



Surviving Chaos: How I Found Peace at A Beach Bar by Harold Phifer

For more than fifty years, Harold Phifer's childhood living conditions remained a secret, even from those who thought they knew him best. No one knew about his past growing up with a mother who suffered from mental illness; a greedy aunt; a mindless and spoiled older brother; an absent father.

It wasn't until an explosion in Afghanistan that his memory was blasted back into focus. This book is the result of a long, cathartic chat with a stranger at a beach bar, where Harold finally found some peace.

Review by Literary Titan: Readers will enjoy the author's informal approach and ability to smoothly switch from tales of the past with relevant events later in life. Each poignant recollection offers another part of his childhood and how it irreversibly shaped his future strategy for a better, more exciting life. The book is a definite page-turner and keeps the reader wanting more from the author. It's a lively, energetic tale that reads like a conversation as if you're hearing the story first-hand from a friend or acquaintance.

Review by Blue Ink Review: His narratives is interesting, and often much fun. Discussing Dead Eye Red, a crimson-wigged woman who held court at the local juke joint during his youth, he writes: "If her mouth was open, she was swearing. But music, liquor, and men revved her up like a steel locomotive... There were fights and shouting matches just for a chance to be near her. Dead Eye Red loved every minute of it, and spanked her little butt as she worked the floor. It was her house. Nonetheless, his tales are

entertaining, sprinkled with humor, drama, and sadness. Readers will discover an intriguing life, one of turmoil and finally, thanks to a stranger on a beach, inner peace.

Reviewed by Andrea Hammer At Forward Reviews: The peace-seeking memoir *Surviving Chaos* revels in the cathartic power of storytelling after a lifetime of challenging circumstances. Harold Phifer's *Surviving Chaos* is a memoir filled with tales of hardship and withstanding fallout. The book's alarm-ringing section and chapter titles, such as "Dysfunction Junction" and "Holidays From Hell," signal the rough ride ahead. The introduction similarly does not mince words--its upfront red flags include references to manipulation by a controlling aunt, abuse by a mindless brother, and shaming by a schizophrenic mother.

Disturbing details about these troubled relationships bubble up at a beach bar in Thailand, with the "calming effect" of "ripping off bandages" from lifelong wounds, as Phifer tells his war stories to a stranger. Through this effective storytelling technique, the listener and questioner serve as reactive filters while advancing through this bumpy ride. The natural integration of Phifer's periodic interjections accents his stories, allowing for moments to process their intense subjects.

Phifer's anecdotes are disturbing, often painful, and compelling. Startling parallels exist between stories of a bombing in Afghanistan and "mayhem" encountered during his childhood, while phrases such as "shaking like lambs in the woods" are used to describe first experiences; elsewhere, "warden of that asylum" evokes difficult memories.

A barrage of stories about a "Crazy Bicycle Lady" who inflicted emotional and physical harm make Phifer's desire for a more loving mother clear. From her constant ranting to leaving boiling water unattended that resulted in severe childhood burns, Phifer's memories serve as shocking indictments of her. A single positive account of her, set during her dynamic recitation of "The Gettysburg Address," means that the expressions of love for her after her death feel unbalanced.

Conflict also arises when Phifer discusses his feelings about his often-absent father. His expressed need to pursue their relationship elicits sadness, which is counteracted when they form a later connection with concerted effort. The book's warm descriptions of the healing experienced with Phifer's father's family are a rare source of light and solace in the book.

Phifer's encounters with racism add another disturbing facet to the book; they include a customer calling him the n-word while he delivered food, as well as the entrenched prejudice he experienced while working as an air traffic controller in the American South. On these points, the book works toward deeper understanding beyond the offenses themselves, connecting the bullying Phifer experienced as a child with his ongoing clashes with racism. Indeed, as it progresses, the book moves from personal stories to more universal experiences, and realizations about these connections wend in. Brief observations about life's perpetual challenges, dwindling time, and unresolved demons are alluded to as the book moves toward its end.

Review by Rosemary Wright At Online Book Club: *Surviving Chaos* is light and gripping. It's jam-packed with intriguing events that happened during the author's childhood, teenagerhood, and adult life. Narrating his stories back and forth, Harold tells about his adventures, school life, bullies, friends, neighborhood, and family, particularly his mother's schizophrenic episodes and constant rants. Though I felt for her, I loved reading the parts of the book involving her.

The book is hilarious and unputdownable. Containing 249 pages, it's a quick read. I commend the author for his ability to relate such a heartbreaking story in a funny way. According to him, he used humor to

sustain himself throughout the story and his life because logic didn't apply. I like his straightforward and suspenseful writing style, which makes the book seem more like a novel than a memoir.

There's nothing I don't like about the book except that, at the beginning, I just couldn't accept certain things the author said he and his brothers did. For example, as a child, during a confrontation between his mother and a teacher, his 3-year-old younger brother "smirked back at him." Maybe, some 3-year-olds can do that. Anyway, it's the author's story, and he told it in an engrossing manner.

Finally, I rate *Surviving Chaos* 4 out of 4 stars. It doesn't deserve a lower rating since it's well written and amusing. Moreover, it was professionally edited; I noticed only a couple of typos. Though readers who don't enjoy non-fiction books may not want to read it, it'll be a worthwhile read for those who like life-changing memoirs.

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About The Author: Harold Phifer was born and raised in Columbus, Mississippi. His first twenty-five years were spent entirely in his home state. After graduating Mississippi State and Jackson State Universities, he became a highly specialized air traffic controller, living and working as an international contractor serving numerous tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. *SURVIVING CHAOS* is his second book.

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**SURVIVING
CHAOS**
HOW I FOUND PEACE
AT A BEACH BAR

HAROLD PHIFER

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