Not Afraid of My Body* is a memoir that speaks of troubled acceptance and spiritual and physical emergence.

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