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## "No Ashes in the Fire" author Darnell Moore on what it means to be "Black and Free in America"

16-21 minutes

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Back when Darnell Moore was fourteen, three boys from his neighborhood tried to set him on fire because they thought he was gay. That wouldn't be the first time he almost lost his life because of toxic homophobia and being a young black man in America.

Today, Moore is an award-winning author, activist and advocate for justice. In his new memoir "[No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America](#)," Moore shares the journey taken by that scared, bullied teenager who not only survived, but found his calling. He sat down with me in Salon's studio to discuss his book, forgiveness, freedom and radical black love. Our conversation here has been lightly edited for clarity.

**What does being free and black and American mean to you?  
Is there such a thing?**

I was at Howard University bookstore at the Barnes and Nobles and this brother was standing at a book and he said, you wrote that book? I said, yeah. He said, "What you mean black and free? You black." He said that to me, and I said for me, for someone who wrestled so long with coming to a sort of understanding of self,

with a sense of not only self-love because I think that's too narrow, but like the type of ability to be free from a cage of all the ideas about masculinity, ideas around sort of sexuality, I try to, in the book, write about what it meant to break out of those cages that were confining me, cages that everyone else sort of created in terms of ideas.

For me to look in the mirror and see myself as a black queer person coming of age, a person who loved expansively, regardless of gender, to not want to take myself out of here, to be grounded in my sense of self, to love every aspect of who I am, is a type of freedom that I imagine, that I talk about in this book. The way that I get at that is like, I remember being in a room with Mumia Abu-Jamal when I was an undergrad and he was talking on the telephone line and I kept thinking, here's a brother that is locked up behind bars as a political prisoner who in his conversation had exhibited a type of intellectual and spiritual freedom despite the bars.

### **That you can't take away.**

I was outside of the prison cell and was still caged, but this brother was behind bars and free. So for me, freedom is about a type of self-possession. A type of shit that we don't have to wait for the ending of white supremacy or anti-black racism to happen in order for it to be afforded to us.

### **You feel like anybody can experience that type of freedom as long as they are locked into who they really are.**

Existential freedom — existential, spiritual, the type of deep psychic freedom that is demanded I think of those who exist on edge of the margins, who have to say in the midst of — look, black

people are always in the midst of the fire that is America. Like the three Hebrew boys in the Bible, Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego, the fire's there, and we critique that fire but we're also able to live and to love and to create life in the midst of all of that. That's what I try to get at as a type of existential freedom that is not conditioned upon the white gaze or white racial supremacy or homo-antagonism, any of those things holding us down.

**One of the things that I really enjoyed about your book is how you talk about family, and the cousins and the gatherings, and things like that. Are you and your family still close?**

My family is like — they are my best friends.

**Because for me, after my grandmother died . . . she held us together, and then we just started breaking apart. Now when we have functions, everybody's on their phones and it's not the same.**

My family, we're from Camden, New Jersey, and that's important for me to name. That's my home. They still live there, and for Camden being known as one of the most economically devastated spaces, was known as one of the most violent, for us to lack wealth, what we were rich in is what I call radical black love. I often describe my family as the type of people where we had that little three-bedroom house and so many of us lived in my grandparents' house at some point or another, right? If you were out on the streets, they would never let you go without.

We would sleep on the couch or two of us be on the floor or somebody being in a basement. A couple of people be up sharing rooms, but it was a type of family that they never let you go without, even if you were that sort of rabble-rousing family member

that did something, you know how that it is. They will let you in. That is the first place I learned what it means to love radically, politically, and I love them. They are the type of family that . . . they don't count measures of success by things that I do. They love me just for being.

**Yeah, you're going to pull up and be yourself and share that love and you all take care of each other and when I think about that, I can't help but to think about some of the policies and what's happening today with the families being separated. Knowing what you come from, how do you even feel about that?**

The funny thing is I was telling somebody that I hadn't even had Trump in mind really when I was writing this book, but so many of the themes that it tries to unpack, I think are relevant to where we are now. The one thing I'll say is for black children — and scholars talk about this all the time — the inability or the unwillingness of folk to allow black children to be children. Black children don't get to be children.

**We grow up quick.**

You understand what I'm saying? Like you're a six-year-old boy and you already supposed to be thinking about becoming a real man or are seen as a real man. You are a 12-year-old boy like Tamir Rice playing in the park with his sister and a police officer sees you as a target, as someone who has a potential to do harm as an adult, even in your childhood, and shoots you dead.

