

Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn Study Guide

Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn by Karen McCarthy Brown

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Plot Summary

This book, *Mama Lola, A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, is an exploration into one woman's life and family heritage, and how she comes into the role of a healer and 'manbo' within the Vodou religion. The story begins with Mama Lola's great grandfather and winds its way through the various generations into the story of Alourdes (a.k.a. Mama Lola) and her ministry in Brooklyn, New York. Like many who practice Vodou, Alourdes is born in Haiti, and hers is a life wrought with peril and poverty. Mama Lola gives birth to her first child at the age of fourteen, and she soon learns that she must do whatever it takes to survive. When Mama Lola is in her twenties, she is offered the opportunity to come to America. She eagerly embraces the chance, and through the will of the spirits, begins her practice in Brooklyn, New York.

Karen McCarthy Brown meets Mama Lola in the late seventies, and the subsequent friendship between the two lasts several years. McCarthy Brown immerses herself into the world of Haitian Vodou, under the tutelage of Mama Lola, marrying two of the Vodou spirits and eventually enduring the initiation rituals of a priestess. McCarthy Brown documents the life of Alourdes and her daughter Maggie by literally becoming a part of their extended Vodou family. She learns how Vodou operates, who the spirits are and what it takes to appease them. Also, and of most importance, she learns about the 'why' of Vodou, and how it is a religion of and for the people.

It becomes apparent that Alourdes's ministry is one of healing; of binding and maintaining the relationships of her extended earthly family, as well as those of her spirit family. The spirits in this book, as in the culture of Vodou, are alive and thriving and very much a part of the drama. Indeed, the life of a Vodou manbo is a trying and selfless existence, where often eight months out of the year an elaborate and expensive birthday party must be thrown for this or that spirit. To neglect these rituals is to ask the spirits not to work for you, and Alourdes's ministry, livelihood and heritage depends upon the work of the spirits.



Chapter 1 - Joseph Binbin Mauvant

Chapter 1 - Joseph Binbin Mauvant Summary and Analysis

The first chapter of the book begins in the rural mountains of Haiti, on a typical early morning. The day is typical, that is, until the "disappearance" of Joseph Binbin Mauvant, Mama Lola's great grandfather. The short, fictitious story told here is one of Mama Lola's family lore and held as historical truth. The town is Jean Rabel, in the northwest corner of Haiti, and Joseph Binbin Mauvant is aged seventy-nine years. The setting is the Mauvant family compound, and Manman Marasa, the wife of Mauvant, is going about her usual morning business of breakfast and tending to children. The compound is a grouping of huts for the Mauvant family's grown children and their children as well. Philomise is the youngest daughter of Marie Noelsine, the family beauty. Most of the compound's women have made the long journey down the mountain to the market. Mauvant dresses and assumes his usual post beneath the cottonsilk tree, where he regularly sits sipping his special rum mixture and doling out medicine and advice. Mauvant is what they call a "franginen" or a true African who has the spirits "on him" always. His medicine, his power, is with him naturally, and he has no need even for an "ason," the beaded rattle used to leverage the spirit world. All morning Mauvant is muttering that he is "going" but no one pays him much attention. Around noon that day, after sitting, swilling his rum and singing, his granddaughter Philomise comes to his side. He vomits up a small, smooth stone and tells her to eat it. She refuses, though later in life, she admits to having regretted this refusal, as what he is offering her is his power. Then, suddenly, he is gone. The Mauvant family would have spent their lives searching for him had he not appeared to his wife in a dream and explained that he had returned to Africa.

As Karen McCarthy Brown explains in the foreword, every other chapter of the book is meant to reproduce stories which have been acted out and passed down from generation to generation in Alourdes' family. The book begins, thus, by telling the story of her great grandfather, and his life in the rural mountains of Haiti. In order to recreate these stories which were preserved in the oral tradition, McCarthy Brown had to take certain creative liberties, imagining the details of the day and the on-goings of the compound. The departure of Joseph Binbin Mauvant is a legendary event, as was the man himself, and the vomiting and offering of his power stone to his granddaughter is of particular significance. The power of Mauvant is passed down from Philomise to Alourdes despite her refusal, though the transition into the life of a "manbo" would have been an easier one had Philomise accepted this gift. This chapter gives us a panoramic view of the compound in which the Mauvant family lives, and what their daily lives are like. The culture is very poor, and hunger is a constant companion. The inhabitants of this compound are scruffy peasants who rely on their family for support, not only for their daily living, but also for their spiritual well-being. The presence of the character Jepete is important because it gives us a little further insight into the way things work -



she offers them labor and service in exchange for the privilege of warming herself by the fire and eating from their cooking pot. Also, the "spoiled" child Marie Claire is interesting, as she is allowed the luxury of sleeping in while the rest of the women in the compound make their way down the mountain to the market in the middle of the night. Vodou ideals and superstitions are commonly understood. As an example - everyone fears and respects the night, tightly shutting up their windows so the evil spirits who wander freely in the dark cannot enter. Jepete fears Marie Claire because she "ate" her twin sister in the womb, and even her mother allows her certain liberties because she apparently fears her for the same reason. To the reader, in modern-day American culture, it seems quite odd that the disappearance of a family's patriarch is dismissed because he appears to his wife in a dream to explain. In the rural mountain Haitian Vodou culture, however, this event may not be commonplace - in fact it is extraordinary - but it is accepted and understood.



Chapter 2 - Azaka

Chapter 2 - Azaka Summary and Analysis

The chapter about the spirit Azaka, or "Kouzen Zaka" begins with Karen telling the story of her journey to Mama Lola's home in May of 1984. Mama Lola is throwing Azaka a birthday party, as she must every year. The spirits will not work for her should she neglect them. When Karen arrives, Mama Lola is slumped against the table, feeling ill, and it is explained by her daughter, Maggie, that this is because Azaka thinks she is not going to throw him a party, as the preparations did not begin days in advance. Maggie explains that he has made Mama Lola ill as a result. Maggie and Karen get to work preparing pots of food, and they decorate the altar in accordance to what will please the spirit. These preparations begin around 10:00 at night, and the ceremonies go on until early in the morning the next day. Many guests arrive for the ritual, and after singing to persuade the spirits to attend, Mama Lola becomes possessed by the spirit of Azaka. He goes about his business first, settling outstanding loans from the previous year's party, and then selling the goods from his altar to the guests. Once this is done, around 4:00 a.m., Azaka offers the rest of his altar food to his guests, doles out messages to the individual guests and instructs them how to dismantle his altar. The chapter ends with a quick anecdote about Mama Lola and how she comes to be an manbo. She travels to America from Haiti, falls very ill and discovers through her sister-in-law's dream that she is to return to Haiti to train as a manbo. She takes the "ason" like her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, and she develops a good reputation within the Haitian community because of her effective treatments, and her fairness with her clients.

