



# A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story

*Elaine Brown*

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## **A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story** Elaine Brown

Elaine Brown assumed her role as the first and only female leader of the Black Panther Party with these words: “I have all the guns and all the money. I can withstand challenge from without and from within. Am I right, Comrade?” It was August 1974. From a small Oakland-based cell, the Panthers had grown to become a revolutionary national organization, mobilizing black communities and white supporters across the country—but relentlessly targeted by the police and the FBI, and increasingly riven by violence and strife within. How Brown came to a position of power over this paramilitary, male-dominated organization, and what she did with that power, is a riveting, unsparing account of self-discovery.

Brown’s story begins with growing up in an impoverished neighborhood in Philadelphia and attending a predominantly white school, where she first sensed what it meant to be black, female, and poor in America. She describes her political awakening during the bohemian years of her adolescence, and her time as a foot soldier for the Panthers, who seemed to hold the promise of redemption. And she tells of her ascent into the upper echelons of Panther leadership: her tumultuous relationship with the charismatic Huey Newton, who would become her lover and her nemesis; her experience with the male power rituals that would sow the seeds of the party's demise; and the scars that she both suffered and inflicted in that era’s paradigm-shifting clashes of sex and power. Stunning, lyrical, and acute, this is the indelible testimony of a black woman’s battle to define herself.

**“A glowing achievement.”** —*Los Angeles Times*

**“Honest, funny, subjective, unsparing, and passionate. . . A Taste of Power weaves autobiography and political history into a story that fascinates and illuminates.”** —*The Washington Post*

**“A stunning picture of a black woman’s coming of age in America. Put it on the shelf beside *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.”** —*Kirkus Reviews*

*From the Trade Paperback edition.*

## **A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story Details**

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### Ciara says

elaine brown was appointed chairperson of the black panther party in the 70s, after huey p. newton was sent packing off to jail again. she headed up the party during a fractious period in its history. she was responsible for dismantling national offices & bringing the focus of the party back to oakland, culminating in bobby seale & herself running for elected office. they cut off the panther 21 awaiting trial on the east coast, eldridge cleaver chillaxin' in algiers after escaping prison, & tons of other party members all across the country who had dedicated their lives, & in some cases, their freedom, to the party. it was kind of a dick move, but they were operating under duress, having been thoroughly flummoxed & wrong-footed by the dirty tricks of the FBI & their COINTELPRO scheme, which targeted the black panther party heavily. all of this is detailed in the memoir, & it's all pretty interesting, listening to brown justify her choices & explain that she may have made different choices if she'd had access to more or correct information. the fact that she is just about the only high-profile woman to come out of the black panther party is also interesting, & she doesn't shy away from addressing the role of sexism & misogyny within the party. however, one thing i disliked about the book, & the reason i gave it only three stars, is because brown herself kind of puts down other women a lot. there's a lot in here about her competitiveness with other women, for men, for power in the party, for whatever, & it's sad. & she writes a lot about all the different well-known party members with whom she had sexual or romantic relationships. i also found this depressing. have you ever noticed that when dudes write memoirs, maybe they'll mention sexual or romantic relationships, but they tend to keep that stuff to a minimum unless they are addressing a really significant relationship, like someone they marry or whatever (unless they are rock stars detailing their groupie conquests, which is a different issue). but memoirs by women spend a lot of time addressing romantic/sexual relationships, as if these relationships are intertwined with the fabric of the story they are telling. contrast brown's memoir against bobby seale's. or flying too close to the sun against fugitive days. see what i mean? this isn't to say that romantic/sexual relationships aren't important & should be separated from political life--in fact, i think the ladies might have a better handle on that shit than the men do. but i want people to think about WHY these relationships seem to be so much more significant to women. don't you think it's weird?

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### Rosa says

#### A Taste Of Power

This book is a more than a memoir, it is a classic tragedy. In A Taste Of Power, Elaine Brown recounts her life and experiences in the Black Panther Party. From the very first chapter in which she is announcing her leadership status to the general assembly, I was intrigued. However, the first chip in the romantic picture of the Panthers also, occurs here. The next third of the book is spent discussing Elaine's childhood. Raised in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia by her mother, we see the impact of poverty, her father's absence and segregation in her life. She drops out of college and ends up in California working as a waitress at a club. After breaking up with a her famous, married boyfriend. She becomes involved with the Black Power Movement.

