

Ageing, care and trauma: understanding care dynamics in long-term residential care in *A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven*

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ABSTRACT

Judi Ann Mason's *A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven* dramatises the caregiving dynamics in a rural black family in 1960s' America, emphasising the interrelated experiences of ageing, care and trauma. This paper analyses the play within the sociocultural context of rural America during the Civil Rights Movement to examine the diverse manifestations of caregiving embedded in familial relationships. Mason dramatises the emotional and physical labour of care that is unevenly distributed within a patriarchal household, simultaneously exposing the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that shape ageing and dependency. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from care ethics, this paper highlights how care circulates within the private sphere of family, reflecting the broader neoliberal tendencies that privatise care to frame it as an individual or familial obligation. The study ultimately aims to underscore how Mason's play foregrounds a reconfiguration of care as a fundamental right, deconstructing the patriarchal frameworks that govern caregiving roles, highlighting the structural inequities in ageing and care.

INTRODUCTION

Pokie. You never worry about nothing, Joretta. You breeze through life like it was yours alone.¹

Pokie, a teenage girl in 1960s' Louisiana, is confronted with a difficult reality: she must choose between remaining as her family's primary caregiver and pursuing her educational ambitions, while grappling with the consequences of her departure for those who depend on her. Through this tension between personal aspiration and familial caregiving obligations, Judi Ann Mason's *A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven* foregrounds the often-hidden care labour and the disproportionate responsibilities of care borne by young black women within the family. For Pokie, life is not a 'breeze' unlike her teenage friend Joretta. Set in the 1960s during the American Civil Rights Movement, *A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven*, a two-act play, explores the quiet struggles of caregiving within the history of racial injustices. The play offers a dramatised portrayal of ageing characters navigating the shifting terrain of care and dependence.

Mason's legacy

A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven was first staged at The Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn, New York, in 1987, under the direction of Mikell

Pinkney. Judi Ann Mason won the Lorraine Hansberry Playwright Award in 1977 for the play, which also received critical acclaim, with the *New York Times* describing its probe into ideas of loss and gain as 'serious',¹ while the *Black American* characterised the production as 'powerful'.¹ An influential African-American playwright and screenwriter, Mason has penned over 25 published and produced plays. She also won the Kennedy Center's Norman Lear Award for comedy writing for one of her popular works, *Livin' Fat*. A native of Shreveport, Louisiana, and a Grambling State University alumna, Mason established a successful career in television writing and production. Her entry into the television industry began with writing for the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) sitcom *Good Times*. She subsequently worked for a number of popular television programmes, including *A Different World*, *Sanford*, *American Gothic*, *Beverly Hills* and *I'll Fly Away*, the Emmy nominated series. She also was the head writer on *Generations*, the first soap opera centred on an African-American family. Across these productions, her works assisted in the expansion of representation of black lives and their experiences within various forms of art and culture. Mason's extensive theatrical oeuvre also reflects the complexities of African-American life and desire for social change. She joined the Writers Guild of America in 1975 and emerged as a pioneering figure who influenced subsequent generations of black and women writers. Reflecting on her legacy, Writers Guild Award-winning writer Tina Andrews remarked, 'So many of us are here as writers because she was there first willing to assist our journeys'.² One of Mason's earliest successes, *Livin' Fat* is a two-act comedy that follows a working-class black family challenged by a moral dilemma after accidentally acquiring money from a bank robbery, combining humour with a critique of economic precarity and everyday financial struggles.³ Akin to *Livin' Fat*, *A Star Ain't Nothin' but a Hole in Heaven* is also situated within an economically marginalised black family context, centring the experiences of the Beckett family as they navigate choices around aspiration, care and survival.

Mason's emergence as a playwright coincided with a tumultuous period of artistic transformation in African-American theatre. The rise of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s became foundational for the development of black theatre institutions. The movement, often labelled as a cultural counterpart to the Black Power

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