The spirit Azaka is a lot like Joseph Binbin Mauvant. He dresses in blue denim, wears a wide-brimmed straw hat and keeps a jug of laced rum with him always. Indeed, he is meant to look like a peasant, because his function is to remind his devotees of their roots, their need for family and their connection to the land. According to traditional Vodou, land, family, and the spirits are the three legs upon which their world rests. Because of poverty, drought, soil erosion and overpopulation, many of the rural Haitians are forced into urban lifestyles, thus closing them off with their connection to the land. To inherit the land that has been worked by their ancestors, where their family has been buried, means to inherit the relationship with the spirits that the ancestors have built. To lose the land is to lose all three, really. Thus, it is vitally important for urban Haitian communities to have a strong manbo to help restore that connection. It becomes very clear in this chapter that the communion that Mama Lola partakes in with these spirits is a very real thing. To displease them means that she cannot be an effective manbo. In fact, at one point Mama Lola decides that she can no longer throw the annual birthday bashes for the spirits regularly anymore, as they are overwhelming to prepare and the offerings that must be presented are very costly. She decides that it is much more practical to space them out to every three to five years. She discovers quickly however, that to not appease the spirits is extremely dangerous, and threatens the whole of her life and existence. These Vodou rituals and ceremonies are very specific and



calculated; they must be executed to the minutest detail in order to be effective, and in order to understand these details, one must be thoroughly well-versed. It is explained that once, in preparation for a party for another spirit, the crucial detail of preparing an offering for Legba, the guardian of doorways and barriers, is overlooked. Thus, upon the opening of the ceremony, the spirit of Legba possesses Alourdes, disallowing the ceremony to proceed any further, and plunks her down in the hallway whining and howling until his offerings are made. To be a manbo like Alourdes is as much an honor as it is a burden, and although she knew it was a family tradition to take up the acon, she is distraught when she discovers that her turn has arrived. Nevertheless, she goes forth with the plan that the spirits have laid out for her and becomes a talented and trustworthy spiritual leader for her community.



Chapter 3 - Raise That Woman's Petticoat

Chapter 3 - Raise That Woman's Petticoat Summary and Analysis

Again we are back to the narrative, "fictitious" story of the Mauvant family. This time we learn about Alourdes's Grandmother, Marie Noelsine. When she first meets Alphonse Macena, she is just a girl of fifteen. According to legend, she is so beautiful that he almost faints the first time he sees her. He is a "grimo," or white-skinned man, who comes to town alone, speaking of having broken with his family. Joseph Binbin Mauvant does not like Macena at first, as most people do not, but when "Sina," as Macena calls her, becomes pregnant, Mauvant and the men from the community build him a hut in the compound. Alourdes's mother, Philomise, is the third child born to them. The relationship between Sina and Alphonse Macena does not last long because he does not carry his weight in the household. Sina realizes that Macena will not leave the family compound, so she and her eldest daughter, Gloria, decide to move to a neighboring town. Her son is left with Manman Marasa and Philomise is given to her godparents, the storekeepers in Port-de-Paix. Sina is strong and has saved money from selling her goods at the market. She buys land in Gros Morne, building her house with her own hands. Before long, Macena discovers her whereabouts and comes to live with her, to her dismay. He is the father of her children so she must take him in. Again, he shirks his responsibilities and spends all of his time at the cockfights. His favorite cock is called Leve Jipon Fanm-nan, meaning "Raise that Woman's Petticoat." Macena hardly ever loses, and folks say he uses magic. Unexpectedly, this prize fighting cock of Macena's dies in the ring. As a result, he mourns bitterly, claiming that this is the doing of his enemies. Though he was never a well-liked man, he now plunges into something much more sinister, administering "bad medicine." He believes that the spirits, like his wife, are there to serve him. In the end, Macena does not do what the spirits tell him, and this costs him his life. Sina, meanwhile, is visited and possessed by the spirit Ezili Danto, who shows her that the spirits want her to serve them. In the end she sees that this is her path.

There are several interesting factors in this story. First, the parallel of Sina and the beautiful, fat guinea hen that Macena can't stop talking about is significant. Metaphorically, Sina is the hen, ripe for the slaughter - ripe for rendering in any way Macena sees fit. The two of them are charged with a powerful sexual energy towards one another and while they seem to be having a conversation about a hen, they are actually discussing something else altogether. Later, when the two have tired of each other and are split, Macena becomes something sinister, and the imagery of him as both a spider and a crab is disturbing. In particular, the story of Macena dropping his tobacco pouch down the well and crab-scuttling down to retrieve it, creates the image of someone who is too powerful for his own good and unnaturally talented. This makes



him both threatening and frightening. There is also an interesting contrast between the masculine vs. the feminine at work in this chapter. Macena's masculine magic is selfish and spiteful; whereas Sina's feminine magic is obedient. Whereas Macena believes the spirits are there to work for him, Sina believes the correct way - that she is there to serve the spirits. Sina proves herself to be a strong, fiercely independent woman who leaves the family compound, strikes out on her own, buys her own land and even builds her own house partially with her own two hands. The women of this culture seem to be the ones who shoulder most of the work, sort of like in a pride of lions. While the men sometimes also work hard - clearing the fields and helping to build the huts, etc, it seems like the men can get away with laziness more readily than can the women. A woman's work in this culture is more of a given, something that is absolute and expected. While Macena is allowed to drink with his buddies and attend cockfights, Sina, like the rest of the women, bear the children, keep the house, cook the food and sell their goods at the market. When a woman of this culture allows a man into her life and her bed, she is offering up the most valuable commodity of all in this mountain culture. A man like Macena has it made once he is "in" with Sina. She, unfortunately, realizes her mistake a little too late and is stuck with him - not forever, but for a while. When Macena makes the fatal mistake of disobeying the spirits, his life is taken, and Sina is finally free from him. The spirit Ezili Danto, who is the mother spirit, steers her away from making further mistakes with men and shows her that her path is to be an obedient servant of the spirits.



Chapter 4 - Ogou

Chapter 4 - Ogou Summary and Analysis

There are many different subdivisions of Ogou: Sen Jak Maje, Panama, Feray, Badagri, Yamson and Ageou. McCarthy Brown says of Alourdes in this chapter that at times she claims there are seven Ogou, at times there are twenty-one. Ogou Badagri, the shy, handsome, brave and loyal, is Alourdes's chief counselor from the spirit world - her "met tet" or 'master of her head'. There are many lessons to learn from Ogou, and his position in traditional Haitian religion is pivotal. When Alourdes is possessed by Ogou, the sword is always wielded and the message is always that while power liberates, it also betrays and can destroy those who wield it, as earlier demonstrated in the story of Alphonse Macena. Ogou also teaches that in order to live, one must fight. This message is particularly poignant in the life of the Haitian immigrant, like Alourdes. In March of 1981, for example, Alourdes's son William, who is mentally retarded, is arrested for a purse snatching. The idea of having to deal with the American police terrifies both Alourdes and her daughter, Maggie, and thus McCarthy Brown steps in to assist in the process. In the end, all charges against William are dropped, as he did not commit the crime in the first place. The incident shows that McCarthy Brown is a devoted friend to Alourdes and her family. Also, that despite her power as a Vodou priestess and the protection that she enjoys at the hands of the spirits, certain authority - especially that of a culture not her own - is enough to upturn Alourdes's life. By the end of this chapter, Alourdes reads Karen's cards in order to determine how involved she should become within the world of Vodou, and it is agreed upon that she should call Papa Ogou to ask. It is determined that Karen should take the initiation rite and marry Papa Ogou. He teaches her the warrior lesson: know what you want, and fight for it.

The moral of the story in this chapter has to do with the wielding of power. This is a significant lesson to learn and understand in the world of Vodou. To be a Vodou priestess like Mama Lola is a position of power, but to abuse that power is to bring about one's own downfall. When we think of "voodoo" here in America, where most of us are raised with Anglo-Saxon religious values, it is automatic that we think of something evil, something foreign and dangerous, something not to be toyed with. We think of a Vodou priestess as being someone to reckon with; a person of great and mysterious power. What we fail to understand, and what is made clear in this chapter, is that power like Alourdes's must be used properly and precisely, and that the price that she continuously pays in order to wield that power is great. One's power in the world of Vodou is contingent upon the will of the spirits. When faced with the prospect of having to deal with the American authorities, Alourdes and Maggie are terrified. Thankfully Karen is there to intercede and assist, but in truth Alourdes and Maggie had nothing really to fear. William was never guilty in the first place, and mentally retarded to boot. But in American culture, Alourdes and Maggie feel exposed and unprotected. It is a surprise in the end of the chapter that Karen actually goes so far as to "marry" Ogou, immersing herself so completely into the world of Vodou. With this action she is no longer a sideline witness to the events, she is now much more deeply involved. She has

her own lessons to learn, and with this action she gains a greater understanding of the idealisms of Ogou, and the story of William tells us the same thing; sometimes you have to stand up and fight for what you believe is right.



