

AND THE LIVIN' WAS EASY

Reviewed by Sigma Boulé Grapter
Archon Andrew C. Hughey



Archon Andrew C. Hughey

A Summer Remembered by Sigma Boulé Archon John E. Fleming (Silver Maple Publications, 2005)

In this touching memoir, Sigma Boulé Archon John E. Fleming masterfully paints a lush, beautiful portrait of his childhood in Morganton, North Carolina. With painstaking detail and vivid imagery, he describes his experiences of hard work, family connections, the community and food. In addition to these aspects of life most familiar to African Americans, Archon Fleming also touches on the universal themes of childhood play, love of nature, scary fables and myths. Images and themes as familiar as these might easily have become uncritical instances of nostalgia. Archon Fleming, however, does not sugarcoat his story: racism, segregation and violence are remembered with the same unflinching attention to detail he applies in describing the good stuff.

The story recounts, principally, events that occurred during the summer of 1956. Archon Fleming was twelve years old that year. His slightly

older and much admired cousin Ike, a soon-to-be troubled youngster, had journeyed from the “big city” of Durham to Morganton to spend the entire summer with his well-behaved cousin Johnny Fleming. Their harrowing adventures and playful antics unfold as rich illustrations, and by the end of the summer, the boys have influenced each other for the better.

A recurrent theme in *A Summer Remembered* is hard work. Indeed, hard work is as essential to the Fleming family ethic as it is to the family’s economic survival. This ethic of hard work is most inspired by his grandfather, DePapa, whose influence permeates each generation of family members, and by and his father, James, who worked three jobs to support his family. Archon Fleming’s mother, a dietician, also worked outside the home while managing their household and overseeing three children. As a result, Johnny and Ike enjoy a summer of fun but are also required to work long and hard.

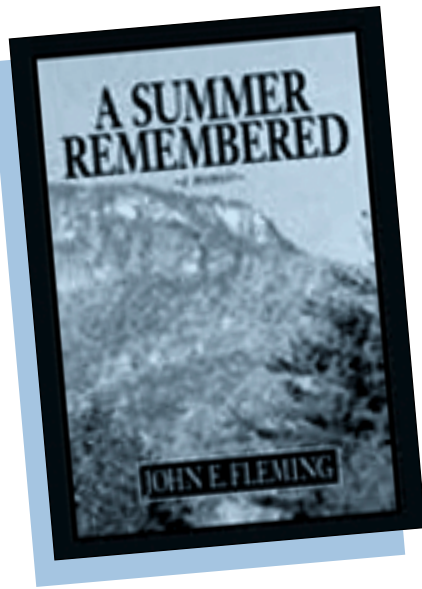
Balancing the themes of hard work and required productivity are the timeless notions of generosity, family ritual and communal celebration. Among these memories are several passages recalling meals so lovingly prepared and delicious that one can almost live the sensory experience. In the following standout passage, Archon Fleming recalls the menu of an extended family and church picnic:

“There were homemade rolls, potato salad enriched with real Hellmann’s Mayonnaise and dozens of deviled eggs, baked beans full of molasses, and smoked bacon, macaroni and creamy cheddar cheese, collard greens and ham hocks, three-bean salad, green beans and ham (that mother had prepared along with potato salad), a country ham and

mounds and mounds of golden fried chicken. There was a completely separate desert table. There was a pound cake so rich with butter that it saturated the paper towel on which it sat. A coconut cake with double-boiler icing and real coconut, a carrot cake, a double chocolate cake, a pecan pie, an apple pie, and a peach cobbler. We topped all of this off with our homemade ice cream.”

The description of church services and the significance of religious life to his family and their community are equally vivid. With culturally familiar characters and scenes that evoke reader’s memories, Archon Fleming describes the preaching, singing and shouting that accompanied his congregation’s call-and-response worship service. In one passage, he discusses the Reverend’s sermon about the parable of the prodigal son, and readers are led to consider the parallels between the prodigal son’s return and his cousin Ike’s spiritual awakening.

The poignant story of his uncle Elliard’s death at the hands of a white racist, reminds readers of the senseless losses that mark African Americans’ collective memory and history in the U.S. Elliard, Archon Fleming’s father’s oldest brother and the first in the family to attend college, was killed in 1914 while a student at Johnson C. Smith College in Charlotte. Archon Fleming’s meta-recollection of the event (for he shares it as a memory triggered by his telling of a different event) casts light on the family’s shadow memories—the ones too hard to remember, yet too affecting to forget—and readers can also vividly see young Elliard walking from the campus library, struck in the base of the skull by a brick thrown from a passing car and killed



instantly. Archon Fleming later describes his own experience with racists with a redemptive self-sufficiency that defies oppression. This is quite apparent when he recounts how, in spite of the landmark *Brown* decision, he and his friends simply did not *want* to go to school with white folks. His memories reflecting African Americans' shared racial heritage offer fascinating lessons to young people about how much better, arguably, race relations have become. He tells of the horrors African Americans endured while traveling by car during segregation and the response by the

American Automobile Association; AAA published a pamphlet for middle-class Negroes with the catchy title, *Vacation Without Humiliation*. This pamphlet, he writes, was based on AAA's investigation of places of public accommodations that accepted Negro patronage.

Perhaps the most significant of the gifts Archon Fleming gives us is the reminder of how much power lies in our narratives. He tells of Ike's initiation into what, for Archon Fleming, had become a cherished and anticipated tradition: listening to DePapa tell the story of the Old African, a story five-generations old. The story is about DePapa's grandfather, Tamishan, who was the first known ancestor to be brought to this country from Africa. This literate ancestor, as the story goes, never accepted his lot as a slave, incited other slaves to discontentment and became known as a trouble-maker. Eager to be rid of him, his owner agreed to allow Tamishan's return to Africa in exchange for four Africans; crew from the ship were to accompany the Old African into the interior once they reached the West Coast of Africa to ensure that he followed through on the deal. But Tamishan could not sell four of his people into slavery. Instead, he purchased his freedom by paying \$400 in gold dust—the value of four slaves.



Archon John E. Fleming

What emerges most clearly in *A Summer Remembered* is that Archon Fleming has plenty to be proud of in both his family and his upbringing. Moreover, he shares them with us with a balanced mix of humor, pride, humility and affection. In doing this, Archon Fleming effectively reminds us of why we innately love black people and why we should love ourselves.

For more information, visit: www.silvermaplepublications.com, Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com. Ω

REGISTER NOW FOR THE 48TH GRAND BOULÉ