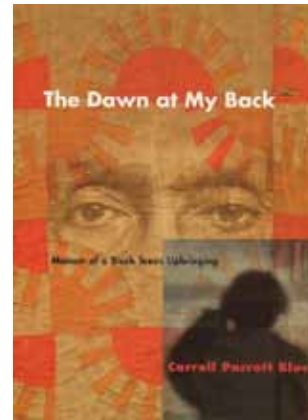


# The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing

By Carroll Parrott Blue

**The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing** explores what it means to grow up in a racist society. It describes the injustices endured daily and vividly paints a picture of the pain they carry with them. Blue’s story demonstrates the power of racism to rip families apart, even as one consciously fights against the fear, violence, and oppression it generates. The following excerpt is used with the author’s permission.

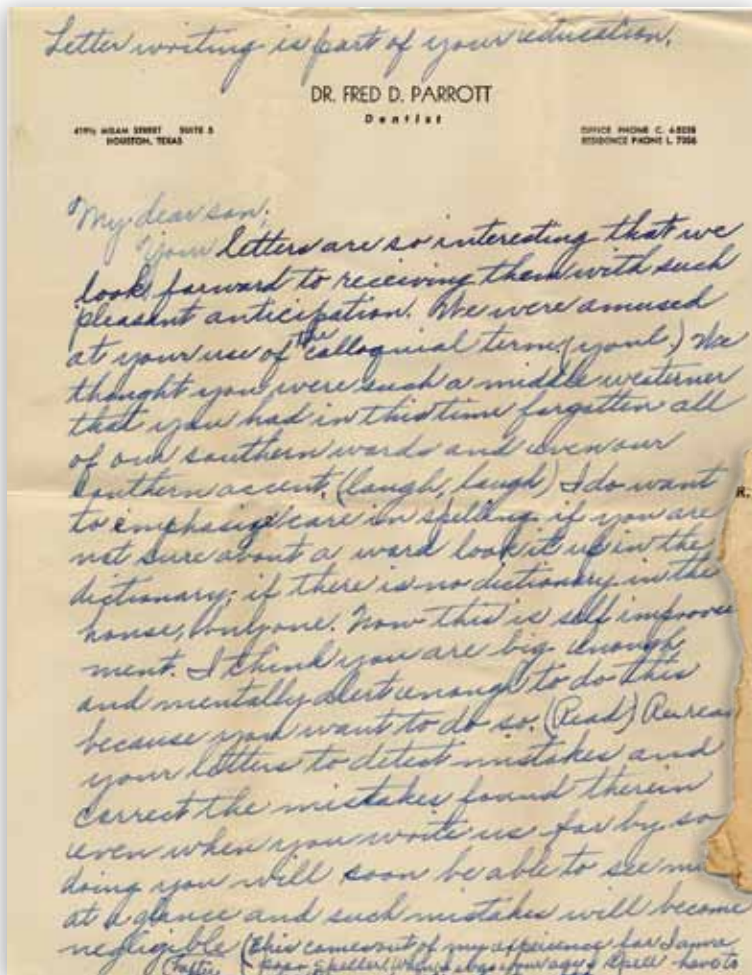


Just ten days before the birth of her daughter, Carroll Ann, Mollie Carroll Parrott wrote a letter to her sixteen-year-old son, Frederick Douglass Parrott, Junior, who she had sent to Chicago so that he could graduate from an integrated high school—an opportunity she hoped would enable him to “move up in a racist world.”

## CHAPTER I. LIFE

“My dear son,” my mother opens her letter. And so she begins instructions to my brother as to how he is to live his life. For her, academic degrees were the key to achieving a better standard of living. And age was not a factor to her continuing dreams of success. Shortly after my birth, she returned to college to obtain a master’s degree in special education. At the time, she was fifty years old, with me, a six-year-old, in tow. To the very end of her life I observed her becoming all that she extolled her son to be in her August 1943 letter to him. She taught the same values to me. How my mother lived her life became my greatest model.