Chapter 5 - The Baka Made from Jealousy

Chapter 5 - The Baka Made from Jealousy Summary and Analysis

The narrative story moves on in this chapter, further into the life this time of Alourdes's mother, Philomise. Marie Noelsine is befriended by Madame Fouchard, the local store keeper in Port-de-Paix. Fouchard feeds Sina and gives her a place to rest whenever she comes to town to sell her goods at the market. Fouchard does this with the knowledge that these favors will oblige Sina to her, and when the time comes she can ask of her any favor she chooses. The day arrives when a "baka" (an evil spirit, in this case, a two legged horse which stands straight like a man) visits Madame Fouchard in the middle of the night. She understands that she must close up shop and immediately leave town. This occurs right around the time when Sina must move to Gros Morne to escape Macena. Sina knows that a single mother raising three children will not be able to provide a very good life for them, so she decides to "give" Philo, her baby, to Madame Fouchard, imagining that she will be well looked after and much better off this way. Unfortunately, Fouchard's plan all along is to utilize Philo as a maid whom she will not have to pay. Philo is treated very poorly, and at the age of seventeen, she runs away. Philo and a group of friends travel to Santo Domingo. Philo is taken in by a generous woman named Madame Victor, who is a successful machann (market woman). Philo meets a man named Luc Charles with whom she bears a child named Frank. Luc is a wealthy man, and he funds a trip for Philo and Frank to journey back into the mountains so that she can be reunited with Sina. In the market of Gonaives, Philo finds her sister, Gloria and she is taken back to Gros Morne. Sina is poisoned and killed shortly after this, which leads Philo to realize that she must serve the spirits and take up her mother's legacy.

The stories that have been passed down from generation to generation that are being told here must be preserved in the oral tradition, as McCarthy Brown puts it, because proverbs, tales and songs are the only vehicles subtle and flexible enough to "cradle the messages when the truths of Vodou are put into words." (p. 106) It is difficult for the reader to determine whether the Baka is a real creature or an imagined one, but in any case, it is essential to the story. The idea of jealousy plays an important role in the story because in Haiti, where everyone lives in poverty, one person looks at what another has and despairs against their own misfortune. It is jealousy that brings the Baka, altering the course of Philo's life, and jealousy that kills Sina, again bringing about another life-changing event. Philo, like her mother, is dissatisfied with her circumstances and takes steps to change the course of her life. In turning and walking away from their pre-prescribed lives, both of these women display an uncommon strength of character; a thing that is part of their biological makeup, passed down in their blood to Alourdes and then to Maggie. This strength parallels as well their decision to take up the ason and

serve the spirits. As we have learned from previous chapters, it is not an easy thing to take this route in their lives, but it is something inherited as much as it is decided.



Chapter 6 - Kouzinn

Chapter 6 - Kouzinn Summary and Analysis

This chapter we learn more about Kouzinn, the spirit who is the female counterpart to Azaka. Kouzinn is a market woman, a trade that is key to the survival for the poor women of Haiti. The capital earned by a market woman gives her leverage over an otherwise male-dominated culture. The emphasis in this chapter is on the economics of women's lives. It is up to the women of the Haitian culture to weave an "economic safety net" for themselves and their children and every day, every situation - down to a simple visit to a friend's house - holds the possibility of trade, commerce and income. In Haiti, before she moved to America, Alourdes, like most other Haitian women, did whatever it took to feed herself and her family, including bartering with sex. Often this way of thinking can lead a Haitian woman into service of the spirits, as Vodou spirits are ideal lovers: protective, constant and powerful. McCarthy Brown recounts in this chapter a trip she and Alourdes make together in 1981 to Haiti. For Karen, the trip is largely in the name of research, but for Alourdes, it is a journey long overdue to pay homage to the spirits, to gather essential ingredients needed for ceremonies and to visit her Haitian family. The journey into rural Haiti is a grueling one, and upon reaching Gros Morne, Karen, Alourdes and their traveling companions are received with a mixture of fascination and expectation by the rural townsfolk. Alourdes "feeds" the family spirits that inhabit the land, and later stages a "manje pov" or ritual feeding of the poor which is held in the cemetery of Port-au-Prince.

Again we see the idea of success bringing jealousy and revenge, and these are important themes in the world of Haitian Vodou. Also in this chapter, we learn about the all-important concept of reciprocity. This idea is effectually accentuated in the story of the theft of the powder and how charity and thievery are both side effects of a lack of reciprocity. Karen tries to be a good guest, appropriately humble, turning aside inquiries about what she likes to eat. In doing this, she is moving the gifts she gives outside of the realm of reciprocity and into the realm of charity. The result of charity in this situation can only be resentment and thievery, as she soon learns. Karen did not at first understand Alourdes's "Queen Bee" behavior, but soon she comes to understand that being bathed by the poor children is a way for them to be able to give something back to her. When Alourdes arranges the 'manje pov' before leaving Haiti, it is far more than just a way to help the most unfortunate in a country of nothing but unfortunate people. She is actually, in the diversionary logic of Vodou, helping to ensure her family's safety by calling upon the special power of the beggars. Only they can stave off misfortune for intact families by accepting these blessings of social reciprocity. It is interesting to consider the rarity of Alourdes's vindication at having a white American woman accompany her to her homeland, following her around and recording her life. This sets Alourdes further apart from the poor Haitians, elevating her to a rare elite status. It is easy, however, to sympathize with Karen, who is treated less than nicely in many situations and often regarded as an item of curiosity and ridicule. Karen, after all, is the one paying for the trip, but as the outsider, she is the first one to be blamed when things

start to go wrong and it is hugely unfair. She is viewed as a person of wealth and privilege, from the land of milk and honey, so in times of crisis, she of course is the natural scapegoat.



Chapter 7 - Dreams and Promises

Chapter 7 - Dreams and Promises Summary and Analysis

This chapter is a story about the life of Alourdes's mother, Philomise. Clement Rapelle, a Haitian man, dreams about a woman named Philomise who lives in a compound called 'Seven Stabs of the Knife,' who, he is told in the dream, will help to cure his ailing son. When he finds her, she repeatedly refuses service to him because the spirits have not come to her to explain how to treat the boy. In time, the two become friends, and she tells him the story of how she began her work in treating people. The spirit, Ageou, comes to her in a dream and tells her how to make treatments, but she does not want to take on the responsibility. As a result, he makes her go blind. Her sight is restored when she agrees to return to her family land in Jean Rabel to give a feast for the family spirits. She begs for the money to host this feast but is not able to earn enough, so instead she throws the party in Port-Au-Prince, promising to throw the Jean Rabel party when she can afford it. In the meantime, she discovers she is pregnant and does everything she can think of to miscarry, as another mouth to feed is the last thing she needs. The spirit Lady of Lourdes comes to her in a dream and tells her to stop trying to kill her baby, that it will be a girl, and that she will call her Alourdes. When Alourdes is born, Philo feels no pain at all; the baby unexpectedly slides out of her into a bedpan while she is urinating. Philo catches the black fever plaguing Haiti after this and Alourdes is suckled by a wet nurse. During her recovery, Ageou visits Philo in a dream and tells her how to cure Clement Rapelle's son. As payment, he gives her a thousand dollars, with which she purchases a home for herself and her children. When Alourdes is seven years old, she is bitten by a dog and falls ill, then disappears for three days. This is a message from Ezili that she needs to throw a week-long feast in Jean Rabel, as promised. In the summer of 1942, Philo does just that, appeases the family spirits, and Ezili Danto tells her that Alourdes will take her place one day in service of the spirits.

