

TELL
ME YOUR
NAMES
AND I
WILL
TESTIFY

Essays

CAROLYN HOLBROOK

A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *TELL ME YOUR NAMES AND I WILL TESTIFY: Essays*

by Carolyn Holbrook

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Carolyn Holbrook’s remarkable book testifies to the power of the arts to heal her own life traumas, both historical and more recent. We see and hear her learn to speak up, and to claim space, in a world designed to keep silent or remove people like her.”

—**RESMAA MENAKEM**, author of *My Grandmother’s Hands*

“Carolyn Holbrook is steadfast in her work to break free of constrictions that harm one’s spirit, knowing them to be racially, economically, and culturally imposed. Honest and perceptive stories of her experiences illuminate how her basic acts to create, over and over again, make for a life whose purpose and meaning resonate with her readers.”

—**CINDY GEHRIG**, retired president, Jerome Foundation

“Carolyn Holbrook’s evocative essays show how experience shapes—across generations and within a single lifespan—both writing and the writer. There are important stories here, stories of single parenting, stories of struggle and connection, stories of colorism and of age.”

—**SUSAN RAFFO**, writer, cultural worker, and community organizer

“You will shiver, laugh, cry, cheer, stomp, want to sing, and, perhaps most indelibly of all, by the grace of this bold book and its author’s beautiful invocation, you too will feel inspired and empowered to write what lives deepest within you back into its vibrant fullness.”

—**ED BOK LEE**, author of *Mitochondrial Night*

“Carolyn Holbrook’s stories are a necessary telling of the history of our city and the roots of its literary community, creating new entrances where there previously were the usual monsters of exclusion and marginalization. I am astounded by her generosity of spirit in this book and in her work with those of us fortunate enough to cross her path.”

—**ZEKE CALIGIURI**, author of *This Is Where I Am*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Carolyn Holbrook's life is peopled with ghosts—of the girl she was, the selves she shed and those who have caught up to her, the wounded and kind and malevolent spirits she's encountered, and also the beloved souls she's lost and those she never knew who beg to have their stories told. “Now don't you go stirring things up,” one ghostly aunt counsels. Another smiles encouragingly: “Don't hold back, child. Someone out there needs to hear what you have to say.”

Once a pregnant sixteen-year-old incarcerated in the Minnesota juvenile justice system, now a celebrated writer, arts activist, and teacher who helps others unlock their creative power, Holbrook has heeded the call to tell the story of her life, and to find among its chapters—the horrific and the holy, the wild and the charmed—the lessons and necessary truths of those who have come before. In a memoir woven of moments of reckoning, she summons stories born of silence, stories held inside, untold stories stifled by pain or prejudice or ignorance. A child's trauma recalls her own. An abusive marriage returns to haunt her family. She builds a career while raising five children as a single mother; she struggles with depression and grapples with crises immediate and historical, all while countering the subtle racism lurking under “Minnesota nice.”

Here Holbrook poignantly traces the path from her troubled childhood to her leadership positions in the Twin Cities literary community, showing how creative writing can be a powerful tool for challenging racism and the healing ways of the storyteller's art.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the parallels between Carolyn's work and life and the entrepreneurial drive of her mother and stepfather?
2. Why does the white father ask Carolyn not to tell anyone about his crush on her when he was an intern? How might his actions be viewed today?
3. Explore Carolyn's reason for choosing the Lucille Clifton poem as her title. Why is it important to share these stories?
4. Share your understanding of how domestic violence impacts families. How has Carolyn worked to end the legacy of domestic violence in her family and community?
5. Given the traumatic events of Carolyn's teenage years, what helped her survive and become a community leader and activist?
6. How has reading this book changed your understanding of racism?
7. Carolyn's life is told through a series of connected essays rather than a continual narrative. How has this form helped you better understand the themes of the book?

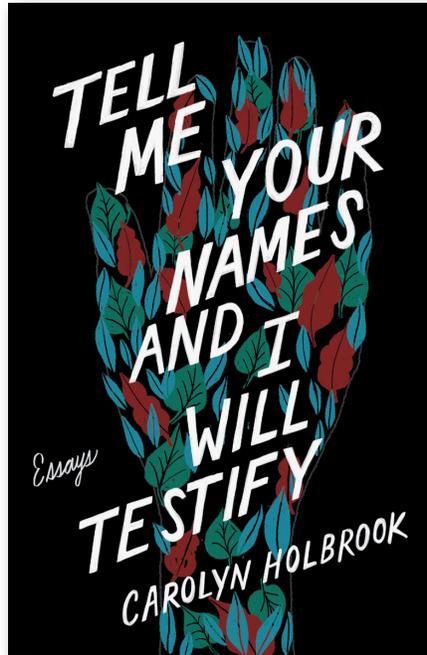


Image: BFRESH Productions



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Holbrook was founder and executive/artistic director of SASE: The Write Place and now leads More Than a Single Story, a series of panel discussions and community conversations for people of color and indigenous writers and arts activists. She is author of *Ordinary People*, *Extraordinary Journeys* and *Earth Angels*, and coauthor with Arleta Little of Minnesota civil rights icon Dr. Josie R. Johnson's memoir, *Hope In the Struggle* (Minnesota, 2019). Her personal essays have been published in *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* and *Blues Vision: African American Writing from Minnesota*. She is recipient of the Hamline University Exemplary Teacher Award, the Minnesota Book Awards Kay Sexton Award, a Metropolitan Regional Arts Council Next Step grant, a Minnesota State Arts Board Cultural Community Partnership grant, a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative grant, and was an AARP/Pollen Midwest 50 over 50 honoree. She teaches at Hamline University and in community venues. She is the mother of five, grandmother of eight, and great-grandmother of one.

MORE INFO:

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