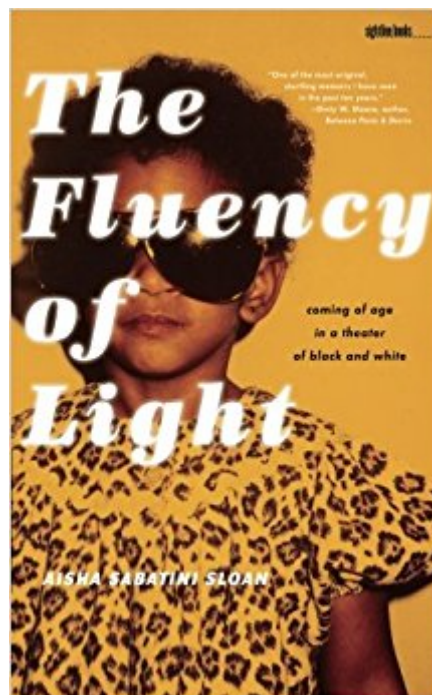




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The Fluency Of Light: Coming Of Age In A Theater Of Black And White (Sightline Books)



Synopsis

In these intertwined essays on art, music, and identity, Aisha Sabatini Sloan, the daughter of African American and Italian American parents, examines the experience of her mixed race identity. Embracing the far-ranging stimuli of her media-obsessed upbringing, she grasps at news clippings, visual fragments, and lyrics from past and present in order to weave together a world of sense. The result is a compelling mediation on identity and representation

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Aisha Sabatini Sloan earned her MA in cultural studies and studio art at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, and her MFA in creative writing at the University of Arizona. She taught writing at the University of Arizona for six years and is currently studying to become a yoga instructor.

This is a truly poignant, provocative, and brilliant book. Sabatini Sloan is a masterful writer. She reveals her complicated and beautiful exploration of issues of race and identity by weaving in personal and familial narratives and those of cultural figures; works of art, music, and film; exploration of landscape and place. She is able to ground the reader while also taking them through her associative leaps. These essays are visceral; I could feel their potency moving through me, in my mind and in my body. At once, they are touching, haunting, smart, witty, and thoughtful. And

perhaps the best compliment from a writer, this book made me want to sit down and write, at length and immediately. I was inspired to examine my own histories, expectations, associations as a result of reading hers. I know this is a book I will return to again and again and I am deeply grateful to Aisha Sabatini Sloan for writing it.

I'm a white male author, which fact apparently has nothing to do with Aisha Sabatini Sloan's fine first book, *The Fluency of Light*. I deliberately bring up the matter for two specific reasons, however. One reason is that I spend a good deal of time thinking and writing about race relations, and the longer I dwell on such matters, the more deeply I fathom the complexities and intricacies involved. On one level it's all very foolish that phenotypic expression of genes controlling skin pigmentation, eye shape, hair structure, etc. - much of which serves as a convenient tagging system typifying deeper cultural biases and bigotries - could so preoccupy human interest and soak up time and energy; on another level the fact that phenotypic expression is effectively so critical to matters of justice and equality and the simplest instances of interpersonal interaction and decency demands that this colossal subject be considered with appropriate attention and sobriety. *The Fluency of Light* examines these kinds of concerns indirectly through the lens of personal biography, its author smartly revealing the ubiquity of subtle, subconscious racial assumptions and their unfolding expressions in the real world as she globe-trotted through her youth. The stories she connects together are aggregates of small moments of minor drama, of casual exchanges of glances, of shared laughter and solitary tears: all human, all genetics-independent. Every chapter here contains its provocative elements and scenes, and now and again I would have to put the book down and think about it for a day or two before going on. Not a lot of books you can say that about these days. The last two chapters were especially compelling as the author began to edge toward a better understanding of her own biases and prejudices and to see herself also as a visual-weighted creature programmed by her own experiences and privilege to respond to phenotypic cues of ethnicity and cultural assumptions. The visceral reaction to a visit to South Africa she describes was disturbing and troubling, and she suggests she still doesn't know how to interpret it, and neither do we, the readers. Which is fine: that open-endedness is entirely appropriate to the subject material and true to her experience. The exploration must continue. The second reason I mentioned my own background above is that I write about my ancestry. One experiences an automatic, kneejerk divide in assumptions upon hearing of either a white male or a black female (Aisha Sabatini Sloan is of African-American and Italian-American descent) writing about ancestry and genealogy. What does it tell you about your own culturally-imposed biases to reflect on why a white male author would not

feel the same qualms about writing about ancestry that a black female author might? Would one author risk being pigeonholed while the other would not? The Fluency of Light must, of necessity, be a daring and revealing book not because of the stories it tells but simply because of who the author is. Unfair, but true enough. I suspect it's well that this is her first book, because she has most effectively laid her cards on the table and is now free to move on to any kind of writing that she likes. In writing this particular book she has, as I see it, carefully chronicled where she has come from, and has simultaneously liberated herself from those roots. She is free to invent the future. When I first started this book I was reminded of the writings of Joan Didion, but beyond some stylistic similarities, the two authors have little in common; at least, that's my conclusion based on this single book. I saw one review that complained because of how it's cut up, jumping between far-ranging topics from one paragraph to the next. I had to laugh. The cut-up approach suits this book just fine. I must also add that the author here has a real knack for finding just the right turn of phrase. She has a fine voice and, more importantly, a fine mind. Very much do I look forward to whatever she writes next.

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