

# Childhood identity crisis

Well-crafted memoir tells haunting tale of biracial angst

By ERIN TEXEIRA  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

If he has any fond memories of his early years as the pale-skinned child of a black father and a white mother, David Matthews doesn't share them.

Barely a few pages into his memoir, it's clear his story will probe some seriously uncomfortable themes: family ties shredded over racism, an unstable mother abandoning her infant and excruciating racial self-deception.

Toss in what he calls "minor league poverty" in a tough Baltimore neighborhood and sporadic child abuse, and "Ace of Spades" is not a happy read.

Yet Matthews' admirable honesty and mostly fluid writing are enticing — and he doesn't bother with blame or self-pity.

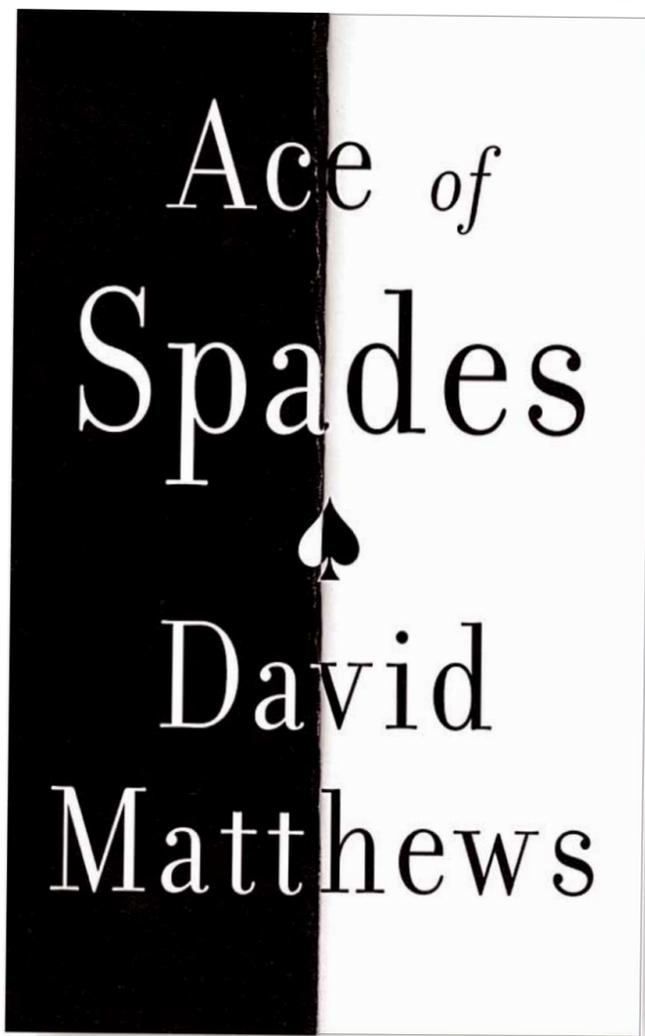
Instead, the memoir comes off as an important primary source about the tortured byways of racial integration in the 1970s, especially as lived by one lonely, confused child.

"Ace of Spades" is part of an emerging genre of memoirs — including "Jesus Land" by Julia Scheeres in 2005, and the newly released "Golden Road: Notes on My Gentrification" by Caille Millner — around a similar theme.

That is, while adults in the 1960s and '70s were publicly grappling with the social upheaval of the civil rights movement, many of their children also did quiet battle on the front lines of integration.



David Matthews was raised by a black father and a string of his father's female companions after his mentally ill white mother abandoned the family.



"Ace of Spades" (Henry Holt & Co., 302 pages, \$24)

Many had intense racial identity struggles but were mostly left to sort it out for themselves.

What scars do they still bear? "Ace of Spades" describes Matthews' father, Ralph Matthews, who was the longtime managing editor of the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper, as a celebrity in local black circles.

He was friends with Malcolm X, James Baldwin and Miles Davis, among other black notables.

But he was one of those stalwart cheerleaders for black empowerment who, bewilderingly, had a string of white girlfriends and wives, and biracial children.

Which leads to the central conceit of "Ace of Spades": One of those children, David Matthews, with his white skin, straight hair and features that aren't exactly black, begins about age 10 pretending that he's white, Jewish, like his mother.

