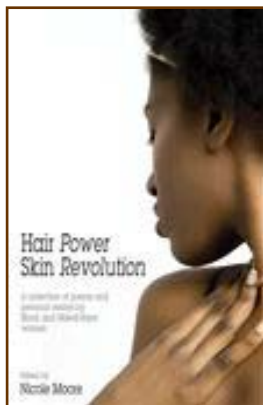


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Book Review: Hair Power Skin Revolution



In Nicole Moore's edited collection *Hair Power Skin Revolution* a wide range of women of colour, have explored and developed their writing to great effect by setting down what their hair and skin means to them. Through the mediums of essays, stories and poetry, all are tested and used to analyse their experiences, feelings, trials and tribulations, I have to say, with varying degrees of insight. It is funny and surprising, and I am sure in some instances will make you weep or smile in memory of the relatives who are no longer with us.

I have enjoyed it very much, though it raises lots of thoughts and ideas for me. For reasons I am unable to fathom it never occurred to me that I would write here about this subject. That is despite the fact that I have been on my own hair journey this past few years. Even though I have been enjoying a number of hair blogs, mostly from the US, writing about hair hardly seems to me to be a topical or critical subject. For me it is a practical one. And after checking this out with friends and family, [Yes, I did some objective Guardian style research before writing this piece!], while they too understand hair issues as it relates to black women in the west – for them, as for me, it is not really something that is uppermost in our minds. So I cannot say that left to my own devices that I would have bought this book, and that would have been such a shame. I would have missed out on *My Bad Hair Life* by Catherine Anthony Boldeau, where she wittily describes her mother's energetic efforts to prettify her hair. My message to Catherine, is that I'll have your mother's heirlooms of ribbons, while you get on with writing the story of the black Scarlett O'Hara – not the fainty, drippy one – but the feisty one undertaking her own real adventures – I'd buy that.

In autumn 2008 – yes the Obama November, a photographer friend asked to do a portrait of me. She wanted to create an image that was a contemplation of that most momentous occasion. At that time my hair was relaxed and in a kind of bob style; and I had been in a couple of meetings in the run up to the US election, where I had been called 'Michele' by people, I supposed at the time, were probably more anxious than I, about what the future might hold. By the end of the year, it now transpires I had had my final relax. On 1 December, I had a really horrid time at the hairdresser, my scalp has always been sensitive, but on this occasion the hairdresser generously chatted away to me forgetting the time, not noticing my anxious eyes, all the while drawing his fingers through his quiff. My stomach was queasy and my scalp was burning. I had told him at the outset, as I always do at any hairdressers, how long I could bear the 'creamy crack' on my scalp. While my hair came out looking fine, my scalp was livid – in all senses of that word. At a Christmas party a few weeks later, a neighbour, a New Zealander, asked whether that was my natural hair and of course I explained. (A conversation I had had many times, before, usually around the fact that having been to get my hair 'done' – why was it looking longer than it was before!) The thing is, that her glorious red non-afro hair was doing naturally what my hair should have been doing – it was standing out in fabulous curly afro! So apart from one wash and blow dry to recreate the hairstyle for the photographer's second visit at the start of 2009 that was the beginning of the end of almost 30

years of chemically processed hair. At the time of writing the portrait is about to go on show at the Maureen Paley Gallery, London.

So no more hairdressers! I miss the celebrity magazines, as I am not allowed to bring those into the house; but I don't miss being fussed over, as that just made me impatient and tense. I have never found being at the hairdressers a relaxing experience, and when I think of the amount that I have spent over the years – I have my own cringe version of that moment where Carrie (in *Sex and the City*) realises that with the amount she'd spent on shoes she could have bought her own home.

While I sometimes wonder whether my sister was actually there during our childhood, since she comes out with such different things, and while we have disagreed about hair, make-up and clothes over the years, one of the few things on which we both do agree is that hair or beauty, was not discussed and did not come up in such contentious or awkward ways while we were young, as described in *Hair Power Skin Revolution*. Our mother never treated her own hair with any chemical process though she would 'press' (hot comb) all our hair, and during the 70s and 80s; and as was the fashion for West Indian women here in Britain then, she wore wigs for work and wrapped her hair when at home. I can remember the horror mixed with laughter when a friend of my mother's, who worked in a mental health hospital, told the story of her wig being snatched off by a patient and the shame she felt at being called an impostor in front of her colleagues by the patient. The patient, who 'was not in her right mind', to use the Jamaican expression, had thought that she was pretending to be someone else. While my mother and her friend were able to laugh about the 'impostor' accusation, I vowed that I would never wear a wig. In any case I had always found the 'head only' mannequins on which my mum stored her wigs to keep their shape really creepy, and I had no intention of having any of those in my house.

So why am I telling you all this? It is because while I enjoyed this book, and I am sure that there are many who will and can review this book much better than I, I think that this book will only truly get to the hearts of those who really know what it means to try and make your hair 'behave,' the ones, who as in Christine Collymore's *Unwritten Rules*, can only enjoy part of the weekend, as a portion of it is spent preparing how your hair might look for the next morning's meeting. I would say those who are going to most thoroughly enjoy this book will know deeply the cultural context and resilience from which this book has arisen.

In addition to those that I have already mentioned, I loved Fiona Joseph's *Hair Wars: Growing Up Frizzy in the 70s* and wonder if any youngster looked good in those 70s wedding photos? In my case it was the face powder that my mother brushed on at the last moment, that made my sister and I look like we were wearing death masks.

I was most worried about the poetry, I was not sure how I would hear it, if would I understand it – what if it did not rhyme. Yes, I am that simple. On poetry. Well, with a couple of friends we read a few out loud in the British Museum café – and we got it. Going through them again alone, I think I actually preferred the poems overall. Look out for *Rapunzel, Rapunzel* by Elayne Ogbeta; *Hair We Are* by Daniella Blechner and *Me and my 'fro* by Gennett Aku Agbenu. And to my book club colleague Marcellina Aderibigbe, (*My Skin Tells a Story*) you kept that quiet! It is beautiful.

So in the end I welcome this book because it has given me a lesson in understanding. A lesson in how hair and skin set in the context of a shared issue has been able to set of this rich vein of creativity in women who I suspect,

probably have little else in common. I think that the main thing that brings them together is their desire to write, explore language, and to share on topics and ideas that would be lost, and who cares that others might not think these thoughts are worth recording. It is! It is! Most of all I admire Nicole Moore for bringing it all together.

About the editor: Nicole Moore was born in London of Guyanese and English parentage. She is a freelance writer and published poet, with experience of producing work for magazines and poetry anthologies. She is the editor of *Brown Eyes* (2005) and *Sexual Attraction Revealed* (2007) both Shangwe produced anthologies of creative expressions by black and mixed-race women. Nicole is a member of The Society of Authors.

Hair Power Skin Revolution



A collection of poems and personal essays by black and mixed-race women

Edited by Nicole Moore

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An edited version of this piece will appear in Lime magazine shortly

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