Whittier Public Library's

Book Club in a Box

WHITTIER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sponsored by the Friends of the Whittier Public Library

PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

About the Book

A middle class African-American widow, Avey Marshall, has set off on a cruise with two of her friends from work on the "Bianca Pride," and becomes ill shortly after they have set sail. Avey disembarks in Grenada after experiencing disequilibrium, nausea, disturbing nightmares, and a feeling of being "clogged and swollen." Thus begins a journey of reclamation and healing of a past that has been largely forgotten or erased in her efforts to escape the poverty of her younger years and obtain the American dream of financial security and a white-defined respectability.

-Ann Folwell Stanford,
Literature, Arts and Medicine Database

Contents

About the Book 1

About the Author 1

Critical Praise 2

Further Reading 2

Discussion Questions 3-4

About the Author

Born Valenza Pauline Burke to parents who had emigrated from Barbados to New York, Paule Marshall explores the contrasts between her West Indian heritage-a heritage of slavery and colonial exploitation-and her Brooklyn background and confronts the issues of identity and assimilation that face Caribbean American families. Maintaining one's identity and voice while dealing with these issues remains a common theme in her work.

Marshall graduated from Brooklyn College in 1953 and worked for a popular African American magazine, *Our World*. Her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, was published in 1959. *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) established her as a major writer and won her the Columbus Foundation American Book Award. Other works include *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), *Reena and Other Short Stories* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), and *The Fisher King* (2000).

While Marshall claims that she is indebted to the "literary giants," both black and white, she notes that "they were preceded in my life by another set of giants . . . the group of women around the table long ago-this is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen." Indeed, her early novels focus on the power of the oral tradition and the idea of women as oral translators of their culture who are able to define themselves and their world based

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)
on their ability to articulate their feelings. In Marshall's works, conversation becomes a means of empowerment, and addressing the spiritual over the material offers important affirmation. Marshall's focus on the Afro-diasporic culture as well as black women protagonists as voices of the immigrant community has opened new avenues of discussion and expanded the concept of what it means to be American.

-American Passages, A Literary Survey
http://www.learner.org/amerpass/unit14/authors-6.html

Critical Praise

Praisesong for the Widow is a novel full of music and dancing; it describes the sickness that occurs when we disconnect from our heritage and the healing power that comes from reclaiming the music and rhythms of the ancestors. Its hero, Avatar "Avey" Johnson, was a new character in black literature: an affluent middle-aged black woman, a mother, a grandmother, and a widow. Avey and her late husband worked hard to climb from the slums of Harlem to the comforts of suburban White Plains. But that material comfort brought with it a spiritual disease—a hard-to-diagnose but impossible-to-ignore malaise that eventually erupted into violent illness during a Caribbean vacation. In this novel, Paule Marshall traces Avey's journey from sickness to strength, from the soulless suburbs to the African roots of her identity.

The novel opens with a curious scene: a woman throwing clothes into a suitcase. Since her husband passed away, Avey had been going on cruises with her friends from work, Thomasina and Glance. It is on a Carribean vacation that she finds herself in distress and decides to abandon the cruise. She finds herself dreaming of childhood summers spent in South Carolina with her Aunt Cuney. Aunt Cuney used to take her to Ibo Landing to do the Ring Shout, a ritual dance in honor of the Africans who were brought to the Landing to be sold as slaves. Later she dreams of her late husband who, in his drive for material success in a white world, shut their lives off from the passion and sense of community they had once shared.

The next day she runs into Lebert Joseph, an old man who listens to her concerns, diagnoses her problem, and prescribes cure: a trip to the island of Carricacou, where she undergoes a reunion with that part of her African heritage and traditions that she has allowed to lie dormant within her for so many years. On the island of Carricacou, Avey observes and eventually partici pates in rituals with the islanders. In one of their rituals, prayers and songs are followed by dances. Each nation is called on to dance, but Avey cannot join until they begin to dance the Carricacou Tramp, a dance she recognizes as the same Ring Shout she did as a child in South Carolina. With that, she is reunited with the roots of her own identity and that of her people. It is through the rituals on the island that she realizes the connective thread between the Ring Shout danced by church members, the neighborhood picnics and jazz music in Harlem, and the African origins of her people.