“Now this is self improvement,” she tells him. Diligently, she maintained a lifelong record of the same quality of self-improvement and community activism that she describes as a pathway to her son in this letter to him. Over time, my parents did achieve a modicum of success. They enjoyed a certain quality of status as professionals and community leaders in Third Ward, one of Houston’s Black neighbor-



The first page of the letter Mollie Carroll Parrott wrote to her son in Chicago instructing him on how to improve his lot as a black man in a Jim Crow world.

All images courtesy of Carroll Parrott Blue.

hoods. Yet their rugged, tough love brand of optimism faced what to this day seems to me to be eternal obstacles. I do believe the challenge was too great for them. The story of their struggle seems to have disappeared with their deaths. For this reason, I am compelled to write our story. . . .

[My mother's] biggest challenge was to make the best of her life in a deeply embedded racist environment. The world surrounding her life had been so assuredly arranged to destroy her spirit. In time, the multiple rejections daily visited upon her conspired to take their toll on her zest for life. Her justified anger at these inequities had no where to go but inward.

*"Fred, that condition (segregation) that you have met is why mother is always so serious, that is why I go to so many clubs, that is what I spent my leisure time doing—trying to fight in a small way that very condition so you will not have to face what I had to face."*

— Mollie Carroll Parrott

"Yes, Fred, there is segregation in Chicago—there is segregation or discrimination either by word, sign or action all over the United States." My mother's letter to her son reveals her anguish over the eventual effects of racism on her child. Her fear of its power forced her to expel her sixteen-year-old boy from her Houston home and send him to the North. In Chicago she felt that he could learn first hand about white people.

If you were Black and lived in the South, you especially

could not escape the punishment that came with being Black. At the turn of the twentieth century, there had been a great migration of Blacks to the North to escape this tyranny. When my parents were teenagers in Houston, the Black press pointed out to them the logic of this mass migration:

Some are decrying this exodus and scoring the Negroes for doing what they believe to be best for them. Every man ought to make an effort to improve his condition. But there is a reason why these people are leaving the south in such numbers and going to the North. (*Houston Observer*, October 21, 1916.)

My parents did move unsuccessfully to the North in the 1930s, only to be forced for financial reasons to return back home. Here they stayed. Yet, they encouraged both their children to leave the South.

"Were the girls pretty, with good hair?" My mother tells my brother that the woman he chooses to mother his children must look white and have "good" or straight hair. She denies her children even a casual enjoyment of the beauty and company of black-skinned people with woolly hair. She requires that my brother keep uppermost in his mind that his future children must conform in appearance to white standards in order to fare well in this society.

She, in turn, will continue "to fight in a small way that very condition." She names this "condition" as segregation. This "condition" drove my mother to a form of self-repulsion. Her denial of her own Blackness and her simultaneous need to be a "race woman" propelled her into a just-below-the-surface, persistent anger that I label as a kind of lunacy.

The invisible quality of the nature of racism makes it difficult



Mollie Parrott (third from right, standing), joined by daughter Carroll, attended numerous club meetings with other African American women in her effort to combat society's racism.



*The Parrott family.*

for me to get at the impact of its entangled, complicated, and deeply entrenched roots—roots that grew outside the reach of my parents. I suspect racism’s consolidated power is frozen inside the values, goals, and aspirations of our very institutions. It can be traced, in part, to the values and cultures that come from the combined, yet largely uncoordinated, work of Congress, courts, corporations, church-

es, schools, prisons, and mass media. My story concentrates on the cumulative effects of mass media’s racist stereotypes on my life.

As I tell my story, certain values extracted from events, books, magazines, entertainers, songs, television, and film begin to surface. And so my personal history is joined with a larger, more public story. This larger narrative is one of my society’s history. It is a mass cultural, collective vision of values based on appearance (the right race, sex, and class) and the ability to consume. Appearance counts; money counts; things count. . . .<sup>1</sup>

### CHAPTER III. HOUSTON

My mother was a race woman. Being a race man or woman in the 1950s meant you had dedicated your life to uplifting the Negro race. Your decision also meant that you had consciously endangered yourself. Your surrounding environment would always be hostile and perhaps violent because of your commitment.

