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## Brother Act

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BY JIM SLEEPER

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### Go and Tell Pharaoh: The Autobiography of the Reverend Al Sharpton by Al Sharpton and Anthony Walton

(Doubleday, 276 pp., \$23.95)

To explain why he has written his autobiography now, at 41, the Reverend Al Sharpton cites as a "defining episode" his stabbing by a white man on January 12, 1991, as he prepared to lead a march in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst section, where a black youth had been murdered by local whites.

I realized, all of a sudden, I could die doing the work I was doing. I began to question how I wanted to be remembered. I was getting older. I was thirty-eight, not twenty-eight. [Actually, he was 36; he was born on October 3, 1954.] I was a husband and a father.... After I was stabbed, I decided to try to begin acting out of resolve, out of an overall plan.... I realized that running around from

problem to problem, chasing phone call after phone call, would never move society.... As my children grow older, I've become more and more sensitive to how they see me... and, if the truth be told, few were asking; the media seemed to enjoy portraying me as a substanceless gadfly.

If the truth be told, three months before the stabbing, Sharpton asked this member of the media to meet him at Junior's Restaurant in Brooklyn, where he told me, over pastrami and eggs, "I'm 36 now, with two little girls starting school. I don't think being on the 6 o'clock news every night accomplishes much anymore. I'm looking for new directions." His defining episode, he was saying then, was that "I've been thinking

a lot about what you wrote about me." Actually, he was conducting one of many periodic campaigns to ingratiate himself with journalists and political figures in the aftermath of another self-inflicted disgrace, this time his histrionics over the Tawana Brawley and Central Park jogger cases.

Sharpton was also making one of many apparently sincere efforts to remake himself, to become a more credible tribune of blacks who feel shortchanged by the American Dream. *Go and Tell Pharaoh* is the latest such effort, prompted this time by his political eclipse under a surprisingly deft Mayor Rudolph Giuliani; by his obsequious embraces of Louis Farrakhan; and by his rhetorical goosing of a separatist paranoia that issued in last December's massacre of eight people in an assault on a Jewish-owned store in Harlem. Like Sharpton's other rehabilitation efforts, such as his run for the Democratic nomination to oppose Senator Alfonse D'Amato in 1992, this book is at times affecting, but mainly as an expression of the black haplessness and yearning upon which he floats. *Go and Tell Pharaoh* will only set up the credulous for more disappointment.

**T**he ranks of the credulous, or the white credulous, have thinned, anyway, and the book's greatest merit is that inadvertently it helps us to understand why. Sharpton's problem isn't so much that he could die doing his work as an impresario of racial street theater; it's that such work is drying up, as the ground of racial discourse shifts under our feet. One hears more talk now about small business development and home ownership than about reenacting ancient hurts to dramatize racism. This is not because blacks think racism has declined, but because it has become harder to capitalize on black rage as Sharpton did during the past ten years. Hence the book mainly recycles old rationalizations and shibboleths.

For all that, it is the testament of a man who is neither a buffoon, as some would have it, nor a tragic hero, as some well-wishers think, but an American folkloric figure, a trickster, a clever practitioner of the politics of promiscuity. His only real political center is blackness, a center which the rest of the world imposes, in part, but which he embraces and embellishes out of weakness as much as love. Isn't "the Reverend" centered in Christianity, too? Well, sort of. He keeps circling back to it, preaching every Sunday in one church or another; calling himself a "devout Pentecostal" in this book; and guarding his wife and two daughters closely. Yet he's often around when terribly un-Christian things are happening,

especially in tandem with his stagy remonstrances with phantom "pharaohs."

Sharpton's co-author, Anthony Walton, is in on the game. He was one of the first journalists to officiate at a Sharpton rehabilitation years ago, in a profile for the now-defunct *Seven Days* that managed to make Sharpton almost endearing just when the Brawley case had made most people think the worst. But the book is Sharpton, through and through, filled with his typical rhetorical questions, apologetics for outrageous behavior and beguiling introspections. Walton has added some narrative and intellectual coherence and dropped in a few felicitous phrases, but this collaboration cannot have been wrenching for either man.