Praisesong for the Widow takes on a decidedly contemporary problem: the rootlessness of a generation of black women—and men—who forsook the traditions of the ancestors and the warmth of the community for a sterile and materialistic version of the American dream. In this novel, Marshall takes a character suffering from this modern dilemma and cures her by immersing her in a world of history, myth, and ritual. The novel is written so vividly and lyrically, one can almost see Avey dancing the Ring Shout and hear the drums in tribute to the islander's ancestors. The book won the American Book Award in 1984.

- Anne Tyler, New York Times Book Review

Further Reading

Other works by Paule Marshall:

Brown Girl, Brownstones

Daughters

The Fisher King

The Chosen Place, the Timeless People

Reena and Other Stories

If you liked *Praisesong for the Widow*, you might like:

Good Hair: A Novel by Benilde Little

Linden Hills by Gloria Naylor

Knowing by Rosalyn McMillan

Somebody Else's Mama by David Haynes

Luminous Mysteries John Homan

Discussion Strategies

Issues and Strategies

One strategy for approaching Marshall's fiction is to explain the "Middle Passage" to illustrate the placement of blacks all over the world (African diaspora). It might also be helpful to discuss the notion of traditional African cyclical time, which involves recurrence and duration, as opposed to Western linear time, which suggests change and progress. The cyclic approach applies thematically (Daduh's symbolic immortality) and structurally (the story comes full circle). Also important is the traditional African view of the world as being composed of dualities/ opposites that work together to constitute a harmonious moral order. (For a more complete explanation, see Marshall's "From the Poets in the Kitchen" in *Reena and Other Short Stories*.)

Consider also discussing the African oral tradition as a recorder of history and preserver of folk tradition. Since it is centered on the same ideas as written literatures (the ideas, beliefs, hopes, and fears of a people), its purpose is to create and maintain a group identity, to guide social action, to encourage social interaction, and simply to entertain. The oral arts are equally concerned with preserving the past to honor traditional values and to reveal their relevance to the modern world. Marshall's craftsmanship is executed in such a dynamic fashion as to elicit responses usually reserved for oral performance or theater.

Students readily respond to similarities/differences between black cultures represented throughout the diaspora. Once they recognize African cultural components as positive, they re-evaluate old attitudes and beliefs and begin to appreciate differences in cultural perspectives as they celebrate the human spirit.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, and Personal Issues

A major theme is the search for identity (personal and cultural). Marshall insists upon the necessity for a "journey back" through history in order to come to terms with one's past as an explanation of the present and as a guiding post for the future. For the author, in particular, the story becomes a means to begin unraveling her multicultural background (American, African-American, African-Caribbean). To be considered foremost is the theme embodied in the epigram: the quality of life itself is threatened by giving priority to materialistic values over those that nourish the human spirit.

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions

Questions of form and style include Marshall's manipulation of time and her juxtaposition of images to create opposites (landscape, physical description, culture). This suggests an artistic convention that is, at base, African as it imitates or revives in another form the African oral narrative tradition. In fact, Marshall merges Western literary tradition with that of the African to create a new, distinctive expression.

Original Audience

All audiences find Marshall accessible. It might be interesting to contrast her idyllic view of Barbados in "To Da-duh" with her later view in the story "Barbados." The audience may wish to share contemporary views of third world countries and attitudes toward Western powers.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections

Both Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall deal with ancestral figures (connections to the past) to underscore cyclical patterns or deviations from them. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), or *Beloved* (1988) might be effectively compared to Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* (1969), or *Daughters* (1991).

Questions for Reading and Discussion/Approaches to Writing

Discuss the use of African and Caribbean imagery and explain why it is essential to Marshall's aesthetic.

Bibliography

Barthold, Bonnie. *Black Time: Fiction in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Denniston, Dorothy. "Early Short Fiction by Paule Marshall." *Callaloo* 6, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1983). Reprinted in *Short Story Criticism*. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1990.

--. Forthcoming volume on the complete works of Paule Marshall to be published by the University of Tennessee Press.

Evans, Mari, ed. Section on Paule Marshall in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1983.

Marshall, Paule. "Shaping the World of My Art." *New Letters* (Autumn 1973).

Review especially the following:

Marshall, Paule. "From the Poets in the Kitchen." In *Reena and Other Short Stories*, 3-12. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1983.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophies*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1970.

-Dorothy L. Denniston

http://college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/marshall.html