The second third of the book was my favorite part. The beginnings of the Black Panther Party and its goals were glorious and heady stuff. With the implementation of schools, free clinics, free bus rides to prisons and other social services, I understood how Elaine got caught up in the fever of the times. Also, I learned a lot about the Panther Party during this time. I had no idea that so many young, black men were killed by police

during assaults on the Panther headquarters. The police with riot gear, tear gas, harassing and beating protestors, with people being hauled off to jail for trumped up charges, reminded me of Ferguson today. Unfortunately, you also start to see the chasms developing within the group. The demise starts subtle, with patriarchy and sexism. Next, problems of infighting and distrust. When violence or 'discipline' was added, I knew I was reading about an implosion.

The last third of the book was spent reading about the downward spiral of the party. Drugs, violence within and without, infiltration and cointelpro, sexism, patriarchy, it was all too much. The end was inevitable. Still, I'm glad this book exists. It is a lesson to the next generation on 'What Not to do'. I've been told there was a lot of push back from former Panthers questioning the veracity of Elaine's version of events. Well, like the cliché goes "There's her side, his side and the Truth". I don't know if Elaine's version of the Black Panther Party is completely accurate, but I think the overall picture and general feeling is probably true. She paints an unflattering picture of the Panthers but she includes herself and shares a lot of her personal life, personal choices and flaws. I kept wondering about her daughter and who was caring for this child? Was the father ever involved? There are parts where the tone is a bit self serving, or perhaps naive, which is another reason I did not rate this book a '5'.

In the end, I wanted a little more than the "flying into the sunset" ending. An "Afterward" would have been perfect. Just two or three paragraphs on what happened after the end. Answering the questions: Did she ever hear from anyone in the group? How was her relationship with daughter affected? and What is she doing now?

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### **Alanna Why says**

A Taste Of Power is a fascinating account of Elaine Brown's life, from her introduction to the Black Panther Party to her eventual escape from it. I knew very little about the Panthers going into this book and learned so much about them from Brown's experience, including the rampant misogyny that eventually caused her to leave. It is a shame that Huey Newton's legacy seems to have overshadowed hers in popular culture, as she contributed fundamentally to the Panther's Survival Programs, from free meals to their community school. Also, Brown is just someone who led a very interesting life: she grew up in Philadelphia in the 1950s, made an album for Motown Records in the 1960s and even ran for Oakland City Council in the 1970s. A very long book but extremely worth it!

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### **Medina says**

Elaine was the President of BPP for a time, Huey's lover and partner for a time; an honestly neurotic woman, simpatico in almost every way. Perhaps a person of more, ahem, prudish virtues would find offense in her recollections. Many have diminished her allegiance to her fallen comrades, holding her responsible for some deaths. \*shrug\* Maybe so, but one is compelled to trust her as she is forthright about her failures. A definite must read for womanists, black nationalists, those interested in BPP or the perspectives of a black woman in the 70s.

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### **Maya B says**

I was not really sure how to rate this book. It's a book of her life as well as an account of what life was like as

a light skin black female and to also be the first female leader in the black panther party. I must admit she did seem bitter at times about her life. This book is her point of view and as we all know there is more than one side to every story. 2.5 stars at best. To all the people she mentions in this book, it would have been nice to read their viewpoints on elaine brown.

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### **ryo narasaki says**

I learned about one version of the Panthers' many histories, unfiltered by the pinball machine that was my capitalist american-dream education in this nation's history. A Taste of Power was organized instead by Elaine Brown's incredible life-experience and perspective. I finally got a concentrated break-down of the Panther analysis of class conflict, Huey Newton's theory of intercommunalism, and the process by which the Party entered city and national politics. I finally have a better understanding of Estacion Libre's critique of the BPP's vanguardist philosophy, although Elaine Brown does not offer that analysis at all - actually she ends the memoir pretty abruptly with her escape from the Party.

