



Advanced Reading Practice (1)

A Book Review

Answer Key

The correct order is:

1. C 2. G 3. A 4. B 5. E 6. F 7. D

This is the how the review originally appeared in the New York Times

**My Journey Through the Land of Possibilities**

By Soledad O'Brien with Rose Marie Arce

321 pp. A Celebra Brook. \$24.95.

The CNN reporter Soledad O'Brien is the daughter of a white Australian father and a black Cuban mother. This heritage bequeathed her an immigrant's ideals about America's promise, as well as a striking appearance that has shaped her experience of "the land of possibilities." Both these themes — her roots and her looks — run through O'Brien's memoir, "The Next Big Story," as she charts her lifelong effort to forge a singular identity out of her biracial background. Her account, written with Rose Marie Arce, is also a reporter's reflection on the television news business, which in the span of her 22-year career has swung from largely ignoring issues of race to often stoking prejudice with bombastic, personality-driven coverage.

By the time O'Brien attended high school in the 1980s, the racism her parents had faced two decades earlier (they'd lived in Baltimore but had to marry in Washington because interracial marriage was banned in Maryland) had mellowed. Yet in suburban, middle-class Long Island, O'Brien's appearance (origins unclear, but nonwhiteness evident) marked her as undatable in a school where race silently mattered.

O'Brien went on to study at Harvard but left before graduating, enamored with journalism after an internship at a Boston TV station (though she did finish her degree years later). Soon she landed at the NBC affiliate in San Francisco, where as Oakland bureau chief she stewed with frustration covering neighborhoods whose problems, stemming from deep poverty, got short shrift in the media. Her bosses didn't like being lectured on what to cover, and she lacked the clout to pitch stories more difficult than the usual schools-and-drug-bust fare. What happened next was something many journalists can relate to: realizing that her anger connected her to the story but was a liability in the newsroom, O'Brien embarked on a quest to build the stature she needed to tackle controversial subjects. Today, it is clear she has been altered by the process, her anger polished down to the point where she is now the establishment big shot frustrating young activists and critics.

O'Brien's experiences reporting on disasters, particularly Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti, unfold in riveting detail, but their enormity seems to overpower her. She vows to pack away



cans of tuna, concludes sanguinely that America is a “land of individuals, not institutions,” and directs her reporting to profiles of courageous individuals. While her desire to avoid wallowing in bleakness is fair, her insistence on sounding a chicken-soupy note of hope brings a caffeinated morning anchor perkiness to stories that demand deeper context and sharper articulations of accountability.

“The Next Big Story” is at its perceptive best when O’Brien grapples with race and immigration. She writes of her former CNN colleague Lou Dobbs with a calculated diplomacy, but her overview of his reporting leaves the distinct sense that CNN sought to play it both ways: expand its audience through programs like O’Brien’s “Latino in America,” while reaping the ratings benefit of Dobbs’s anti-immigrant vitriol and sizable fan base.

In a book that often treats issues of race candidly, however, O’Brien turns naïf when dealing with critics who question whether she is “black enough” to report the documentary series “Black in America.” She writes that “the big surprise for me about skin color is that it matters so much to black people,” as though shades of blackness haven’t been central to African-Americans’ experience of racism for centuries. She is particularly indignant after an encounter with the Rev. Jesse Jackson: complaining about the dearth of black anchors at CNN, he told her, “You don’t count.” Later, he acknowledged to her that he didn’t know she was black. But his dismissal reflects how the quest for representation in minority communities can devolve into cliquishness; those who don’t belong, or don’t look as if they belong, are left feeling irrelevant to the cause.

As memoir, O’Brien’s book keeps the reader at a distance. If her chaotic job has ever strained her family life, we don’t learn about it here. Although she takes a discreet shot at “heroic action figure” colleagues for their eagerness to cover wars and disasters, she remains very much the heroic action figure on the news front, propelling herself into the next big story.