***My Vanishing Country: A Memoir* by Bakari Sellers. New York, Amistad Press, 2020.**

**Thesis:** The strongest grip on one’s life is the family and friends that one grows up with. They are anchors and buoys as one travels through new waterways.

The book My Vanishing Country: A Memoir by Bakari Sellers examines the author’s life and how his father, Cleveland Sellers, shaped the choices made by his son, Bakari Sellers. The story explores and illuminates the culture of many small, rural, dying southern towns of the deep south.

In the book’s opening, the author introduced readers to the Sellers’ family history and to the town of Denmark, South Carolina. During the 1950s and 1960s, the town was an established railroad hub and possessed thriving business and manufacturing communities. Many town residents were tradesmen. The town provided a good living for many of its residents. Denmark’s population was 85% black, and the thriving economy provided its residents with a full life. The Sellers’ family members were educated and many were college graduates. The family owned and operated many business and rental properties. Several were members of Denmark Technical College and Voorhees College communities. Voorhees College is a private, historically black college established in 1897 by Elizabeth Evelyn Wright and affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

Today, Denmark is one of the many isolated southern towns that lack businesses and economic opportunities. The town does not have a hospital and its population cannot depend on having safe drinking water. The town has one grocery store and most of the residents do not own cars and use bicycles for transportation. The one thing that can be noted in the town of Denmark today is poverty.

It was to the impoverished town of Denmark that Cleveland Sellers and his family returned to after his parents died in 1989 and1990. He moved into his parents’ home and took up the reigns of the family businesses. His wife, Gwen, was also educated and self-determined. She was from Memphis and Bakari describes his mother as Southern but not country. She made sure her children knew the difference. Cleveland Sellers was well educated. He attended Howard University and after his release from prison he attended Harvard. While living in North Carolina, Cleveland Sellers earned a Doctorate in Education. Due to Dr. Sellers’ education and his family’s reputation, he became the Eighth President of Voorhees College.

In the early ’60s, Cleveland Sellers[[1]](#footnote-1) was an active member of the Civil Rights Movement. He was ambushed, shot, and imprisoned during the 1968 Orangeburg Massacre.[[2]](#footnote-2) Bakari grew up with many of the Civil Rights Movement’s stories and many of the men who participated in its events were household visitors.

Bakari was reared among the influences of the Civil Rights Movement, its leaders, and its philosophy. He also grew up in a rural South Carolina town that he loved. Like the state of South Carolina, Denmark was segregated by race and economics. Many of the blacks in Denmark did not have the advantages or the Sellers’ name. They could not rise above Denmark’s poverty, lack of education resources, drugs, alcohol, workplace discrimination, segregation, and lack of male role models.

Bakari’s best friend growing up was a youngster named Pop. Pop spent many hours with the Sellers family and Mr. Cleveland Sellers tried his best to be a positive role model for Pop, but it did not quite work out. Pop continued to be in and out of trouble and he never got a positive foothold in life.

Pop was born into the wrong neighborhood-on the wrong side of town. Three years before Bakari met Pop, Pop witnessed his father’s death. Pop’s father was driving drunk and crashed into a tree. Pop’s mother was left to rear six children on her own. Not growing up with the advantages that his friend Bakari did made it next to impossible to overcome the oppressive economic and political pressures that Pop lived under. Pop went to prison after he shot a man for attacking a woman. In 2013, Pop earned his GED and received a bachelor’s and master’s degree. Due to his prison record, he could not find a well-paying job and was never wholly ready to give up drinking.

Pop and Bakari were childhood friends, but they did not spend much time together after their childhood. During his high school years, Bakari became friends with a young man named Jarrod. School counselors steered both boys to apply to Morehouse College and off they went to become Morehouse Men and follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr., Spike Lee, Samuel L. Jackson, Herman Cain, and others. Morehouse surrounded the boys with the history and examples of successful Black men. Jarrod and Bakari become summer interns for South Carolina Congressman Jim Clayborn. The political environment became the incentive that guided the boys into politics and the attitude that they should become positive role models for black youngsters. Bakari became an attorney and Jarrod, a lobbyist. Both boys knew what it was to go beyond the dirt roads of an impoverished southern country town.