Walton has his own knack for these things. His book, *Mississippi*, which was published in February, recounts his recent poignant reckonings with his parents' experiences of unrelenting racism as he visited the state they'd left before he was born. "When I went to Mississippi, I was an American innocent," he writes, "happily suffering the historical amnesia" of our national dream as a child of an integrated Chicago suburb who'd dated white girls and faced few problems weightier, he says, than choosing between cappuccino and espresso after dinner. Actually, as David Garrow noted in *Newsday*, Walton had already announced his loss of innocence in 1989, in an essay called "Willie Horton and Me," for *The New York Times* Sunday magazine. There, he wrote that the Horton commercials had made him and his black friends feel "suckered" by an American Dream that they considered "a hoax" because it so casually stigmatized them. The Horton essay and his early Sharpton profile suggest that Walton no more went to Mississippi in the 1990s an "innocent" than Sharpton went to Bensonhurst lacking a "defining episode." In their collaboration now, Garrow predicted "Walton's 1989 understanding of the concept of 'hoax' ought to stand him in very good stead indeed." And so it has.

**I** don't find them telling any new big lies here, but they defend old ones and do a lot of dissembling. The book jacket has Sharpton living "in Brooklyn," but he doesn't even live in New York. He writes of his move in 1991 from the city to a garden apartment in Englewood, New Jersey, where he recovered from his stabbing, but twice he implies that he has moved back, which he has not. Similarly, he writes that he never gets involved in a case unless its principals invite him, but that depends on one's definitions of "involve" and "invite," as disgusted Brooklyn tenant

leaders and clergymen have told me, and as Mike Kelly, a columnist for the *New Jersey Record* makes amply clear in *Color Lines*, which recounts Sharpton's duplicitous responses to a white cop's slaying of a black Teaneck youth named Phillip Pannell. "I was right about Phillip Pannell," Sharpton now writes. Not according to Kelly's scrupulous account of how and why the officer was acquitted.

Sometimes Sharpton deletes past wrongs entirely: you'd never know from the book that he has ever dealt with the leftish, cultish New Alliance Party, which mixes pseudo-Marxism, black nationalism and psychotherapy, organizing its patients into its leader Lenora Fulani's electoral campaigns, which have garnered public funds that the party has then spent on its own profit-making subsidiaries. For several years, Sharpton operated out of NAP's offices, retained one of its lawyers and rode around in a car rented on its credit card. In return, Fulani traipsed around after him to street demonstrations and "opened" for him on stages, using him for media coverage she couldn't have gotten otherwise. Sharpton himself has used Farrakhan this way, introducing him to 25,000 at New York City's Javits Convention Center in 1993 with the words, "We will stand together. Not in some private midnight meeting ... but in the daylight. ... Don't ask who don't like it; we love it! Don't ask who's mad; we're glad!"

**S**harpton's best-known controversies prompt his most grandiloquent evasions. Writing about Howard Beach, he rightly claims credit for forcing Mario Cuomo in 1986 to appoint the special prosecutor who superseded a compromised Queens district attorney and won convictions of the white perpetrators of brutal assaults on three black men, one of whom died when he fled into the path of a passing car. But Sharpton complains that "the white media" portrayed him as a meddling opportunist, not a veteran organizer with "a good strategy that worked as planned. ... For the first time," he brags, falsely, "whites were going to do serious time for assaulting a black in a bias case in New York City." In 1982, without his help, white toughs got long sentences for murdering a black transit worker leaving a bagel shop in their Brooklyn neighborhood. He writes that his Howard Beach marches brought out the spectators' true racism, but he doesn't mention their fury over a recent string of robberies and brutal break-ins by blacks. Nor does he tell us that Jon Lester, a leader of the white gang, had dated a black girl who defends him even now or that, on an earlier, minor case, Lester had a black attor-

ney whom he'd befriended as a busboy at a diner which the lawyer frequented with local black politicians who called Lester "Elvis" affectionately, on account of his hairdo.

