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A REVIEW OF

PAULE MARSHALL'S *THE FISHER KING*



True Music of the Spheres

WITH *THE FISHER KING* PAULE MARSHALL SCORES ANOTHER WINNER IN a brilliant writing career that began more than 40 years ago with *Browngirl, Brownstones* (1959), the seminal novel that guided generations of readers and writers. A winner of a MacArthur Fellowship and the American Book Award, Ms. Marshall offers here her new jazzy variation on the famous legend of the Fisher King, with the brown uniform castles of Brooklyn standing for the Arthurian castles, and 8-year-old Sonny Carmichael Payne as our modern-day Perceval.

The story opens with Sonny on his first trip from Paris, his home, to Brooklyn to visit his two great-grandmothers, whom he has never met before. Sonny is here with Hattie – his overly-protective guardian whom he calls “fathermothersisterbrother” – to attend a concert marking the 15th anniversary of the death of his grandfather, the legendary jazz pianist (Everett) Sonny-Rett Payne.

In her rich, assured prose, Ms. Marshall follows Sonny as he gets to meet Ulene Payne (his grandfather’s mother) and Florence Varina McCallum-Jones (his grandmother’s mother), two eternal rivals who never recovered from their children’s flight to Paris back in the 1940s. There’s also Edgar Payne, his great uncle, a successful developer who invited him and Hattie and paid for the trip. Edgar is intent on making Sonny stay in Brooklyn and heal old rivalries and unify the crumbling community. But Hattie, of course, is in the way. She, who as a young woman loved both Sonny-Rett and his wife, Cherisse, has no intention of staying or leaving Sonny behind.

Characters’ names in *The Fisher King* bear special meanings: Florence Varina is named after Varina, “the only county in Georgia [...] where Colored were allowed to own land”; Sonny is named after his grandfather and in addition gets also Hattie’s last name, Carmichael; JoJo, Sonny-Rett’s and Cherisse’s daughter is named after Josephine Baker and Josephine Bonaparte; Sonny-Rett himself gets his nickname from the “Sonny Boy Blue” tune that changed the course of his own life and that of the two women who shared it, Hattie and Cherisse.

Jazz music is present throughout the novel. Sonny-Rett’s piano provides a pulsating soundtrack, playing softly first, then erupting in a “dazzling array of ideas and wealth of feeling” on the page.

Language and music are inextricably intertwined by Ms. Marshall's virtuosic craft. She creates memorable characters who appear on the novel's virtual stage to perform their part as if in a free-wheeling jam-session, with each player getting his or her solo turn. Jazz is also the tie that binds the three young lovers back in Paris. It draws them into a whirlpool of emotions, transforming three individuals into a single passionate ensemble.

The narration begins in Brooklyn, after Sonny and Hattie's arrival. Only later we learn details of the past: the flight from Brooklyn and life in Paris, disclosed bit by bit through Hattie's reminiscences. As the story unfolds, we are introduced to an array of powerfully depicted characters, a series of heartbreaking decisions, tricks and deceits, and to a kind of love that goes beyond boundaries. Flashbacks are part of Sonny's narrative, too. Almost everything that happens to him in Brooklyn is accompanied by a flashback, by a memory of a person back in France, a school friend, a drunkard 'baby-sitter'. And the language gets richer and richer, creating a formidable fresco.

The story's point of view alternates from that of Sonny to that of Hattie, and back. Around the middle of the novel, Hattie's voice plays louder; her memories add color to this fresco with descriptions of what her life was like with Sonny-Rett and Cherisse, her difficulties in raising JoJo, Sonny's adolescent mother, her continuous struggle to offer Sonny a decent life. The two narratives complement each other, with each filling out certain blanks, and each leaving space for the other.

Most of the story is seen through the eyes of 8-year-old Sonny, but told in a language that probably belongs to an older Sonny. This reading is not at all improbable considering other works by Ms. Marshall. In the 1966 story, "To Da-duh in Memoriam," a 9-year-old girl goes from New York to Barbados to visit relatives she has never met before. Meeting Da-duh, her grandmother, will change the course of her life. The story is told by the grown-up woman, as experienced by the little girl but examined through an adult perspective. In Ms. Marshall's new novel the trip is taken from Paris to Brooklyn, with Sonny looking at the experience that will change his future.

The abrupt ending is built according to Modernist rules. The story is left unfinished – actions unseen, facts untold – like an open door unto the future: to be continued. Sonny's self-questioning – "whose side would he take, loving them both as he did?" – is part of this opening.

Would Edgar really make public the *menage-a-troi* that had bound Sonny-Rett, Cherisse and Hattie? Will Hattie be forced by Edgar's schemes and the power of his money to give up her hold on her much loved ward? Though Hattie's defeat might seem inevitable – "Money'll do it every time" – Sonny's opinion has not been heard yet, and there is no knowing, now, whose side he will take.

The Fisher King is a captivating read, propelled by Ms. Marshall's penetrating insight and dazzling prose.