The responsibility of serving the spirits is a great one, and not always an easy choice to make, as we see in the story of Philomise. Just like the women in her family before her, Philo learns that this choice is not really hers to make; the spirits will have their way whether she likes it or not. Indeed, many choices are not up to the women of this culture and religion as we see in this chapter, down to whether or not even a pregnancy will be carried out to full term. Philo realizes that the practical solution is to not have another child and thus tries to abort Alourdes, but the spirits have another plan in mind. Alourdes is meant to be born, meant to become a powerful manbo, and it is beyond Philo's power to change this course of action. In the end of course, Philo loves her very special daughter Alourdes, who is chosen by the spirits at a very young age to take over her mother's legacy as manbo of the family.



Chapter 8 - Ezili

Chapter 8 - Ezili Summary and Analysis

This chapter is about the female spirits who belong to the grouping known as Ezili. Specifically, they are Ezili Danto, Ezili Freda and Lasyrenn. Each of these spirits exist in close relation to one another and, when considered as a group, are able to quite accurately paint a portrait of the Haitian woman and the circumstances in which they exist. Ezili Danto is the mother, the one who bears the children. She is tough and strict and sometimes very violent. She goes absolutely wildly out of control at the sight of blood, and therefore must be kept away from it. She is the 'wonder woman' of the female spirits, capable of great force and a very effective protector. Ezili Freda is a white woman. She loves fine clothes and jewelry and French perfume. She is fancy, glamorous and in ceremonies is decked out in pink satin and lace. She is never satisfied, always craving more love, more wealth and more honor. Lasyrenn is an elusive creature of the deep sea, a siren. She is seen as the image of a mermaid or a whale. A person who catches a glimpse of her beneath the water that reaches out to touch her is taken under the water and drowned. She will take a person under the water and initiate them into the world of Vodou; she will train them as a healer. When a person experiences this rite, they can never immediately remember what has happened to them. Eventually they recall their time under the water, and the result of their time with Lasyrenn is that they need not bother with initiation or apprenticeship into Vodou priest or priestess-hood. Alourdes, a Haitian-born woman living in New York, has embodied all three of these female spirits in one way or another throughout her lifetime, as do many of the women who live out their lives in Haiti, or emigrate to America as well.

The stories of the Ezili spirits serve as a template for women like Alourdes. In her life and times she has been Ezili Danto - the fierce, no-nonsense mother who is capable of great anger as well as Ezili Freda, the fancy perfume, lipstick and jewelry wearing woman of class and privilege. Most interestingly, there is a story in the previous chapter about Alourdes when she is a child being bitten by a dog and while laying in her bed, having an overwhelming need to leave her house, to escape. She wanders off for three days and has no recollection of her time while missing. What is interesting is that this relates her also to the spirit of Lasyrenn, who according to legend will pull people under the water with her usually for three days - the number of days Alourdes was missing. Also, Alourdes was found next to the city reservoir, the urban sea, and when found was disoriented and unable to recall what had transpired. Myth very much provides the interpretative framework for Alourdes's life of Vodou, and the stories of these three female Vodou spirits play important roles in her life.



Chapter 9 - Sojeme, Sojeme

Chapter 9 - Sojeme, Sojeme Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, we learn more about Maggie's life and her struggles when it becomes her turn to serve the spirits. Maggie is hospitalized with a mystery illness, something the doctors are unable to properly diagnose or cure - a sure sign of illness caused by the spirits. Alourdes is naturally worried about her daughter, but possibly more so than in a normal mother-daughter situation. We learn in this chapter that Maggie is almost more like a sister to Alourdes, someone upon whom she relies heavily in her work as a manbo. Alourdes calls the spirits to help her daughter. Maggie tells the story of losing a po-tet (an important item in Vodou initiation rituals.) while in Haiti, and subsequently having a dream of being pursued by the spirits and meeting them with resistance. Alourdes remembers Maggie's birth, when she was born by cesarean section weighing a record 17 pounds. Also it is noted that the fetus of a partially formed twin brother was removed at the same time. Back to the present time, in the hospital, Maggie is undergoing a procedure where the tube in her stomach into which her fluids are draining must be dislodged, as it has become imbedded. During this procedure, she dreams of a giant cobra that makes her swear she will take the ason. She does swear it, and the medical procedure is a success.

Back in chapter one, there is a quick reference to Marie Clair, Maman Marasa's favorite child, who supposedly "ate" her twin sister in the womb. Interestingly enough, the same thing happened to Maggie in the womb. Chances are, the two occurrences are neither significant, rare nor related, but it is interesting in the way such a thing runs in the family, and also how it ties Maggie in with her ancestors in this way. Indeed, much about this story is meant to show just how intimately Maggie's story is woven into the matrilineage of this family of strong women manbo. In every case, the women are chosen and their selection is met with resistance. The spirits persist, cause bad luck and make them ill until the women realize that the choice is ultimately not theirs to make. Also this chapter gives us a more intimate understanding of the relationship between Alourdes and her daughter, and how in many ways they are more like sisters than mother and daughter. They rely on one another more than anyone else in their lives, and there is no room in this equation for a man in either life. When these women do decide to involve themselves with a member of the opposite sex, the relationship is kept outside the home, as there is more important business to attend to for not only the spirit family, but the Vodou community as well.



Chapter 10 - Danbala

Chapter 10 - Danbala Summary and Analysis

In this chapter we are introduced to the Vodou spirit known as Danbala. The prefix of the word Danbala is Da, meaning snake-like, or more accurately, the coiling, sinuous movement of life. The spirit Papa Danbala is very old, so when he "mounts" his horse, or manbo, in the possession-performance, he utters sounds only and does not speak. He represents the idea that Haitians must connect to their lost African roots, while shedding their skin and recreating themselves as needed. He operates from the territory of blood and memory, asking the questions; who am I? And who are we? In the year 1981, both Maggie and Alourdes are confronted with the question; who are my people? It is clear that both of these women descend from a line of women who are survivors, who nurture their families and their families' spirits as best they can. Alourdes and Maggie have the responsibility of keeping the women of this line, Sina, Philo and beyond, as well as the family spirits, alive with ritual feeding. Each of these women represents a generational link in a chain that, if broken, will cause future generations to lose their ancestral stories and their deepest connections to who they are. In this chapter we also learn that Vodou rituals are always opened with Catholic prayer, as all Vodou lwa are represented by a Catholic saint. The ritual, however, resembles nothing Catholic beyond this, and is merely Catholicism of gesture, rhythm, and intonation. The litany of spirits and the litany of ancestral rite would be impossible to maintain in the realm of Catholicism where the human and the divine are forbidden to mix. Alourdes maintains that there is only one God, and one set of spirits, but different kinds of people in different kinds of religions give them different names. When Karen decides to marry Papa Ogou, Alourdes tells her that she must also marry Papa Danbala for the sake of balance. Karen does just that, and discovers that this experience is far more satisfying than the marriage to Papa Ogou, who tried to teach her a lesson about self assertion, leaving her to feel rejected. During the marriage ceremony to Danbala, Karen is able to become possessed by him and finally her acceptance into Alourdes's Vodou family is sealed.