Similarly, Sharpton writes that Dominick Blum, whose car struck and killed the fleeing Michael Griffith, "was found guilty in an administrative hearing of hit-and-run." He doesn't tell us that he and Alton Maddox Jr. and C. Vernon Mason, the attorneys for the two surviving assault victims, vilified Blum as a racist accomplice and demanded his indictment for murder in exchange for their clients' cooperation. They knew that Blum, an innocent passerby returning from a concert that he had attended with a *black* friend, was identified at all only because he had returned to the scene and reported hitting someone. The assaults were an outrage, but our understanding of the climate surrounding them has been impaired by the narratives which Sharpton scripted and the media all but enshrined.

In his chapter on Tawana Brawley, Sharpton again seeks refuge in clever timing. He demands to know how anyone can charge "that I used my media wiles to disseminate a tale that I was not even involved with until a month after it had been made public. . . ." But the point is that he sustained and embellished a tale that he found politically—that is, theatrically—irresistible because it stirred collective black memories of the most intimate sort of violation and of betrayal

by the courts. Calling Brawley's charge that she had been abducted and raped by a group of white law-enforcement officers in 1987, "the latest in a series of outrages stretching back to Jamestown," Sharpton can't admit that he summoned the specters of primal, historical violation so vigorously that they overwhelmed the actual evidence in the case. Not only did he thus embarrass and betray blacks' well-founded yearnings for justice; his handling of the case, mirroring his misuse of Dominick Blum in Howard Beach, deepened the injection of racial epistemology into trials. Solicitous liberals were shocked when that "worked" for O.J. Simpson, but, for those who had seen the Brawley controversy as a watershed, Simpson's acquittal was almost anticlimactic.

Sharpton still claims that when grand jurors weighed Brawley's story, they "said only that there was not enough evidence to indict the accused. They did not say that [the case] was a fraud." Actually, they did what the law constrains grand juries to do. His dodging gets even more artful as he frets that the conflicting charges and evidence "cried out for cooperation and community trust. . . . But it couldn't occur, because the reservoir of goodwill was empty. No one had done any work in building it up." No one, indeed: Sharpton stood with Maddox and Mason as they charged that Attorney General Robert Abrams, who convened the grand jury, had masturbated over photos of Brawley and that her abductors belonged

to a white-supremacist cult practicing Irish Republican Army rituals. Sharpton himself told an Associated Press reporter that asking Brawley to cooperate with Abrams on the case was "like asking a Jew who watched his family burn in the Holocaust to cooperate with Hitler."

While Sharpton doesn't acknowledge such assaults on "goodwill," neither does he mention his own quiet withdrawal from the increasingly perfervid Maddox years later. But, then, how could he, when Maddox's diabolically smart lawyering had won his acquittal on sixty-seven counts of grand larceny and fraud brought by a vindictive Abrams in 1989, after the Brawley case was over? Sharpton's fade-out on Maddox, whom he should have repudiated publicly, is typical of how he handles all his apparent commitments, whether to people or principles: he slithers away from them.

Sharpton's accounts of other cases are similarly skewed by old entanglements, unspoken or deftly deflected. Of the Central Park jogger case, he writes, "I didn't dispute the case or the facts, only that some of the accused were clearly uninvolved and that could be proved and I didn't want them railroaded in the fashion of the Scottsboro Boys," black youths who were falsely accused of raping two white women in 1932 and whose case became an international *cause célèbre*. The "wilders" and the Scottsboro boys: the analogy is grotesque and typical. He doesn't mention that he brought Tawana Brawley, whose own tale had already been discredited, to the jogger-trial courtroom to greet the first group of defendants and "to see," as he told the press, "how the criminal justice system responds differently for a white victim than it does for a black victim." In fact, it was he who responded differently—and never mind that two of the defendants whom Brawley greeted had confessed on videotape, one breaking down before a photo of the woman he had bludgeoned.