One of the safest ways to survive was to form groups of like-minded people and work together. This joint effort provided protection. Someone had to organize these groups and mobilize them toward an action that would effect social, political, and economic change. And so my mother’s natural next step after becoming a race woman was to become a community organizer. Primarily she worked through Houston’s Negro women’s clubs.

While browsing in a bookstore a few years ago, I discovered a remarkable book that gave me insight into the enormous impact of my mother’s volunteer work. Ruthe Weingarten’s book, *Black Texas Women: 150 Years of Trial and Triumph*, is the first comprehensive history of Black Texas women who toiled like my mother all over the state for over a century. As I rushed through the index of the names of women listed from Houston, I was upset to see her name was missing in the book.

What I did learn was that my mother’s seemingly isolated activities reflected a pattern that was part of a historical loss of memory, both nationally and in Texas. This book mirrors my mother’s public life completely. It focuses on the Black women’s club movement and its contribution to the state’s workforce, education, culture, religion, politics, civil rights, and community building. Conversely, my mother’s life adds one more piece


to the 150-year puzzle of how Black women in Texas came together to create a better life for all Texans. My mother was more like a worker bee or a soldier ant. Historically, she is faceless.

Today, as I write from a vantage point of a certain maturity, I am stunned by how brave, feisty, and relentless my mother was. She worked courageously and tirelessly to right the world’s horrible wrongs. Now I place her extraordinary efforts alongside those of Mary McLeod Bethune, Dorothy Height, Marian Anderson, Coretta Scott King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, and Houston’s own Christie Adair. All of these women were supported by workers like Mollie Carroll Parrott.

It disturbs me that my mother, my heroine, is invisible to historical record and that her remarkable contributions to Texas life go unmentioned. The Houston women named are the ones I stand on the shoulders of my mother’s work. I think it is because the book references only the women who made the newspapers or some other public record. These papers became historical records, and so the people written about inside them also became historical record. Very little is written in public records about my mother.

Remember now, I am talking about the South in the 1950s. These were the days when we were “colored,” when any white person could publicly humiliate and denigrate any Negro and get away scot-free through the privilege of public, legal, and social sanction. The days when Black men and women were being killed for the simple act of attempting to register to vote, even though their reasons for wanting to vote were perfectly rational. As American citizens, they paid taxes, and so they wanted to have the right to vote that goes with the money they contributed. By having the vote, they could take part in determining who would best represent their interests in public office.

My parents held still-fresh memories of the times when southern lynchings were widespread. They remembered when the peculiar American phenomenon of lynchings occurred almost daily. At one time, Texas had the third highest number of lynchings in the nation. Today Texas still ranks high in deaths resulting from hate crimes and capital punishment, also known as a modern, legalized form of lynching. . . .

Daily, my mother and father woke up to this kind of world — a world that my mother had resolved to change. The tragedy in my mother’s struggle is that, in the end, she could not triumph. Instead, she left this battle for equality to us, the living. Even though slavery officially ended in this county in 1865, its racist violence, perpetrated through well-placed hate crimes and government-sanctioned capital punishment, continues to this day.<sup>2</sup> 

**Carroll Parrott Blue** is a research professor at the University of Houston Center for Public History. She is an award-winning filmmaker, author, and interactive multimedia producer. *The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing* is a combination book and DVD-ROM. In 2004, the American Library Association selected it as one of the thirty best American Association of University Press publications, and the DVD-ROM won the 2004 Sundance Online Film Festival Jury Award. As a small child, Blue joined her mother at many Black women’s club meetings, having the opportunity to see Mary McLeod Bethune, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall conference with these Houston activists.