"I was shaking with fear when it occurred to me that it was important to hold on. Not for them. But for me. If I could withstand the total deprivation of my senses, I might see something that could set me free forever." - Huey Newton on being held in the 'Soul Breaker' cells at Alameda County jail.

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### **alix says**

I don't think I can recommend this book enough. Elaine Brown's autobiography is moving, captivating, and unexpected. Although I knew when all the assassinations of Panthers like John Huggins and Bunchy Carter and Fred Hampton were coming, I still found myself choking back tears when she described their deaths. This book was an illuminating portrayal of the life of one (incredibly smart, daring) woman and of the Party to which she gave so many years of her life.

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### **Nakia says**

This is the story of Elaine Brown: From a poverty laden childhood in Philadelphia, where her mother demanded she HAVE the best, resulting in days in school surrounded by the children of rich Jewish and Black bourgeois business owners and professionals, and nights at home filled with roaches, ghetto girls and gang members...to a job in a strip club in Los Angeles which leads to romantic liaisons with powerful celebrity connections, where the last thing on her mind was "Power to the People"...to becoming a pivotal part of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, eventually moving to the Oakland chapter, becoming Huey Newton's lover, recording albums, working tirelessly as the editor of the newspaper, abruptly becoming national president, spawning a new and unheard of era of female leadership within the highest ranks of the party, immersing herself in Oakland politics, and sadly running away from it all to calm her own fears.

This book was too much of everything: dramatic, sad, inspiring, eye opening, sexual, poetic, thrilling. It provided for a fulfilling and riotous discussion in our bookclub meeting, forcing us to examine the roles of women in the Black Power movement, the significance of sex being used to further the cause, the fluidity of motherhood within the community, the rich history of Oakland, the governments intentional destruction of the BPP through Hoover's implementation of COINTELPRO and the flooding of the ghettos with drugs, the

controversy between Bobby Seale and Elaine, and the brilliance that was Newton, who was eventually destroyed by drugs and too much power.

We were also left to wonder, WAS ALL OF THIS TRUE? Should we really believe Brown's story and portrayal of what went on behind closed doors? The reader will be curious as to her life following her exit from the party, as well.

I loved this book. Will definitely be adding it to my collection.

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### **Andrea says**

As revealing in what she can see as what she can't see, this was an incredibly illuminating account of the black panthers. Both the fierceness of their ideals and the fierceness of their flaws. And a continuous reminder of just how far women have come since those days...though lord knows we haven't come far enough. I know those rumors are out there that she was involved with the FBI. I find it doubtful for all of her flaws, they shine from the book as much as what she believed to be true, and I don't know you could ask more from an autobiography.

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### **Teri says**

Update: Rating changed to 5 stars because of my love for this book. Despite my rating change, my original opinions still stand.

Brown grows up like many black leaders I've read about, trying to do well, be respectable and respected despite her the obstacles her race presents to her. She has an absentee father and an emotionally demanding mother. Throughout her childhood and well into adulthood, she tries to fulfill herself through appealing to people's physical and emotional demands: her mother's, her fathers, Huey Newton as well as other men in the Black Panther Party, and her various lovers. You can see the toll that her lack of self-care takes on her. It makes for a very wild and interesting ride.

A Taste of Power is the story of Elaine Brown's quest for identity and purpose through race, love, and womanhood. She discusses growing up poor, her black experience, and how the two influenced her.

This book was a breath of fresh air.

My main point of interest while reading was Brown's membership and leadership in the Black Panther Party. The stories she tells truly display the fullness of her womanhood despite misogynistic obstacles. She plays the background to someone's foreground; she is misconstrued as a bossy bitch/lesbian in instances when she takes charge; she gets abused, hypersexualized, and desexualized all in the name of the struggle she wants to represent. And she displays raw human emotion through all of it.

I've found that socially conscious African Americans in my generation hold our leaders in history on a pedestal. We hear people talk about the good old days with such nostalgia that we wish we were there ourselves. Sometimes we do talk as if we were there. In an effort to preserve our leaders' reputations, we talk about them as if they don't have flaws. To us, they are conservative, respectable, and unshakably united.

Elaine Brown debunks these myths and brings those of us with a mental pedestal back to reality.

