

Explorations in Sights and Sounds

Jewell Parker Rhodes. *Voodoo Dreams*. (New York: Picador USA, 1993) 436 pp., \$13.00 paper.

Until I read Jewell Parker Rhodes very finely crafted novel, *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie Laveau, the New Orleans voodoo queen loomed invincible, beyond the reaches of anyone: man, woman, Black, or white. But in this novel Rhodes skillfully humanizes Laveau by presenting the majority of characters, including our heroine, as scared people motivated by their insecurities and fears. Those who are bold enough to seize the opportunities presented to them, such as John, Marie Laveau's vicious lover, exploit their power and manipulate others for their own glory. The Marie Laveau that we meet in this novel is the third in a line of voodooienne; she is a novice priestess, and a victim of domestic violence, which is perpetuated by her own distorted sexual attraction to John. John was also her mother's lover and his actions precipitated her mother's death. Mostly, Marie Laveau is a victim of ignorance.

Because of her mother's death, she was reared by her grandmother, the first in the line of Marie Laveaus, who fails to instruct her in the teachings of voodoo. After the death of Marie's mother, her grandmother, overcome by grief and fear, flees New Orleans, retreats to a rural area, and raises Marie in ignorance. As a result, Marie is shut off from her private history, embodied by her mother. Throughout this novel, the reader witnesses Marie's search for self identity and meaning. When Marie and her grandmother, forced by circumstance, return to New Orleans, Marie hopes to find some evidence of her mother, and failing she wails: "All my life, I've just wanted to know myself. I don't know anything about me. And what other people know of me is lies. Even if I died, the lies would live on". And indeed, many of the lies take on a reality of their own so that when possessed by Damballah, the powerful Marie Laveau that the voodoo worshipers observe is a far cry from the naive woman abused by John.

Jewell Parker Rhodes is not merely re-writing the life of Marie Laveau, she also writes about the role and function of religion, in this instance voodoo, for the masses of disenfranchised, formerly enslaved Africans in nineteenth century New Orleans. "For many, Voodoo was an escape from the daily brutality of their lives. Marie was their show queen, leading them into the realm of imagination. For others, Voodoo was salvation." Rhodes uses Marie to explore how those who are oppressed cope and maintain a sense of self. She portrays Black people who, in order to survive, constantly redefine themselves in the often very confusing world that they find themselves in. "She [Marie] could reinvent herself. She could become as strong as he was". And indeed our heroine gains strength and breaks John's hold on her, thereby freeing herself from the tyranny of fear. But Marie Laveau's victory is not singular, it signals the possibilities for the masses who attend the voodoo ceremonies hoping to

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experience the magic and escape, if but temporarily, the harsh realities of their lives.

Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* is a remarkable achievement. Through her vivid imagery, the reader experiences another world. The characters are so tangible they walk off the page, multi-dimensional and real, carrying with them the fears that direct their lives. *Voodoo Dreams* is an effective weaving of myth, magic, and fiction into art.

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Beatriz Rivera. *African Passions and Other Stories.* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1995) 168 pp., \$9.95 paper.

In recent years there have been many novels, collections of short stories, and editions of poetry published by Mexican-Americans, but the works by Cuban-Americans have not been as plentiful. *African Passions*, the first published collection by Beatriz Rivera, is a promising but not altogether satisfying contribution to the corpus of Cuban-American writing. It is sometimes brilliant and imaginative, sometimes not very inspiring, with eight stories (several of which are interrelated) ranging from the humorous and well-conceived to the rather tedious.

The best is the title piece, which chronicles the demise of a long-term relationship between a Cuban-American couple from different socio-economic backgrounds. As the pair seeks a burial place for a dead cat, they are accompanied by the Afro-Cuban gods of Santeria (akin to the more widely-known practice of Voodoo) who, summoned by the woman, provide a humorous view of the gods and their activities in her support. Several stories are about the pursuit of the "American Dream" and the degree of success or failure of that pursuit among Cubans. The best of these is "Once in a Lifetime Offering," where Kiki (also a minor character in another tale) finds herself caught up in a typical American middle class career chase. Her pursuit is also one of identity terminating in her voyage to Cuba, an act which causes her friends to declare: "Normally, people leave their countries to find jobs here... This is the land of opportunity. So what does she expect? To find a job in Cuba?"

The weakest story is "Bells," in which Cristina pursues another kind of dream, that of finding the perfect man. She is a wealthy over-achiever (PhD., world traveler, Spanish language television reporter, Jujitsu expert) who is so exasperating that in the end the reader is left indifferent to her fate. "The Battery-Operated Drummer Bear" is about Cristina's father, an overbearing millionaire advertising executive who claims to have invented the term "Spanish Market."