In 1984, after an FBI sting caught Sharpton talking with Don King and others about a boxing promotion to launder drug-sale profits, he informed for the bureau on mobsters he worked with as a promoter. "We 'flipped' him without having anything really criminal on him, so the con man got conned," a former FBI agent told me. "But soon he was conning the bureau, using us to get closer to King's operations for his own benefit." When I confronted Sharpton with this years later, he retorted, "I think a good reporter would say, 'Wait a minute, if he was runnin' with the mob, what did he do for the mob? What deals were cut? Who got killed?'" But if Sharpton had done nothing wrong, why had he informed for

## Wissenschaftslehre

*In short, there is for me absolutely no such thing as an existence that has no relation to myself.*

—Johann Gottlieb Fichte (Berlin, 1800)

"Himself as everything! How does Mrs. Fichte put up with it?"—so Heine jokes, yet forgets she exchanged her sickbed for a deathbed, infecting Mr. Fichte with the typhus got tending to her ethics among the poor. And he—of the unbending will, son of a ribbon maker, and a tender of geese—wore out his *Willkomm* among lax professors, duelling students, and Goethe himself! Who could blame the Visiting Spirit for smiting him to the ground, who could only respond, "but you refer me to myself"? As Napoleon neared Berlin, the *philosophe* fled, vowing to raise the avenging spirit of the German *Volk*, for by then the Science of Knowledge was history. Five years after his death, they buried Mrs. Fichte, laying her by his side—dust to dust, all to all.

PAUL KANE

the FBI, which isn't trusted by many blacks? Instead of explaining, he dodges again, suggesting in the book that the then U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani chose the height of the Brawley controversy to leak his old but still-secret bureau history in order to discredit his protests. He raises, then dismisses, the possibility that the leaker was Joseph Spinelli, a former FBI agent who helped to sting and wire him but whom he praises here as "fair and discreet."

**T**he reason for this peekaboo is that Sharpton wants to admit but downplay another strange collaboration, with Mario Cuomo, who was Spinelli's next boss. In 1992, Spinelli, then Cuomo's Inspector General, came with Sharpton to my apartment and vouched for him: "Al's claim that wise guys never actually did anything illegal around him is potentially true," he said, as Sharpton affected a choirboy's innocence. What prompted this? Could it have been that Cuomo had recently shoehorned Sharpton onto the 1992 Democratic U.S. Senate primary ballot, where he was expected to draw enough black votes from Elizabeth Holtzman and his nemesis Abrams to throw the nomination to Cuomo's unspoken favorite, Geraldine Ferraro? Sharpton mentions that electoral strategy but not the dalliances with Cuomo that attended it.

Of the campaign, he writes that Abrams and Holtzman "never in their worst nightmares thought that old loud-mouth Al Sharpton ... would be the one staring back at them in a live debate and standing between them and their dreams." He proved a champion debater, astutely positioned above his three opponents' squabbling over whether Geraldine Ferraro had more mob connections than he did. Sharpton challenged what he calls his opponents' "Democratic Leadership Council/NEW REPUBLIC-type positions" with welfare-statist jeremiads against "Reaganomics"; but he had done more homework than they had on Bosnia and health care, and it showed. Although Abrams won the nomination over Ferraro, Sharpton did come in third, ahead of Holtzman, and Cuomo declared him "the real winner." Abrams began grovelling for Sharpton's support, only to see him and many of his 166,000 primary voters sit on their hands as D'Amato squeaked through. By 1994, it was a running-scared Cuomo who truckled to a Sharpton "rehabilitated" again by local columnists loyal to the governor. Sharpton brags that he carried more than 90 percent of the (very small) black Democratic primary vote against Daniel Patrick Moynihan that year. But what could blacks show for putting so many

eggs in his basket that they had come to seem like an exotic appendage to the polity?

And, where, really, are Al Sharpton's pharaohs? Until Giuliani rebuffed him and Moynihan refused to debate him, most New York politicians and journalists had been pushovers for this would-be Moses since 1971, when a lawyer named David Dinkins helped the "wonderboy preacher" incorporate his National Youth Movement. Now he writes that Dinkins's defeat by Giuliani in the 1993 mayoral race "was a Mario Cuomo setup from the beginning," but Sharpton himself was Dinkins's nemesis through most of his mayoralty. The town just wasn't big enough for both of them, and to hear Sharpton tell it back then, Dinkins was a retainer for Pharaoh.