While the boys were working in Congressman’s Clayborn’s Capitol Hill office, they set in motion Bakari’s future to run for the South Carolina State House of Representatives. They learned the science of running for public office and filed it away for later. Meanwhile, the work with Representative Clayborn and Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin continued to influence and nurture their plans.

While at Morehouse, Bakari learned firsthand what it was to be a leader. While running for the Student Government Association (SGA) presidency, he reached out and worked with a broad base of supporters. He learned how to knock on doors and spoke to many people and each group on campus. After a brief setback, Bakari won the SGA presidency. Working through that setback, taught him to overcome many obstacles--many of the same obstacles he would meet again and go through in the future. After graduating from Morehouse, Bakari went on to law school.

 In June 2005, Bakari decided to run for the South Carolina House against Congressman Thomas Rhoad in the Democratic Primary. He was a hands-on, door knocking politician and began his campaign by drawing up lists of people he needed to meet and greet and went about meeting them after attending law classes. Bakari won his first election at the age of twenty-one. While at the Statehouse, one of the people he met was Senator Barack Obama. The Senator began quizzing him on Constitutional Law. At the end of their conversation, Senator Obama asked Bakari for his support. “Senator,’ I said, ‘I will do so under two conditions: one, my mom, gets an opportunity to volunteer for your campaign. And two, you visit my district.’ Sellers (p. 111)

Sellers was not afraid of risk and challenge. He had become the youngest member of the state of South Carolina Legislature and gave it up to be the youngest Lt. Governor of South Carolina. He believed that holding a statewide office would allow him to make the necessary improvements to towns throughout rural South Carolina. He received some support, but all his friends did not support his bid. Congressman Clyburn attempted to dissuade him. Clyburn and others pointed out the hardships and impossibility of an inexperienced, young, black, democratic, and statewide office. Sellers decided to push forward and gave it his all. He fought long and hard. On election night, Bakari won 41 percent of the vote to McMaster’s 59. His white opponent won 75 percent of the white vote and 10 percent of the black. Sellers (p.148)

Sellers is no stranger to the impacts of hate and racism. Often the outcomes are personal and devastating. Pastor Clementa C. Pinckney and other victims of Emmanuel AME Church shooting in Charleston South Carolina, June 2015, were close friends. On CNN, Bakari Sellers spoke out for all Black victims of church bombings and killings. He pointed out that the Black Church is the heart of the Black community. The church is the center of social change. When the heart is attacked and killed, the body is destroyed and change is no longer possible. See Sellers Chapter IX. “A Voice for the Voiceless” (p.169)

The author stated that one of the reasons he wrote My Vanishing Country is to share the pain and trauma that is a part of Black lives. Sellers explains the problem and that living for others mends and heals the pain and trauma. “I suffer from anxiety, and all these tattoos keep my loved ones in my orbit every day, assuring me of their love and letting me know I love them.” Sellers (p 152)

Sellers communicates his admiration for the strength of Black women. He briefly examines their contributions and support to their communities. He speaks about the problem of Black women’s health and shares a personal story of how his wife nearly died while giving birth to his twins. He credits his wife, Ellen, for speaking up for her health and supporting others’ health.

Sellers ends his story by expressing his thankfulness for the gift of a donated liver for his daughter Sadie.[[3]](#footnote-3) The book My Vanishing Country: *A Memoir* illustrates the long road the author traveled and the long roads he will continue to travel. What powered his travels is the love of family, friends, and humanity.

1. <https://snccdigital.org/people/cleveland-sellers/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/orangeburg-massacre> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/461065-cnns-sellers-gets-emotional-over-daughters-life-saving-organ-transplant-90> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)