



BRUTAL TALE, BRAVE TELLER

At a time when the black community is celebrating its heroes, a new novel dredges up a horrific episode

IF YOU HAPPEN to be black, male and professionally accomplished, you are wanted badly these days. Especially in February, which is Black History Month. Public school principals and teachers will snap you up and bring you in to speak out as a black role model. Given that guns and drugs are still circulating, and that a disproportionate number of black males find themselves in trouble with the law or the school system, it is understandable that educators and parents want to trumpet success stories. But the desperate search for feel-good testimonials comes at the cost of intellectual and artistic freedom. It can lead to censorship, not just in terms of what you remove from the school curriculum, but what you don't dare use in the first place.

Consider *George & Rue*, the powerful but

disturbing new novel by George Elliott Clarke, a seventh-generation African-Canadian and previous winner of a Governor General's Award for poetry. In the tradition of the classic *Native Son* by the black American novelist Richard Wright and, more recently, *The Polished Hoe* by Austin Clarke (no relation), *George & Rue* (HarperCollins) dramatizes what the author calls a "slug-ugly" crime. And it is based on a true story: in 1949, George and Rufus Hamilton, who were dirt-poor Nova Scotian blacks and cousins of (the still unborn) George Elliott Clarke, murdered a white taxi driver for his pocket change. They murdered him because they were destitute and destabilized by poverty. After Rufus bludgeoned the man with a hammer

Clarke humanizes his murderers without trying to exculpate them

provided by George, the brothers went drinking. George used some of the money to spring his wife and newborn baby from the hospital (they were being kept there because the doctor's bill remained unpaid), but spent much of it on a night with a prostitute.

It is an awful story—beautifully told. It meets one of literature's highest demands: the novel disturbs, challenges and confronts the reader. It foments dissent. It is true, poetic and rendered partly in a sort of blackened English that gives a sense of the cadence of the language of Nova Scotian blacks around the middle of the 20th century. It is hauntingly brutal. Readers encounter a taboo subject in black culture: domestic violence. In *George & Rue*, the father of the murderers beats his wife and his children (until one of the boys grows strong enough to beat up the father). The men, women and children in this novel are victims of a racist society that has forced blacks into an underclass for two centuries, but they are also victims of each other. No reader can relax and truly enjoy the erotic lovemaking—of which there is plenty—in this book, because we know that sure enough, the man will be pummeling his woman on the next page. What kind of love is that?

In a country desperate for black role models, it would take a courageous teacher to assign *George & Rue* to a Grade 12 English class. Someone would surely raise the roof, so why not avoid controversy and hunt for a laudatory book about Perdita Felicien or Oscar Peterson?

And you say, so what?

So this: the time has come for *George & Rue*. It roots around inside black rural poverty. It humanizes the demons we all love to hate. It doesn't elevate or apologize for murderers. It just says, this is them, and

they are us. Let's look at it.

We could use Clarke's wisdom the next time newspaper headlines scream out about black-on-black violence. We, as a nation, are strong enough for this book.

We, in black Canadian communities, are strong enough for it too.

Sure, let's celebrate our role models, but let's look unflinchingly at our own warts and demons. They, too, define our humanity and deserve our attention. Put *George & Rue* on the high school curricula, and then, in preparation for the inevitable protests, put in your ear plugs. ■