

Keeping history alive: the merits of freedom in the family



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For thousands of years, history has been kept alive through the written word; men and women of virtue, in particular, have recorded social struggles so that future generations can know about the events that transpired over the course of their lifetimes. Through *Freedom in the Family*, Patricia Stephens Due and Tananarive Due set about to make sure that the injustices that they and countless other African Americans experienced during the Civil Rights Movement would never be forgotten. In their memoir, the mother and daughter duo enumerated all the obstacles they had to overcome in their fight for freedom for themselves and for their family. Their story is one of a search for purpose, identity, and a desire to be free amongst a sea of discrimination and injustice, but above all, it is a piece of history that has been uncovered in the hopes that it will never be repeated.

Patricia and Tananarive both state their purposes for writing this memoir in the first few chapters in a way that is effective at setting the tone for the memoir and emphasizing the importance of what the writers are undertaking. Patricia tells a short anecdote of a time when she was sitting on a textbook committee and realized none of the textbooks mentioned Tallahassee with regards to the Civil Rights Movement. She writes, “ Without written documentation, I was told, the forty-nine days my sister and I spent in jail, the tear gas that burned my eyes, and the people I knew could not be included” (2). It is at this moment that Patricia realizes she and her fellow freedom fighters are not yet a part of history, and so she writes this memoir with the intention of turning their story into history. Storytelling is important to the Due family, and this sentiment is echoed by Tananarive in her first chapter as she describes the Holocaust survivor telling her story in Miami

Beach. Tananarive laments, “ Soon she [the Holocaust survivor] will be gone, and all of her stories will go with her” (5). Tananarive wants to make her own story more concrete so that it does not disappear with her. She want to make sure that “ the children of strangers... will never, ever forget” the sufferings of an entire race, and this becomes her main purpose for writing *Freedom in the Family* (6). Something to note is the effectiveness of both women’s tone in their opening chapters. Both Patricia and Tananarive speak with a tone of urgency and an underlying sense of fear of what could happen if they do not complete this task. This tone lends credibility to the actions they will later describe, for it makes it easier to see them as the fierce activists that they are, fearing not for what would happen to them because of their actions but for what would happen to the world if they not take action immediately.

There is no doubt that, through Patricia and Tananarive’s doing, *Freedom in the Family* has become a part of history. However, it is unlike most of the history that students will read in their classes because the way the way that events and people are described makes it feel like history is coming alive for readers. This is one of the most effective tools the writers use, for it makes the events that they are describing stay in the readers’ minds long after they close the book. For example, take Tananarive’s description of Patricia when she goes to meet the officers who are accusing her husband of stealing machine guns in his black van. According to Tananarive, her mother “ stood in [the police’s] overwhelming spotlight that night in a short, sheer slip as through she wore a bulletproof vest.... My mother never flinched, and she sure wasn’t about to start” (215). That imagery evoked by those few

sentences is electrifying in a way that most depictions of history are not. That brief instance of history is described in a way that makes it seem like it is the climax of a captivating thriller. Most of the memoir is written in a similar fashion; the endings of most chapters contain either elements of foreshadowing or other strong declarative statements about various personages that add to the dramatic feel to this part of history. These descriptions further demonstrate the importance of storytelling to the Due family. They want their history to be more than just dull and boring like the textbooks that Patricia was reading in her opening chapter; they want their history to be stories that later generations can remember and share with others.

An additional element of the memoir that makes it so captivating is its modern-day relevance. The way that the struggles that the authors as well as other people they describe in their memoir are depicted, with such vivid detail and expressive language, make them very easy to relate to. An underlying theme of the memoir is that many of the issues that Patricia and Tananarive faced are issues that people today face, no matter what race they are. Take the issue of identity and belonging that Tananarive struggles with during her years at Northwestern University. When Tananarive writes, “I felt like a white woman in blackface when I set foot in FMO [For Members Only, a black student organization] meetings,” she is expressing feelings of displacement in her college campus (108). These issues of discomfort in her own skin and a lack of connection with her peers are problems that plague many college, and even high school, students today, and it is almost comforting to read that even a woman that has done so many extraordinary

things still struggles with the most ordinary human emotions. Additionally, *Freedom in the Family* tackles the issue of finding out what the purpose of one's life is. This issue is blatantly expressed when John says, "[Civil rights] was my life. Patricia's always talking about that, how it's my whole life" (151). The issue of what one is supposed to be doing with their life, of how they can make a difference in the world is one that many people, both young and old, struggle with today and that is depicted beautifully in *Freedom in the Family*.

The structure of the memoir is another element of the work that makes it relevant for today's readers. The fact that the book is laid out so there are two stories being told, each a generation apart and yet completely intertwined with one another, implies the ongoing nature of history. There is no set beginning or end to any period in history. The story of the civil rights movement as told by Patricia and Tananarive spans two generations, and the structure of the memoir implies that there is no reason why it cannot be an issue of the following generation—the generation of college students today. This problem is not yet over. Patricia even alludes to actions of activists in modern times that echoes the actions of the activists she worked with when she was in college when she describes observing a "sit-in [in 2000] outside of Florida Governor Jeb Bush's office in Tallahassee. [She] felt as if [she] had stepped back in time" (364). She also writes about how that same year, Tallahassee was the site of the largest protest march in the state's history. Patricia ends her memoir with the words "History happens one person at a time" (369.) These words demonstrate that there is still history being made in the field of civil rights; however, it is up to this new generation to record

their history and keep it alive. Undoubtedly, one of the most important themes of the work is the importance of recording one's own history, but just as important is recognizing the fact that one's own history may still be ongoing. Had *Freedom in the Family* been written when Patricia and Tananarive were older, more specifically when Tananarive's children were grown up, there most likely be three intertwining stories instead of two, for even the next generation of *Dues* would have something to say with regards to civil rights.

Patricia and Tananarive were strong and determined activists, and they played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement in Florida, but there are intense battles to be fought against discrimination today. The *Dues* knew this, for there is no sense of finality to their work. The memoir is left open-ended because there is still work to be done. The *Dues* accomplished their purpose in writing this memoir; they wanted to record their history so they could share it with others and so that it would never be forgotten. Beyond that, it is important that their history be remembered so that it is never repeated. In other words, so that no more young African Americans have to go to jail for fighting for freedom, be tear gassed for expressing their opinion, or be afraid that the entire world is against them. Whether this goal of the memoir was ultimately accomplished remains to be seen. Only can the actions of today's generation can be the judge of that.