When asked how she feels about Catholic priests insisting that those who serve Vodou spirits will go to hell, Alourdes astonishes Karen by saying that this is just how priests talk. Karen realizes the lesson here is that Haitians have the extraordinary skill of turning the power of oppressors back against them. We learn in reading this book that much of the practice of Vodou is far more practical than any outsider could dream, because it deals with community and survival, tradition and culture. Karen, as a white American, is someone that the reader can relate to and thus the stories that she tells about the Vodou community, the extraordinary presence of Mama Lola, and the happenings at the Vodou ceremonies become more than stories; they become history and fact. We begin to realize just how real these occurrences are, despite our ability to shuffle them aside in the name of disbelief. When Karen marries Papa Danbala, she has her first out-of-body experience through possession and it is at this point that her acceptance into the Vodou community is final. This event also shows the reader,



through the eyes of the outsider, that this type of experience really does occur. One of the best stories in this chapter is the story about Maggie taking her final exam, and Papa Gede appearing with a whiff of smoke in the classroom to help her. The lesson in this story is that Papa Gede is brash, much more so than the other spirits, and will come into situations where he feels he can assist his children. Here again, we have a story that makes the presence of and interaction with the spirits much more real to us as readers.



Chapter 11 - Plenty Confidence

Chapter 11 - Plenty Confidence Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Alourdes, Maggie, Karen, Big Daddy and Maggie's children arrive at Karen's new TriBeCa apartment in Manhattan to bless it. At the end of the blessing, Alourdes mentions to Karen that Maggie is going to 'kouche' (undergo the ritual initiation into Vodou) in July, and asks if Karen would like to do it as well. Karen decides that she wants to do it, because she wants to have confidence in herself the way Alourdes does. Karen, Maggie, and a man named Robert Gerard all gather at Alourdes's house to learn about the initiation rite. In July of 1981, they travel to Haiti and meet up with a Haitian woman named Mimose who will undergo the initiation as well. It is explained to these four that after the initiation, Alourdes will be their Vodou mother, and they will be brothers and sisters forever. Also, they are made to understand that they cannot reveal exactly what occurs in the initiation chamber; to do so is to cause your own death. First, upon arrival in Haiti, the group visit's the cemetery where a ritual cleansing is performed. The next day, they are taken to the initiation chamber where, in essence, they are expected to "give up" themselves; they must lie down, sleep, make love, die and be reborn. All four successfully survive the initiation. The story jumps to some years later in Alourdes's Brooklyn basement where the three surviving siblings of the initiation are missing Mimose, who is killed in the spring of 1987.

It is explained in this chapter that taking the initiation rite is not something that a person enters into out of curiosity, nor does one do such a thing lightly. It is a grueling, expensive, all-consuming process in which a person must, in essence, become a child again, give up who they are as an adult and agree to be reborn. Of the four initiates, Mimose handles this transformation the best. Karen clings to her field journal, Maggie to her flashy clothes and Robert to his masculinity in an attempt to maintain their adult identity and slow down their slide into helpless infancy. In the cemetery, they all have to strip down to their skin and be cleansed, and then pray to Philo for help in their transition. The complete vulnerability of their nakedness in this ritual is a message as simple as it is practical. The initiates must be cleansed and stripped of who and what they are before they can be worthy of receiving the ason - a tool which will allow them to travel between the worlds, and a symbol of the privilege and responsibility it is to care for the Vodou community.



Chapter 12 - Gede

Chapter 12 - Gede Summary and Analysis

This chapter opens with Alourdes, Karen and a Jamaican woman named Mabel traveling to Jamaica and then onto Haiti in January of 1980. Alourdes has been hired to do some healing work for a woman in Kingston, as well as for Mabel's son. In Kingston, they meet Aunt Emma, who is devoutly attached to her bible. Alourdes tells the story of a potential client who is a member of a devil-worship group, and she explains that she is a Christian, who has nothing to do with Satan. Alourdes, Mabel and Karen travel to a large dairy farm in Kingston where Alourdes is to "treat" a parcel of land the owner needs to sell. They meet the owner, Cecile Shepherd, and Alourdes quickly discovers that the problem she has with her land is just the beginning of her troubles. We learn that the main focus of Alourdes's healing energy is directed at the deeper issues that are uncovered during the course of her treatment. Often the underlying problems come as a surprise even to the client. According to the Vodou philosophy, the world is a precarious place, and it is naïve to think that one can navigate their life without the labor required to usher in good luck and stave off bad luck. Thus, healers such as Alourdes are specialists that are for hire in order to assist in the labor required to orchestrate good luck. She strengthens and mends relationships with both the living and the dead, as well as those with the spirits. It is explained that Alourdes's work, in essence, is a means of controlling luck by caring for and feeding one's family, in every sense of the word. What Karen experienced in the previous chapter is explained in greater detail later in this chapter. There are four levels of initiation into Vodou. The first is a 'head washing' in order to dislodge the spirits in one's head. Second is called 'kanzo,' to transform suffering into power. Then, step three is to 'kouche' - to lie down, sleep, make love, give birth and to die and be reborn. The fourth step is the giving of the ason, or ritual rattle. Sex, death and humor are the great social levelers, and during these events, one is in the presence of Papa Gede, and stripped down to one's basic humanity. Papa Gede lives in the cemetery. He is the master of balance, which in Vodou terms means not being caught in an unresolved dilemma, but to use forces that contradict each other to raise life energy. Gede's humor is of the macabre sort, because looking into the face of death raises this life energy. He is also a randy character who, conversely, dotes upon children. Gede is a part of every human life because death is a part of every human life. Gede's domination of the realm of death is reflective of a time when males held the power in Haitian families, and this is not the case any longer. In consequence, and in showing how flexible and ever-evolving the culture of Vodou is, a strong female version of Gede is slowly emerging, whose name is Gedelia.

The character Aunt Emma is important in this chapter, and the contrast we see between her and Alourdes. There are many God-fearing, bible quoting people in the world who probably took up reading this book in order to discredit all things Vodou. The character of Aunt Emma represents these people, and she gives Alourdes a chance to answer back. As Mama Lola explains, she is a Christian, not a devil-worshipper, as those who do not understand Vodou would believe. As the author explains, in America we work



hard to suppress thoughts and ideas of our own mortality, as well as those of our own sexuality, whereas Vodou deals with these issues head-on. This is what has lead to the belief that Vodou is an evil religion preoccupied with these things; people are deeply threatened by anything different, misunderstood or contrary to that with which they have indoctrinated. The truth is that Vodou is an ever-evolving true religion of the people, nurturing and providing its devotees with what they need as a culture and a society. More than anything, Alourdes is a healer, and she works to mend relationships and situations that require her certain kind of expertise. Alourdes never sits in suspense waiting to hear if her treatments have worked. She knows they have because her hand is guided by the spirits. She will not take on a job unless she is sure of this fact. Also, she is guided by her own experience and intuition, when she meets someone, she will instinctively know if they need her help.



Characters

Karen McCarthy Brown

Karen McCarthy Brown is the author of this work. Through the writing of the piece, which took approximately 12 years, the author not only becomes close friends with Alourdes, a.k.a. Mama Lola, she goes almost as far as any individual can go into the realm of Vodou. She begins her contact with Mama Lola essentially on the basis of observer and subject but the two quickly become friends, and Karen comes to understand that to fully know the world of Vodou, one must plunge themselves thoroughly into its waters. Thus, over the next decade and beyond, Karen McCarthy Brown immerses herself into the life of Alourdes, her daughter Maggie, and their extended Vodou family. She participates not only in the home-spun ritualizing that is essential to pleasing the various spirits, she also undergoes ritual marriages to the spirits Ogou and Danbala and completes the initiation process one must undertake in order to become a manbo.