Brown takes the fantasy out of the struggle. In history books and media, I always see political and social thought leaders portrayed as a united front and in as few groups as possible. That was not the case. Everyone had different goals and different thoughts on how to reach them. Everyone didn't get along. People were exploited for the personal gains of another.

They fussed, cussed, fought, and fornicated just like everyone else. I enjoyed her honesty.

My only complain is a big one and it kept this book from getting a 5-Star rating. In each chapter Brown has a set-up to a climactic story. In the beginning, they are simple but as the book progresses they are jam-packed with details. While they are essential to understanding, sometimes I got a little lost. Among the details, it gets a little boring and I was left reading the book and thinking, "Huh? Where is she going with this?", and found myself still wondering a few pages afterwards. She eventually gets to the point though and the stories themselves are great.

Overall: Great Woman. Great Story. Raw and Real.

Happy Reading!

Teri

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### Joe says

This is pretty good. Its got me on a whole new Black Panther Party focus. After Assata, Elaine gives a good account of what was going on in southern California and the who Karenga/COINTELPRO situation.

lots of interesting stories about tons of people. the stories about Huey and Bunchy are crazy. definitely check it out.

what did i learn from it so far?

in 1970, blacks were 50% of the prison population and we still are!

the FBI had a plan to get rid of "black messiah type people" or "to create one" The question is who were they and who are they? Karenga, Barack, Jesse, Obama, Sharpton, Colin, TD Jakes, do we really know? hmmm

Eldridge Cleaver despite all his "greatness" was a convicted rapist.

The Panthers had heeeellllllaaa guns. hella guns. thats wassup.

The panthers in Oakland used to discipline members with a lash, Elaine was whipped 20 times at one point for something she was set up for by a jealous man, Bobby Seale. how bout that for internalized oppression, and gender issues. how bout that?

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### Che-che says

My husband gave me this book for my birthday and it took me a while to get into the book but once I did I

fell in love with Elaine Brown her story her struggles and he drive. So much so that I was tempted to go to a book signing she was having in Oakland Calif for a different author. This was such a great book and I wanted it to never end when I got to the last page I was a little sad

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### **HeavyReader says**

Wow! This book is important!

Elaine Brown, once leader of the Black Panther Party, tells the story of her life, both before and during her days with the party. She tells of the misogyny of the male Panthers and how the women Panthers just wanted to be treated as equals.

This book taught me a lot of things I didn't know about the Black Panther Party and answered a lot of questions that I had. In addition, the book is written in a way that draws the reader in and makes him/her/hir want to read more. In a lot of ways, it's an action/adventure novel, where I had to wonder how Elaine, as the main character, survived the turmoil happening all around her.

Highly Recommended!

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### **Kimberly says**

Wow. This huge book knocked me over. Remember how I said Black Pather women are misrepresented? This is a blow by blow account of Elaine Brown when she was the head of the Black Panthers when Huey P. Newton left the country. Besides trying to raise a kid, live through police attacks, and dealing with sexiest fucks, let alone racism, I found that I deeply identify with some accounts of self-denial and deep-seated self fears. When she describes the painful process of reclaiming herself as being black as opposed to wishing she was white as a child, I can't identify on the race card, but I know the utter embarassement and pain she describes.

This is a book for one who wants a book written like your friend would talk to you about such important and personal matters as race in american, being a woman in america, trying to be yourself, and claiming space to be black.

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### **Joe says**

Wow, I can't say enough about how great this book is. On the surface level, it's well-written, well-organized, and very clear. There are some things I wish she had included more details about, but there is a substantial amount about the Panther years.

Probably the only thing I would have liked additionally is more context or perspective, though I'm not sure there would have been room for that. Elaine Brown played such a big role in the Party for so many years, but in some sections she's speaking so personally about it I forgot that she was DOING so much as well, and contributing to this incredible movement.

Her struggles as a black woman were particularly illuminating for me. The things that she did/had to do to

accomplish was she did were both saddening and amazing. She addressed many of the issues that the documentary "NO!" does in a different, very personal way, and does a great job of connecting those issues into her day-to-day struggles, and those of the Black Panther Party.

Really fantastic book, I can't recommend it highly enough.

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