**D**oes Sharpton ever regret his evasions? Well, sort of. "I think that in many ways society is totally a hustle from top to bottom," he told me in 1992, explaining his past collaborations with mobsters and the FBI. "But there are those that aspire to rise above it ... which is why I call that period in my life a weakness." But his weakness for access and publicity, even beneath poses of defiance, has persisted in his dealings with characters as diverse as D'Amato (whom he endorsed outright in 1986) and Moynihan, whom he has courted quietly since losing the primary in 1994 with letters praising his positions on welfare. None of that is in this book, which might better have been called *Go and Hustle Pharaoh*.

Yet the book isn't wholly a hoax. It recounts horrors in Sharpton's childhood home which were real and are the more compelling for the simplicity with which they are rendered. Real, too, is his intimacy, as a virtuoso in the pulpit, with tens of thousands of long-suffering churchgoers, black domestics, nurses and laborers blown North decades ago into dumping grounds of the American Dream. They pay less attention to his media and street antics than to his heart-rolling homilies, which wouldn't carry well in print and aren't in the book. Also true are Sharpton's claims that he has never been all that comfortable around the Afrocentric and black-nationalist lunacies that he has indulged in the likes of Maddox and Farakhan. He is not a hater, or a black racist; his political promiscuity is too pressing for that. He would sooner be attacked than ignored, but he wants some whites' approval more than he does their respect.

In 1964, he writes, his father, a successful businessman and landlord, walked out of the family's home in the leafy Hollis section of Queens after impregnating his stepdaughter, young Sharpton's "half-

sister." She bore a son—in effect, his brother and nephew. Sharpton told me this in 1992, adding then, as he doesn't in the book, that his half-sister and brother/nephew live in Alabama, the son "in and out of jail, and I identify with him, because he went through some of the same trials I did." What he recalls in the book is that "I had to watch my mother, whom I loved more than anyone, live with the fact that her daughter had stolen her husband, and that the two of them had given life to a child, out of wedlock. To this day I don't know how she lived with the humiliation..." If anything, of course, it was the husband who had stolen his wife's daughter.

**A**s if that weren't puzzling enough, Sharpton invokes his early tragedy again in the chapter on Brawley: "At some point," he writes of the case, "it stopped being Tawana, and started being me defending my mother and all the black women no one would fight for. I was not going to run away from her like my father had run away from my mother, like so many other black men had run away." He means this as a bid for sympathy, but he fails to see that it is a damning admission.


Tawana's own father had indeed left years before. Her step-father, Ralph King—never mentioned in Sharpton's book, though he was in her home throughout the events of the case and the controversy that followed—had murdered his first wife while awaiting trial for having stabbed her fourteen times. Naturally Tawana feared him, and a boyfriend of hers told *Newsday* that she had confided having staged her rape story to keep King from beating her for her four-day disappearance. "Can I say that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt what happened [to Tawana]?" Sharpton asks rhetorically toward the end of the chapter. "No. Neither can my critics. We haven't proved anything definitively, but it hasn't been dismissed."

His most poignant apology for such nonsense may be a much earlier paragraph about his effort to pull himself together after his own family debacle. Explaining why he hasn't managed to reconcile with his father, he cites a New Testament parable about how sea voyagers coped with a shipwreck:

Some swam, some floated, some made it on broken pieces. And I always talk about how I'm one of the kids that made it on broken pieces. But when you've learned how to make those broken pieces work, it's kind of hard to rearrange the pattern, because you've made the broken ones do. And maybe, somewhere in your heart, you don't know if there *are* any other pieces, you've held onto the broken pieces so long.

With more courage and love than many people give him credit for, Sharpton has pieced together a family of thousands and found many surrogate fathers—the Pentecostal bishop who ordained him at age 10, the singer James Brown, Jesse Jackson and others who have taken him under wing and stood with him through his myriad entanglements with the mob, the FBI, the cops, the hecklers, the assailants, the prosecutions, the jail cells, the blunders and big lies.

“[My] vilifiers and critics never tried to look at me as a man and as a person,”



he writes. “How could they know what I was talking about if they didn’t know where I’d been?” How, indeed? But many a reporter who does know where Sharpton has been has hoped that he would rearrange the broken pieces. Learning so little from this memoir, one can only regret that he has abused the trust of so many, deepening black isolation and despair.

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