Alourdes, aka Mama Lola

Alourdes, the central character and focus of this book, was born in Haiti to a mother who was a powerful and generous manbo. Her journey is not only that of her immigration to the United States, but also of her struggle through the process of becoming a Vodou manbo and the responsibilities carried therein. Like the women in the generational lineage before her, Alourdes rejects the idea of becoming a Vodou priestess, but is soon persuaded by the spirits who inform her, as they have informed her ancestors in no uncertain terms, that they will not take no for an answer. Alourdes, like most others who refuse service to the spirits, becomes gravely ill, and her recovery begins only when she swears that she will take up the apon and carry on the heritage of her foremothers.

Gede

Papa Gede lives in the cemetery. He is the master of balance, which in Vodou terms means not being caught in an unresolved dilemma, but to use forces that contradict each other to raise life energy. Gede's humor is of the macabre sort, because looking into the face of death raises this life energy. He is also a randy character who, conversely, dotes upon children. Gede is a part of every human life because death is a part of every human life. Gede's domination of the realm of death is reflective of a time when males held the power in Haitian families, and this is not the case any longer. In consequence, and in showing how flexible and ever-evolving the culture of Vodou is, a strong female version of Gede is slowly emerging, whose name is Gedelia.



Maggie

Maggie is Mama Lola's daughter. She is one of three children, but the closest of all to her mother and the one most likely to take the aison and inherit her mother's alter as well as the responsibility of the family spirits. Maggie is more New Yorker than she is Haitian, and to Alourdes she is more sister than she is daughter. Alourdes is second in command in Mama Lola's household, the main assistant in the rituals and ceremonies, and the one living person upon whom Alourdes most relies.

Joseph Binbin Mauvant

The book and the entire story begins with Joseph Binbin Mauvant. In this story, he is seventy-nine years old and living in the rural, mountainous town of Jean Rabel, Haiti. He is known far and wide as a true African, and a natural healer who has no need for the aison, as he has spirits on him at all times. He begins singing one morning, and disappears, they say, back to Africa. He appears in his wife's dreams to inform her where he has gone and not to come looking for him. Before he leaves, he vomits up a small stone which he instructs his granddaughter to ingest. Of course she refuses, though she realizes regretfully later that what he had offered her was his power.

Alphonse Macena

Alphonse Macena comes into the story in the late 1800s. He is a well-dressed, light skinned man who woos and wins the affections of Marie Noelsine, daughter of Joseph Binbin Mauvant. Macena has a great deal of power, but does not use it wisely. He believes that the spirits are there to serve him, not the other way around. His final error is to deliberately disobey an order given to him by the spirits, and in consequence, he loses his life.

Marie Noelsine

Sina: In order to understand Mama Lola's story, one must begin with the stories of her ancestors, Marie Noelsine (Sina) in particular. She is the mother of Philomise, and grandmother to Mama Lola. Sina is a strong woman who realizes the error of her ways too late, after becoming impregnated by Alphonse Macena, an untrustworthy man. She leaves the security of her family compound and builds her own house in a neighboring town. Macena finds her, but does not live for too much longer. Once he is gone, the beautiful Sina is courted by other men briefly, before she realizes that her path in life is to serve the spirits.



Philomise

Philo, the daughter of Marie Noelsine, is probably the least fortunate of her siblings. She is given away when she is a child, thrown into a life of slavery, from which she escapes when she is in her teens. She has the blood of a true merchant woman running in her veins, and creates a comfortable life for herself. She makes her way back to her family after a number of years, to find her mother dying. She strikes a bargain with the spirits, that she will serve them if they protect her and becomes a powerful and well respected manbo in her time. Mama Lola has said on many occasions that much of the work that she is able to accomplish occurs with the help of her mother's advice from beyond the grave; Philo frequently appears to Alourdes in her dreams.

Azaka

Azaka is a Vodou spirit that is central to Mama Lola's work and religion. He dresses like a peasant, just like Joseph Binbin Mauvant, wearing blue denim and a broad-brimmed straw hat. He functions to remind his devotees of their roots in poor, rural Haiti and of their ever-important connection to the land and the family spirits there. He is called Azaka Mede, Papa Zaka and Kouzen. He manages and directs the two worlds of family and business; the currencies of these two worlds are quite different, and his job is a most important one.

Kouzinn

Kouzinn is the female counterpart to Azaka. She is one of the few spirits who have no Catholic counterpart. Mama Lola does not throw an annual feast for this spirit. She is a market woman, a machann. She has a keen business sense, a key survival skill for the poor women in Haiti. The savings that a market woman scrapes together are the only security she can depend upon for herself and her children. The emphasis in speaking about Kouzinn is upon the economics of Haitian women's lives.

Papa Danbala

Papa Danbala is an ancient spirit. He is a flexible, sinuous snake who gives up his skin in order to recreate himself while remaining true to who he is. He is the spirit most responsible for connecting the Haitians to their lost African ancestors, and also shows them how to be flexible enough to adapt to whatever life and time throws their way. He stands above the human tug-of-war, shedding luck upon those who come to him with the appropriate love and respect.



Ogou

Ogou is the warrior spirit who condenses and represents the lessons of Haitian history. He teaches his people how to live and fight. He also teaches that in one turn of the screw, pride, endurance, and self-assertion can turn into braggadocio, stubbornness and bullying. The main message to learn from Papa Ogou is that while power liberates, it is also capable of betrayal. In no time at all, power can turn upon those who wield it leading to their destruction.

Ezili

There are several spirits within the group known as Ezili, including Lasyrenn, Ezili Danto and Ezili Freda. Lasyrenn is the beautiful woman in the water, beckoning to those above ground to come beneath the surface and drown with her. Those who do enter the water are gone from their regular lives for three days, and when they re-emerge are trained in the arts of diagnosis and healing. Ezili Danto is above all else the mother, the one who bears the children. She possesses the qualities of the perfect mother: hardworking, responsive, present in times of trouble and pretty but not vain. It is important not to anger Ezili Danto, as she has a violent temper. Ezili Freda is a white woman who loves fine clothing and perfume as well as copious jewelry. It is impossible to satisfy Ezili Freda. She is always in search of more: more love, more wealth, more honor. Freda's insatiable hunger parallels the irrational rage in Danto and the death-dealing siren of Lasyrenn. Taken together, these three female spirits present an accurate and detailed portrait of the forces that shape Haitian women's lives.



Objects/Places

The cross

The cross, in deference to Gede, refers to the crossroads and is the central symbol of his iconology. He stands at the point where the land of the living intersects with the land of the dead. The cemetery is Gede's home, and is a major ritual center in Vodou because it is the most charged and direct incarnation of the crossroads.

The Mirror

In Vodou it is believed that certain spirits live on the back side of the mirror surface of the water. Mirrors, used for divination and mirror gazing, are one way to tap the wisdom of the ancients. Gazing into the mirror, or into the water-mirror, one will see their own reflection but also the faces of the lwa. Superimposed over the faces of the lwa, the gazer sees the faces of their ancestors because an ancestor returns to the living in the form of the lwa he or she revered most during life.

Ason

An ason is a sacred beaded spirit rattle made from a gourd, used by manbo to leverage the spirit world. The ason, like money, is an instrument of coercive power. It exercises control over the spirits, who are thought to be compelled by its sound to come and go. Receiving the ason is the final step in the initiation process of becoming a Vodou priest or priestess.