Mentally ill, she'd left the family

soon after Matthews' birth, never to return. Her ex-husband replaced her with women who were sometimes affectionate and sometimes brutally abusive.

Matthews is not hysterical and tortured about passing. He's no tragic mulatto: the stereotypical biracial character seen mostly in old films who weeps and rants about having black blood.

As he grows up, he is dispassionate and calculated in his elaborate lies to classmates and their parents.

He eventually realizes that, though he is a racist, his racism was "exceedingly rational": Living on the edges of an affluent white area of the city surrounded by poor black neighborhoods, Matthews must navigate the social minefield of a racially mixed world, especially at school.

Minutes into his first day of school, his new classmates interrogate him: "What are you? What are you?"

With few friends and a father who worked endless hours, Matthews' childish mind concocts crude tactics to survive.

He rejects blackness.

"I wanted access. I wanted the benefit of the doubt. I wanted in on the America that smiled back at me from my television and from my teacher's encouraging glances. ... Life for me was not a war between black and white, or rich and poor, it was a life sentence that could be commuted only by whiteness, real or imagined."

Matthews seems to delight in turning a unique phrase.

He often uses unconventional words and writing tactics, including footnotes that contain his marginally interesting mental ramblings.

It mostly works.

But he loses his footing when he lapses into impenetrable writing, such as, "A tangential benefit of that enfeebling cultural diktat was the justifiable anger that smoldered at its core."

It's as if he can't quite figure out what he wants to say, and hides behind his own words.

By the end, Matthews has made sense of his father's decisions, probed his mother's life and reconciled with himself as a man with black roots.

But it feels rushed. It's a testament to his skillful writing that, despite a tortured life chronicled over 300 pages, we still want to know more.

## PUBLISHERS WEEKLY BEST SELLERS

### HARDCOVER FICTION

1. "Step on a Crack" by James Patterson, Michael Ledwidge (Little, Brown)
2. "Sisters" by Danielle Steel (Delacorte)
3. "The Double Bind: A Novel" by Chris Bohjalian (Shaye Areheart Books)
4. "Plum Lovin'" by Janet Evanovich (St. Martin's)
5. "For One More Day" by Mitch Albom (Hyperion)
6. "The Alexandria Link" by Steve Berry (Ballantine Books)
7. "High Profile" Robert B. Parker (Putnam)
8. "Cross" by James Patterson (Little, Brown)
9. "Hannibal Rising" by Thomas Harris (Delacorte)
10. "Natural Born Charmer" by Susan Elizabeth Phillips (William Morrow)

### NONFICTION/GENERAL

1. "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne (Beyond Words)
2. "The Audacity of Hope" by Barack Obama (Crown)
3. "You: On A Diet: The Owner's Manual for Waist Management" by Michael F. Roizen, Mehmet C. Oz (Free Press)
4. "A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier" by Ishmael Beah (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)
5. "The Best Life Diet" by Bob Greene (Simon & Schuster)
6. "Marley & Me" by John Grogan (Morrow)
7. "The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town" by John Grisham (Doubleday)
8. "I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman" by Nora Ephron (Knopf)
9. "The Proper Care and Feeding of Marriage" by Dr. Laura Schlessinger (HarperCollins)
10. "About Alice" by Calvin Trillin (Random House)

### MASS MARKET PAPERBACKS

1. "Irish Dreams" by Nora Roberts (Silhouette Special Releases)
2. "The Dream-Hunter" by Sherrilyn Kenyon (St. Martin's Paperbacks)
3. "The House" by Danielle Steel (Dell)
4. "The Divide" by Nicholas Evans (Signet)
5. "The Templar Legacy" by Steve Berry (Ballantine)
6. "Causing Havoc" by Lori Foster (Berkley)
7. "Honeymoon" by James Patterson, Howard Roughan (Warner Books)
8. "McKetterick's Luck" by Linda Lael Miller (HQN)
9. "Tongue In Chic" by Christina Dodd (Signet)
10. "Most Likely To Die" by Lisa Jackson, Beverly Barton, Wendy Corsi Staub (Zebra)

## Novel set in Seattle of public, private privacy intrusions

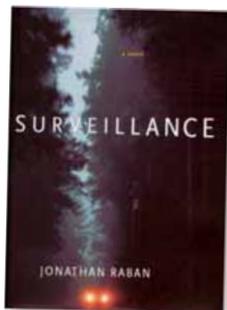
By DOUG ESSER  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

"Surveillance" is set in Seattle sometime in the near-future. It's hot. The rain isn't the typical mist, but a hard fall. Water drives through roofs into homes.