So many of our young people, if you're black and brown, don't get afforded the privilege of being children, and right now under this dangerous policy, this is what we're seeing. Childhoods are literally

being snatched away and the traumas that are going to result, not only the traumas that are present but the traumas that will impact these young people who will grow to become adult human persons, is going to be remarkably devastating.

The other thing I will say though, in relation to the book, I talk a bit about how theology shapes not only our perceptions of self, but also policy, and here we have an administration who has in so many ways cited Biblical scriptures as a rationale for their wrongdoing.

**A whole huge segment of this country who identify as evangelicals not are saying a thing. They're just mute.**

**Let's get into the [book's] title. It came from a very unfortunate situation in your life. Could you take us to that moment?**

So when I was 14 I was jumped by some neighborhood boys. One was a neighbor, a couple of them. They all live in the neighborhood and I got picked on a lot. I was like, that dude that was figuring out different routes to take home from school every day. I got picked on because I'm like a quirky black boy. I didn't yet identify as gay, but I knew my gender presentation raised people's suspicions. There's one dude who would pick on me all the time and this particular time when I was coming home from the store, they surrounded me, was hitting me and one of them took a gallon of gasoline and emptied on me and tried to light a match that wouldn't light because of wind kept taking the flame out. Between the wind and then my Aunt Barbara who intervened — I won't tell you how she intervened — I sort of survived that moment.

The trauma of that gasoline being poured onto me and having

experienced that remained, but the thing I've been saying about that — the title is a specific reference to that, what it meant to survive that fight. There wouldn't be no ashes in the fire because there was nobody to be mourned. There was no death, but it's also a reference to what I think it means to be black in America, to exist in the space where a fire is always raging and tap to survive for that.

### **As you grow and as you heal, do you forgive those people?**

I was recently doing an interview where I really wanted to impress upon the person I was talking to that I really don't believe in disposing of black people. I don't believe in doing to each other what the systems do to us, and I don't believe that punishment and particularly carceral tools are avenues for transformation. At 12 years old, the only thing I imagined, I just wanted it to stop.

I didn't want to fight. My family wanted me to fight. As an adult who has worked with young people and who also realizes that prisons aren't fixers for things, I can't imagine. Actually, I should tell you, when I was writing this book, I went searching for the brother that did that and I searched a couple of things. I searched prison records because I wanted to be sure, I wanted to make sure he wasn't locked up. I searched all accounts to see if I could find him, if he was dead, because I wanted him to be alive, not in jail.

### **Did you find him?**

I didn't. I do forgive, but it isn't like cheap grace or cheap forgiveness. It's not like I'm saying like, "Oh, all is . . ." Well, it's me saying I understand. When I was writing this, I was writing what's shaped this young brother in such a way that he would want to do some things like that. What was he going through? What was he

trying to burn in me that might've been a reflection of what he saw in himself?

**Because you saw parts of yourself in him as well.**

Absolutely. I try to humanize him in the book, and what I want for him is for him to be alive.

**It's such a retaliatory culture, I sometimes I struggle with how do we get to that level? How do we look at hate or pure evil and try to put love into it?**

Part of it is, none of these routes have worked. Not only that but to be black in this country is always to be ready for disposability. You know, transformation, you don't get — your mind and heart don't change because you are put behind bars. It's not going to make you love your neighbor who you might be hating because you see some parts of yourself in them. I kept thinking, damn, what if some of the parents got together at that age and said, "Let's bring all these young — let's bring them together in a living room."

"Let's name the wrong as a wrong and ensure that it never happens again." Let's talk through what the issues are that might be catalyzing some action like that. Inevitably, I'm struggling right now because we exist in a culture that's [focused on the] call out, and is all about punishment. If you want transformation to happen, if you want harm to stop, what can we imagine as a route that's outside of just the narrow confines of punishment? That's what I've been thinking about.

**That ego prohibits us from getting to the root of these problems. It's always like, who's going to win? How do I win? This person hurt my son, so I want their son to feel some type of pain. Instead of saying why did this person do that and**

**how can we get together collectively and move forward because we have bigger demons to fight? There's whole systems that are structured with the sole purpose of destroying us.**

**It was Sojourner Truth who said, "The rich rob from the poor and in turn the poor rob from the poor." So, as a person who is or was a Black Lives Matter organizer, how do you feel about the current state of the movement?**

So the Movement for Black Lives is, should be and should be expected to morph.