Pwen

The word 'pwen' in the context of Vodou means 'point' and refers to a charm or a talisman. A pwen can be made up of words or gestures, ritual objects or herbs. Sometimes during Vodou baptisms, a point name is given to people, sacred objects and sacrificial animals in order to endow them with, for example, cautionary codes against misuse of power. This is another example of the oral tradition of Vodou. A pwen is given to Cecile Shepherd in the form of a shimalady plant that she is meant to point at the four corners of her bedroom and "work" everyday in order to bring about Alourdes's prescribed cure.

Po-tet

A po-tet is literally a 'head pot.' It is the most important product of Vodou initiation rituals. It is usually a white porcelain cup that provides an external home for the spirits who would otherwise dwell in the head of the initiate. Upon completion of the initiation, the



po-tet becomes a focal point for personal ritualizing. Maggie becomes severely ill after she loses her po-tet and is certain that the two occurrences are intertwined.

Haiti

The republic of Haiti is the Caribbean country where Mama Lola was born. Haiti is a severely impoverished country and the place most readily associated with the religion known as Vodou. While not every Haitian citizen practices Vodou, the vast majority does and each community is helmed by a Vodou manbo such as Alourdes. The land in Haiti is of particular importance to someone like Mama Lola because inheriting the land is to inherit the spirits of one's ancestors. A Haitian family can only be fully intact when the ancestral spirits are involved.

New York

In Haiti, America is considered the promise land where one can live in wealth and ease. New York, Brooklyn specifically, is where Mama Lola moved in America when she immigrated. New York is known as the big apple, or the city that never sleeps and is worlds away from the poverty and devastation of Haiti. Despite this, Mama Lola speaks of wanting to return to Haiti, her homeland, because it is where her lineage began.

Ginen

Ginen is Africa, the mother land, home of the spirits, and the place where over a million citizens were rounded up and sold as slaves. Ginen is important to Mama Lola and to this story because it is where Joseph Binbin Mauvant is originally from, and it is the original home of the most distant ancestors of the Haitian people. In rituals, the people who were lost to slavery are frequently remembered.

Rada

The Rada spirits are classified as being sweet-tempered, dependable and wise. If a promised sacrifice cannot be offered immediately, a Rada spirit can be easily put off until a later time. The Rada spirits are known as the root spirits, and are given intimate, familial titles like Papa and Kouzen. They are offered libations of water, sweet liqueur, herb-laced rum and perfume.

Petwo

The Petwo spirits are the opposite of the Rada. They are volatile and hot-tempered. They must be handled with much care and precision. These spirits will badger and harass those who serve them if debts are not paid promptly. Petwo spirits are extremely

effective, however, and their power lies in their ability to make things happen. They are offered coffee, hot pepper, blood and gun powder.



Themes

Matrilineage

The family stories that Mama Lola spins for Karen McCarthy Brown add up to a matrilineage. The powerful lineage of Vodou in her blood began, it is true, with a man, Joseph Binbin Mauvant, but since then every story follows the line from mother to daughter. Once one of these special, powerful women is chosen to serve the spirits, it is no longer a choice. They must answer the call. If they do not, sickness, blindness and bad luck in all forms is the result. It is natural to resist the call, every one of the women in Alourdes's family did, but in the end the spirits will get their way. McCarthy Brown discusses this in chapter 10, where she explores Maggie's plight and how "coil upon coil, the spiritual crisis experienced by Sina, Philo and Alourdes provided the interpretative framework for Maggie's struggle. The lineage is a chain, each generation a link." (p.286) The women of Alourdes's family, the ones who make up this chain past, present and future, shoulder a great responsibility. To break this chain is to deprive future generations their ancestral stories and thus the deepest connection to who they are. To become a manbo within this matrilineage is a responsibility not only to the family, but to the community as well. The job entrusted to a Manbo is to commune with the spirits for the living, but also to appease the spirits and keep them happy. This is true of a manbo's larger Vodou family as well - the Vodou community. Like the women in the line before her, Mama Lola is a spiritual leader, there to assist in all matters intrapersonal and cultural. Her job is to mend and maintain these relationships, with all of the members of her family, living or dead. McCarthy Brown says it best on page 305 when she states, "Alphonse Macena had greater spiritual power, but it was Marie Noelsine Joseph who sustained the family as best she could. Thus Sina's whistling rock rests on Alourdes's Brooklyn altar, not Macena's sword. Among Alourdes's people, time and again, the women have shouldered the responsibility of the generations, caring for the young, the old and the ancestors. They have fed the spirits of the dead and the hungry babies as well. Alourdes's religious responsibilities devolve from this lineage of mothers who survived and nurtured as best they could. These are her people, and it is their spirits she keeps alive with her ritual feeding."

Reciprocity

The idea of reciprocity is something of great importance to the religion of Vodou. In chapter 6, there are a few stories about the idea of reciprocity. First, there is the visit to Gros Morne when Karen learns that cheerfully hauling her own luggage and politely brushing aside inquiries as to how she likes her food cooked moved her gifts to her hostess outside the realm of reciprocity and into the realm of charity. This is why Marie Therese is forced to steal Karen's powder; it is something she craves by cannot justify requesting. Karen misunderstands the way Alourdes is acting while they are staying in the tiny, impoverished village. Why does she make everyone wait to eat their dinner while the village children bathe and lotion her like a Queen Bee? She is dancing the



social dance of reciprocity. Karen learns the hard way that the old truth holds very true in this situation: charity breeds thievery, and "both are deeply flawed human exchanges because both lack reciprocity." (p. 179) Suddenly the pre-dinner bath makes sense to Karen, who sees that this action places Alourdes in debt to Marie Therese, which balances the gifts of cola, vegetables, and meat that she brought as offerings. The second story occurs just before Karen and Alourdes leave Haiti. They perform a ritual manje pov, or feeding of the poor. This action is significant, and explains much about the philosophy of Vodou. After she feeds the people, Alourdes waits as they gather around her, wiping their hands over her face, head, arms and clothing. They do this in blessing to her and her family in hopes that they can help her stave off misfortune. The spirits gave this special power to the poor and in doing so, "placed in their hands a ticket to the dance of social reciprocity. By the diversionary logic of Vodou, only beggars (those who would not be beggars if they had family to cushion their suffering and bad luck) can stave off misfortune for intact families." (p. 201)

Religion

Vodou has often been a very misunderstood and highly caricatured religion. People who do not understand it try to deem it as dangerous, evil, even phony. In writing this book, Karen McCarthy Brown did a magnificent thing. She allowed Vodou to be a legitimate religion like any other. Mama Lola received much attention after the publication and became a cultural icon in the world of Vodou. In addition, the practice of Vodou is currently much more visible as a result. No longer do the manbo living in the United States have to feel like they must hide what they do, because after all, wasn't this country founded on the basis of religious freedom? Why should Vodou be any different? All of the Vodou spirits are based on a Catholic saint, but the Vodou spirits are more three-dimensional characters. "The wholeness of the spirits - their ability to contain conflicting emotions and to model opposing ways of being in the world - gives Vodou its integrity as a religion." (p. 98) The people of Haiti are impoverished and oppressed, and as such, are the most practiced analysts of the human condition. Haitian traditional religion is "the repository for wisdom accumulated by a people who have lived through slavery, hunger, disease, repression, corruption, and violence - all in excess." (p. 98) The roots of Haitian Vodou come from the African slaves who brought their religion with them. What makes Vodou a unique entity is the fact that this religion has been wrought and forged into something new, according to what its people needed within the social arena. The incredible thing about the religion of Vodou is that it continues to evolve into modern day, and will continue to evolve into future generations.