The government is obsessed with security, with soldiers searching cars at highway checkpoints and Homeland Security holding disaster drills that put everyone on edge.

But maybe the point of the measures is to put everyone at such a level of fear that they will accept greater government intrusion.

At the heart of the story are a single mother and magazine writer, Lucy Bengstrom, her sixth-grade daughter Alida and neighbor Tad Zachary, an actor who



"Surveillance" (Pantheon Books, 258 pages, \$24)

serves as Alida's father figure.

Lucy lands an assignment writing a profile of a former professor, August Vanags, who wrote a best-selling memoir about growing up during the Holocaust. Her

research makes Lucy suspect something unpleasant about the professor.

Meanwhile, Lucy's landlord takes an unnatural interest in her.

There are two levels of surveillance in the book. Foremost is the police state-style inspections and their threat to civil liberties. The criticism of the measures is largely voiced by Tad in passages that might as well be the author's footnote.

"You think you're living in a democracy, then one morning you wake up and realize it's a fascist police state, and it's been that way for years," Tad tells Lucy.

Vanags, meanwhile, supports an aggressive government. His experience with Nazis convinces him that it is necessary to confront evil.

"I think the situation we're in

now's as bad as 1939, worse, in a way. The world has changed. People have got to wake up to the complexity, the scale, the global nature of what's happening," he tells Lucy an interview.

The second level of surveillance is the personal snooping: the landlord's musing on the razor in Lucy's bathroom, Lucy sending for information that could expose the professor. Just as the various schemes are about to climax, an earthshaking event changes everything.

In Lucy, Tad and the others, Raban has crafted believable characters readers can care about: Lucy's love for her Spider convertible, Alida's questions about her father, Tad's late nights on the Internet, the professor's affection for his doddering wife.

The characters give voice to

Raban's politics, to his belief that the war on terror has led to a surveillance society. And the real surprise to "Surveillance" is that Raban's characters hijack the vehicle for his political point of view and drive off to a soap opera.

The characters are stronger than the author's message because the criticism of government surveillance is largely voiced as Tad's rants.

On the other hand, the probing into personal privacy could drastically alter the characters' lives. Lucy seems to be on the verge of breaking a best-selling author into a million pieces, something that would destroy his reputation and build her career.

The big issues are important and deserve attention, but it's the personal ones that linger in the mind.

## Page turns out 16th book about sleuth

The Associated Press

"The Body in the Ivy" is Katherine Hall Page's 16th novel featuring caterer and amateur sleuth Faith Fairchild, and it's really a "chick lit" mystery.

With one minor exception, all the characters are women. Some chapters read like a soap opera.

This time around, Faith is hired by famous author Barbara Bailey Bishop to feed the eight women she has invited to her private island for a week.

It's to be a 35-year reunion of

schoolmates from their Massachusetts college.

What it turns out to be, however, is a gathering of women who had motives for murdering Bishop's twin sister Prin.

Shortly before she was to graduate, Prin fell from a tower on campus and landed in a big bed of ivy. It was ruled suicide.

The book starts slowly but interestingly as it introduces each woman on her way to the reunion. The story is already one-third of the way along before one of the guests states her suspicion about Bishop's

true purpose for the reunion.

Some of the chapters take place on the island while others are set during the women's college years. It's cleverly done.

Prin was a beauty, and people were drawn to her. She had an ugly nature, however, and harmed people in various ways. Each of the eight guests did, indeed, have reason to hate her.

And one, it turns out, will kill again to protect the secret of Prin's fall from the tower.

There's a major storm that keeps the frightened women from leaving the island.

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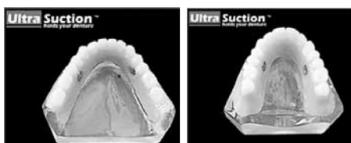
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