

Njeri: "Every Goodbye Ain't Gone"

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LA Times writer Itabari Njeri discusses her memoir, "Every Goodbye Ain't Gone," including stories of her father, an historian who would talk about Plato in Harlem barbershops.

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Transcript

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DEBORAH NORVILLE, anchor:

George Bernard Shaw once said that if you can't get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance. Well, making the family skeleton dance is just what Itabari Njeri has done in her new book, "Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: Family Portraits and Personal Escapades". The LA Times writer has won high praise for her first book, which looks back on her life as an African American growing up in New York during the '50s and '60s. This book started, I guess, as, as a way of looking back at your own family.

Ms. ITABARI NJERI: Well, I knew that my family represented, in its complexity, the diversity of people of African descent in the New World. And as I say in the book, you know, when Baldwin wrote "Nobody Knows My Name", I believe it was a metaphor at the deepest level of the African-American psyche, for the blighting of black history before the nature of slavery and sins. And so, our history was so distorted, I felt this book would illuminate a part of the American experience. It's an African-American proverb:

'Every shut-eye ain't sleep; every goodbye ain't gone.' My grandmother used to tell it to me all the time. And simplistically, it's like your grandmother has 'eyes in back of her head'...

NORVILLE: Yeah.

Ms. NJERI: ...but also, 'The night has eyes, the earth has ears, the past is not forgotten.' I have a rich past, you know. There was a lot of struggle there too. My father was a brilliant historian, a Marxist historian, but also an alcoholic, an abusive person who was, who was violent toward my mother and psychologically neglectful toward me. And I think in many ways he was an archetype. Harold Cruise talks about the crisis of the Negro intellectual. I think my father embodied that, that, yeah.

NORVILLE: Because of his frustration to, to gain acceptance on a wider level?

Ms. NJERI: Exactly, exactly. He was brilliant, you know, but few are anointed in any era, as I point out in the book. Ralph Ellison once told me you could find my father elucidating the dialogues of Plato in Harlem barbershops, you know, pontificating to draped men held prone, a razor pressed against their

cheek. He was a very frustrated man.

NORVILLE: Yeah. The book opens with, with a wonderful story about your own search to find out about your grandfather's death.

Ms. NJERI: Yes.

NORVILLE: He was killed in a hit-and-run accident in Bainbridge, Georgia.

Ms. NJERI: I went back 23 years after the fact. My grandfather had come from Guyana, South America, to practice medicine in the small, small rural town in Georgia, and he was a political activist at a time when to be a member of the NAACP was considered subversive.

NORVILLE: Which was something you didn't know before you went down there?

Ms. NJERI: Not really. I thought he was kind of a member of the bourgeois black aristocracy of the period. He was quite a leader, quite a progressive force, actually. And I was very young when he died, and I'd heard the rumors that drag-racing youths had killed him. I went back to find out what happened, and there were so many lies and distortions, I could never really find out the truth.

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