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Becoming Richard Pryor by Scott Saul (review)

Jack Blocker

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notes, “[Readers] may discover that the actual origins and legacies of great structures are often less beautiful than the structures themselves.”

Gary R. Kremer

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI

Columbia, Missouri

Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*. New York: Harper, 2014. 587 pp. \$27.99.

Born in Peoria, Illinois, in 1940, Richard Pryor incorporated his experiences as a black youth in that city into his brilliant, comedy-reshaping act for many years. When most people think of the history of African Americans in the Midwest, they focus on the massive movements that brought so many from the South to the region: the First Great Migration of 1916–30 and the even larger Second Great Migration of 1940–70. But as sociologist Charles Tilly pointed out many years ago, such a focus obscures an at least equally powerful shaper of the African American experience:

. . . [T]he situation in the city, rather than the fact of moving, shook Negro family life in the time of the great northward migration. The distinction may seem academic: the impact of any move on the individual always includes the differences in living conditions between the origin and the destination. Yet it matters a great deal. For in the one case we might conclude that as migration slowed down and the immediate shock of moving faded, the troubles of Negro families would disappear. In the other case, we could hardly expect much improvement until the opportunities open to Negro men and women in the big city changed.—Charles Tilly, “Race and Migration to the American City,” in *The Metropolitan Enigma*, ed. James Q. Wilson (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 146.

Tilly’s point underscores an important fact about the families who shaped Richard Pryor. The circumstances under which they lived did not grow out of the First and Second Great Migrations, because both his mother’s family, the Thomases, and his father’s family, the Pryor/Carters, were living in the Midwest before the First Great Migration got underway. Nor was either family directly affected by the rapidly growing network of institutions that was creating a new black cultural world in Chicago, the mid-western metropolis. When Richard was born, only about three thousand

African Americans lived in Peoria, while Chicago's African American population hovered around a quarter of a million. Before and after her marriage to Buck Carter, Gertrude Thomas lived with her parents on a rented farm near Springfield. Richard's grandmother Marie Carter Bryant, born in Decatur, Illinois, in 1899, moved to Peoria in 1930. Thus, neither the major migration streams nor big city life shaped Richard's families' experience. White racism, residential segregation, and restricted job opportunities in non-metropolitan midwestern communities defined the world in which his families—and Richard himself—made their choices.

Scott Saul, a literary scholar at the University of California—Berkeley, has illuminated this world by delving deeply into the historical record to elucidate both the context and the individual lives of his subjects. In the face of whites' stranglehold on legitimate businesses, black entrepreneurs sought opportunity in illegitimate ones, in particular creating what historian Kevin Mumford calls "interzones," spaces such as saloons, speakeasies, black- and-tan clubs, and brothels where blacks and whites mingled in an atmosphere suffused with the wrong kind of music, the wrong kind of dance, and the wrong kind of sex—all wrong from the perspective of both middle class blacks and whites. (See Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997].) Marie's ventures into bootlegging and her long career as a madam in the brothel in which Richard grew up represent a creative response to this challenge.

Saul describes Richard's family as one that was "shrewd, loving, and bruising" (xvi). The combination produced a boy and man who could be brilliantly creative—when he could gain control of the warring forces of his personality and achieve some sense, always tentative, of who he really was. *Becoming Richard Pryor* traces a process of discovery and mastery, as Richard first realizes, as a schoolboy, that he could make people laugh; then tries to make himself a comedian in the mold of whites such as Jerry Lewis and Sid Caesar; later strikes out on an original path by turning his youthful experience into comedic material; and finally becomes an insightful critic of race relations under the influence of the civil rights and Black Power movements. By 1978, when Saul believes that Pryor had reached his full genius, he had revolutionized standup comedy. "Not only did he refuse to respect the boundaries of 'good taste,' but more powerfully, he turned his own powers of scrutiny on himself and declared that nothing was off-limits there, either" (483). As a social critic, Pryor was "Dark Twain," becoming

“for many in the 1970s, a guide to how much and how little the world had changed after Black Power and Flower Power” (484). As a crossover artist, through films such as *Lady Sings the Blues*, *Wattstax*, and *Silver Streak* Pryor took minor roles and expanded them to turn the films into something newer and fresher. Through Saul’s delineation of the many nearly catastrophic turns in Pryor’s rollercoaster career, we come to understand how dearly those achievements were bought.

The book rests upon impressive original research. In addition to consulting widespread archival materials, Saul conducted interviews with more than eighty people with whom Richard Pryor lived, loved, and worked. He has also excavated a goldmine of recordings made of Pryor during a critical period in Berkeley in 1971 when he was undergoing a decisive reinvention. As with other biographies, the spine of this one remains Pryor’s autobiography, since it contains significant details available nowhere else. Saul, however, uses the autobiography critically. He corrects Pryor’s account of the divorce hearing between his mother and father by showing that Richard was five years old, not ten, when the hearing occurred, and hence the boy’s testimony that he wished to live with his grandmother is unlikely to have been given much weight. Saul also amplifies the autobiography when he reports that Richard’s father Buck suffered his fatal heart attack during a *ménage à trois* which included his thirteen-year-old daughter, Richard’s half sister. (After this revelation, Richard’s report of what his Aunt Maxine said to him at his father’s funeral takes on a new and different meaning: “Your father fucked everything. Just be glad he didn’t fuck you.”)

For readers who have forgotten, or never learned, the various contexts of Richard Pryor’s life, from black community life in the Midwest through the civil rights and Black Power movements to the dramatic changes in the entertainment and film industries during the 1960s and 1970s, Saul provides just enough background to assist in understanding the conditions Pryor faced. Written in a fluid style with no trace of academic jargon, *Becoming Richard Pryor* is a pleasure to read. The task Saul sets himself, to explain Richard Pryor’s artistic achievement, is an important one, fully accomplished. Peoria should be proud.

Jack Blocker

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

London, Ontario