In the 1996 essay collection "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man" by Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., there is one titled "The Passing of Anatole Broyard."

The title is a double meaning. Broyard, who had been a book reviewer at The New York Times for 19 years, died in 1990, but the piece was addressing another kind of "passing."

Broyard had been born into a black family in 1920 in New Orleans. When his light-skinned parents moved to Brooklyn and "passed" for white, their son went a step further: He left his black roots behind entirely. Eventually, he married a blond, Nordic woman and had two children, a blond son named Todd and a curly-haired daughter named Bliss, whom he raised in toney, nearly all-white Greenwich, Conn. When he died, he was listed as "white" on his death certificate.

Now his daughter, who only learned of her father's hidden racial identity -- and thus her own mixed racial background -- just before her father's death, has written her own reflection on the "passing" of Anatole Broyard.

Bliss Broyard reverses her father's passage, traveling back to New Orleans to trace her family roots over 200 years. She also uncovers the complex and crazy racial history of our nation.

This is not, thankfully, a book about a privileged white girl trying to decide if she should call herself black, although at first Bliss does struggle with how she should identify herself.

"You're Bliss, that's who you are. And the best thing you can do is to figure out what that means," her father's sister Shirley tells her. "You're not going to be able to understand what it means to you until you understand what it meant to your father. That's the question you should be trying to answer."

As she tracks down her father's Creole relations, she begins to ask harder, more interesting, questions:

"Was my father's choice rooted in self-preservation or in self-hatred? Did it strike a blow for individualism or for discrimination? Was he a hero or a cad? And how did he justify his behavior to himself?"

She doesn't flinch from the more ugly aspects of her father's decision. During the 1960s, her father grew increasingly hostile to blacks, even using racial slurs as black pride replaced black shame and the justification for his rejection of his heritage became more and more indefensible.
Most poignant, though, are her stories of the effect her father's decision had on his immediate family. Maintaining his new racial identity meant cutting himself off from his darker-skinned sister and her family and keeping only cursory contact with another lighter-skinned sister and even his parents.

Bliss and her brother meet their Aunt Shirley and her son for the first time at their father's funeral. They met their paternal grandmother only once, when Bliss was 7.

"I wonder, did I let Edna hug me? Did I call her grandma? Did she look at me as if to drink me in?" writes Bliss.

With that last line, Bliss is echoing a scene from her father's autobiographical novel in which a son goes to see his dying mother. Anatole, whose life inspired Philip Roth to write "The Human Stain" (made into a movie starring Anthony Hopkins), never finished his own novel, another ironic consequence of his decision to avoid being labeled a "Negro writer."

By rejecting his past, he blocked his own creativity

When her mother told the children the family secret (she had been urging her dying husband to do it, but he never did), Bliss and her brother both reacted with relief.

So that was the big secret? What was the big deal? Living in a world far from the racial segregation that their father had grown up in, they thought being black was cool, not something to hide. "To reveal the young colored boy that my father had been, I had to carefully strip away the father that I had known," she writes. When she finds him she realizes that he is different from the person she remembered:

"More vulnerable to others' opinions and less self-assured about the choices he'd made. He seemed both needier and more selfish, less heroic."

And, she adds, "more human."

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