I think that organizers are being very strategic and doing what one should in terms of organizing around a particular issues of the moment. So there's a lot of folks who are doing the work around electoral politics.

Folk who have been with the Movement for Black Lives policy roundtables who have been really honing in on to specific policies that need to be overturned, and doing work within communities, organizing at the ground to help people develop their knowledge around the policies that are impacting their communities and what they can do to shape those local policy.

I also think though, it's an opportunity for us because, for so many people, we woke up in a world under Trump that was like, "Oh shit." It isn't new. I don't think we can fool ourselves and think that white rage and all of its consequences are new.

**Even if we had a black president.**

People woke up in the space going, "Oh, we might need to reimagine some tools outside of the ones we've been using."

We're in a space now where folks are really working collectively to think about what new tactics and approaches need to be put in place in order to respond to what's happening now. Like Alicia Garza, pushed to do the black census project as a way to collect data from black folk, which hasn't happened before, right? Across the country to get a sense of what black folks needs' are, and differentiate that according to region and age. It's time for innovation. This is where folks are having to be challenged in the midst of scarcity, in the midst of all that's going on to think differently about how to solve very old problems.

**I think one of the most dangerous things about movements, in general, is the labeling. If you are a black person who speaks out against certain issues, you automatically get thrown into a category. "Oh yeah, he's a Black Lives Matter activist." There's nothing wrong with being called that but if that's not what you do, then you don't want to represent that organization or those people in the wrong way.**

**As a black person who writes books and articles, the minute I step outside, I'm supposed to represent any and every movement that identifies with black people across the country, if I know about it or not. That's a bad thing. And I wonder, as a queer man, do you get put in boxes like that? Do people call you like the voice, "I'm the voice of queers around the world. I'm the voice of black queers, and everything I say represents everyone because I have this platform and I'm this person." Does that happen?**

I don't mind the label, even "Black Lives Matter activist." If only because I am part of a large collective of people who love the hell out of black people and have been thinking about ways to respond

to the needs or to do what we can to respond to the needs of black folk within the Movement for Black Lives.

The public loves to have noticeable "leaders." One, so that they can pin all their anxieties on them. Two, so they can sort of celebrate them and then tear them down. Three, so that-- particularly within movements, black men are often lifted up as leaders. So it was important for me and some others to shy away really from this label . . .

**I feel like that only happens to black people, because if I'm a white man with khakis, you're not going to look at my khakis and say, "Oh, he's from Charlottesville." You're going to say, "that man likes generic pants!"**

You're right. It happens to us so much because even now . . . we get put into these little boxes. It's like, "Here's the black LGBT writers, right there."

**It's as if you can't write about nothing else.**

Because this book isn't just about sexuality, right? It's about a variety of different things, but it even gets pegged in that way. So you get put in these little boxes and you make people fight it out to see you going to merge with the microphone. So I try as much as I can to resist those labels because I don't think that they actually do us any good. Let me tell you in a moment where branding is important for folks. You get social capital based on branding —

**When you first said that, that's what I was thinking.**

It's hard to relinquish social capital and what I call digital capital. When you know that you can get that shit based off of how people are branding you. I feel the better way that we can do this to push

back against that is to resist that all together. You know what I'm saying?

**Something else I wanted to touch on was this whole idea of toxic masculinity. I'm basically referring to a passage in the book where you were talking about how you were living in that culture and you tried to take on some of those actions but it just, it didn't feel good. The results weren't what you expected.**

I said this earlier, but one of the things I tried to do in a book is to also interrogate myself. I always lifted my father up as the big monster in the room — the big type, the black man that I wanted to be totally opposite of. Only to discover that the same message as he had been taught about black boyhood and manhood to be strong, to demonstrate your power by use of force, to possess a certain type of swag regardless of the environment that you're in, to protect one's emotions, right?

As much as I wanted to make him seem like he was the big bad guy, I had to realize that we were taught the same messages and I had practiced the same type of behaviors, in my life, at the expense of my relationships to women, at the expense of my relationship to men. I've been asked, this, what I say to people like rather than ask me what it means to be a better man or a more whole man or a more healthier to possess a more healthier masculinity.

What if we just ask people what might it mean to be a better human being? Because manhood, masculinity . . . they're so shaped by all these ideas and perceptions that don't really do nothing for us, and can be cages for people. I'm not necessarily

trying to be a better man. I'm trying to be a better human being. I'm trying to be free of all that I've been taught — not everything we're taught is good.