

# Book Review

## *Ordinary Notes* by Christina Sharpe

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*Ordinary Notes* is a non-fiction book written by Christina Sharpe. First published in the US in April 2023, by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, the book deals with various aspects of Black life such as memory, trauma, and racial violence. It is written in the form of 248 notes which are divided into eight chapters. Along with the notes, the work also contains photographs, paintings, posters, newspaper clips, letters, among others. The length of each note ranges from one-line to a few pages; and many of these notes are intertextual in nature. Since the language is easy to read, the notes convey a similarity to diary entries. Through the book, the author primarily explores her memories and experiences around racism, makes some solid arguments about Memory Studies, and explores the mother-daughter relation she shared with her mother.

As an acclaimed scholar of the Black community, Sharpe shares many memories throughout the book, which makes it an excellent addition to Black Memory Studies. I think that the biggest argument she makes is on the function of museums and memorials. While many may insist on the necessity of these sites of memory, the author argues that memorial narratives fail to provide ‘reconciliation and healing.’ According to her, “Every memorial and museum to atrocity already contains its failure” (Sharpe 38). When visiting the Nazi Documentation Centre and Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, she discovered that the memorialization focuses on the perpetrators rather than the victims. During her Whitney Plantation visit, Sharpe is disappointed to notice that there are no representations of Black adults; only sculptures of Black children who do not nearly look the way they did during slavery. At the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Sharpe is frustrated to observe that museums and memorials mostly cater to the white supremacist demands, in-

stead of elaborating on the pain of the oppressed. The author acknowledges that for many, these sites of memory might seem like a therapy against violence, but “To look into other people’s faces for your therapy,” she argues, “is a dangerous proposition” (Sharpe 45).

Another important argument she makes is that white supremacists manipulate language in order to produce a narrative that depicts them as innocent. The mishandling of language indicates that ‘memory’ is also manipulated, and so, instances of racism are often made to seem trivial and inconsequential. As a result, discrimination never ends. This manipulation takes place not only in the news and the media, but also in educational institutions, and books. While revealing some unpleasant situations in her graduate school experience, Sharpe recalls a question that the Director of Graduate Studies once asked her: “Why are you so unhappy? Why are the Black students so unhappy here?” (Sharpe 279). Instead of finding out how to make Black students feel comfortable, the Director’s misuse of language made it a narrative about herself only. When reading a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (the Japanese-born British novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017), Sharpe cannot help but notice his awful description of the Black characters in the story. Likewise, newspapers and media outlets regularly use language to take part in racial discrimination by depicting white supremacists as guiltless, even when they are clearly at fault.

Through *Ordinary Notes*, the author also contributes to the field of Generational Memory. She says that she “wanted to write about *silences* and *terror* and acts that hover over generations, over centuries [which she] began by writing about [her] mother and grandmother” (Sharpe 26). Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “Postmemory” can be traced to the photographs of these two maternal figures in Sharpe’s life. Despite the author never meeting her grandmother, she still feels that she knows her because of the photographs and all the stories she hears from her mom. These photographs are not only a place of wonder for her, but also a place through which she inherits the wounds of the older generations. This is also closely related to Astrid Erll’s concept of Genealogy, where the older generation’s stories and memories are passed down to the younger ones.

Motherhood is also a dominant topic that Sharpe explores in this book. “This is a love letter to my mother” (Sharpe 351). She profusely talks of her mother and the pure dynamics that they shared. Despite having a traumatic childhood experience due to racial discrimination and abuse, the positive mother-daughter relation allowed her to delve into works of literature, particularly the ones written by Black writers. This, in turn, helped her to relate and be vocal towards Black suffering. “What these books share is that they produced in

me the feeling that I needed” (Sharpe 295). Despite being a well-read woman, her mother did not want to be known by others; she even instructed the author not to write about her. But she did not hold Sharpe back; rather she parented her in such a way for her daughter to make a safe space for herself in the world. Sunday teas and singing with her mother – these are some of the fond memories of Sharpe’s childhood. The fact that she deeply cared for her mother is also reflected in how she describes her life as being devoid of ‘gravity’ after her mother’s passing.

*Ordinary Notes* is a great book which I thoroughly enjoyed reading. It might seem like a very simple read because the notes are short in length, but it should be read with attention. The book is for the reader who wants to get ideas on Memory Studies expressed in quite simpler but effective words. I would highly recommend *Ordinary Notes* to those who want to get an introductory notion on Black memory studies.