Style

Perspective

This work is written in several different voices. The bulk of it is written from the scholarly and observant voice of the author, Karen McCarthy Brown, who immersed herself into the world of Vodou in the name of her research. She explains that this voice is "distanced enough to discern patterns and relationships, but not so distant as to create the impression of overall logical coherence." (p. 20, foreword) She also writes parts of the book in the third person perspective in order to create a more intimate view into certain situations, and to achieve, as she puts it, "whole self-revelation." Every other chapter of the book are third person perspective short stories where McCarthy Brown has taken creative liberties in reproducing accounts that have been kept alive largely in the oral tradition. Another distinct and essential voice is, of course, that of Mama Lola herself, which McCarthy Brown says she tried to record and edit as respectfully as she possibly could manage. There are many passages that are first-hand verbatim accounts as spoken by Mama Lola, as well as by her daughter Maggie. Finally, there is the voice of Papa Gede, the Great Spirit storyteller who presides over all goings-on in the Vodou world, who is a master of trickery and truth bending, in order to bring stories alive for his audience.

Tone

As with any piece of literature written about the religion and culture of Vodou, the main setting of this book is Haiti. Of course, Mama Lola lives in Brooklyn, New York, as the title proclaims, so the book is also set largely against the backdrop of her row house in Fort Greene. Like many who practice the art and religion of Vodou, Mama Lola lived for the first part of her life in Haiti and so of course much of her memory is rooted there. Her ancestors came from the rural sections of the mountains of Haiti, specifically Jean Rabel and Gros Morne. One of the pervading themes of this book is the considerable difference between the practice of Vodou in native Haiti and the practice of Vodou in New York, where it is far less acceptable and something to be kept secret. Other places of importance in this book include Jamaica, where Lola and Karen travel together so Lola can perform healing work and of course Africa, or Ginen, the mother land, which permeates and colors the stories in the book from an ancestral perspective.

The primary language of this book is English, but since the subject is a Vodou Haitian woman, it was necessary for the author to interject snippets of French and Creole as well. McCarthy Brown explains that she and Mama Lola routinely speak in English but switch back to Haitian Creole when they discuss spiritual matters or human relationships; she asserts that Creole is far better to use when talking about such matters. When in Haiti, it becomes increasingly difficult for Alourdes to speak English, so she and Karen speak almost exclusively Creole. While in Haiti, the two women do not want to be mistaken as tourists, so they will often speak exclusively in Creole



anyways, whereas in America the reverse is true. They speak in Creole as a secret language when they don't want bystanders to understand what they are saying. In one instance, however, McCarthy Brown relates a story where a broadly grinning and lipsticked Alourdes is riding a bus in Haiti and wants to stand apart from the peasant market women, and so speaks in English. There is reference made in this book also to what is called langay, which is the sacred language of Vodou used in ritual that is composed of partially remembered African words and disguised Creole. McCarthy Brown writes that in many cases Vodou is transmitted in the oral tradition because "proverbs, anecdotes, ancestral tales, and songs are the only vehicles subtle and flexible enough to cradle the messages when the truths of Vodou are put into words." (p. 106)

Structure

This work is constructed of 12 chapters in varying lengths. The book is 429 pages long including foreword, afterword, glossary, bibliography and index. The author approaches this book from two different directions: fictionally and anthropologically. Every other chapter is a short narrative fictionalized biography of Mama Lola's family which details her lineage back to the story of her great grandfather. From the foundation laid by Joseph Binbin Mauvant, the narrative moves on to the story of his daughter Marie Noelsine, her daughter Philomise and then onto Alourdes and her daughter Maggie. The interlaced chapters illustrate the lwa, or Vodou spirits that are of special importance in Mama Lola's life and work. The reader is introduced in no particular order of importance to Azaka, Kouzinn, Ogou, Danbala, Ezili and finally Papa Gede. Perhaps Papa Gede was saved for last because he is the largest and most important of the spirits.

Quotes

"In urban temples, the manbo (priestess) is called manman and the oungan (priest) is called papa. Those initiated in the temple are called "little leaves," or "children of the house." Along with these titles go all the privileges and responsibilities of family membership." Chapter 2, Azaka, p.37

"The ason, like money, is an instrument of coercive power. It exercises control over the spirits, who are thought to be compelled by its sound to come and go, more or less, at the will of the manbo or oungan. Neither money nor the ason can be placed in the bed, for such distancing power implements do not belong in the place where children are made and born, the place where family begins." Chapter 2, Azaka, p. 69

"Papa Ogou in my mother' head say I have to take the ason. You know, my mother don't have no ason. But Papa Ogou say I have to, because my father' family serve with the ason, so I have to take the ason for protection. I serve two kind of spirit, from my father' family and from my mother' family." Chapter 2, Azaka, p. 76

"The flickering candle flame multiplied the ropes through sevenfold shadows until it would have appeared to an observer - had there been one - that Macena was a spider lying in wait in the center of the web." Chapter 3, Raise That Woman's Petticoat, p. 88

"Vodou seldom halts its kinesthetic and sensory drama to force its wisdom into concept or precept; proverbs, anecdotes, ancestral tales, and songs are the only vehicles subtle and flexible enough to cradle the messages when the truths of Vodou are put into words." Chapter 4, Ogou, p. 106

"The contents of Vodou rituals - from private healing consultations to public dances and possession-performances - are composed from the lives of the particular people performing them. When I began to bring my own life to the system for healing, I began to understand more of what it meant for Haitians to do that." Chapter 4, Ogou, p. 134.

"In the chaotic traffic, the biggest and the most brazen vehicles bullied their way forward, while the rest waited for a chance opening to shimmy through. Together, we made up a passel of fish, large and small, brightly colored and drab, pushing through a narrow channel out into the vast sea of the countryside." Chapter 6, Kouzinn, p.170

"My picture of Alourdes's life in New York includes the afternoon the rat ran over my foot in her downstairs bathroom. But when members of her family in Haiti picture her in New York, they see food, wealth, ease. Neither of us is more correct than the other; we simply start from different places." Chapter 6, Kouzinn, p. 181

"Haiti is a Catholic country. People who serve the spirits, including those like Alourdes who are priests and priestesses, consider themselves good Catholics." Chapter 8, Ezili, p. 241



"Whatever is wrong, whatever persons want to happen, the Vodou spirits do not fix it or do it for them as much as empower them to do it for themselves." Chapter 8, Ezili, p. 242

"She offered libations to her ancestral spirits. A splash of Babancourt rum activated the spirit of Papa Ogou; a dollop of sugary ojat called to the slumbering serpent Danbala. A mist of perfume enticed Ezili Freda to grace the company with her presence. A pungent bath of pepper-laced gin returned the shine to smooth black rocks in a dish at the foot of Papa Gede's altar." Chapter 9, Sojeme, Sojeme, p. 261

"Vodou can share its wisdom and its healing techniques with a larger and more varied group; but as the group of potential devotees expands, the spirits will also become more universalizable, the faces of the spirits less transparent to those of the ancestors, and the stories that carry the wisdom of the religion more abstract." Chapter 10, Danbala, p. 308

"Danbala used to stand with one foot on the water and one on the land, they said. But not now. Now Danbala is so angry that he has withdrawn his foot from the land. He is angry about the abuses of Duvalier and about the Duvalierists, who remain in control. These are people who turn on their own, on the 'families' for whom they are father figures. As punishment, Danbala has withdrawn his foot from the land, and Haiti is withering and dying." Chapter 10, Danbala, p. 309

"Other Caribbean peoples tend to look down on impoverished and illiterate Haitians, but there is also a widespread belief that you must go to Haiti for the most powerful medicines." Chapter 12, Gede, p. 341

"Maintaining and enhancing good luck and, when necessary, fending off and removing bad luck are forms of labor as necessary to life as the labor of the peasant farmer in his fields or the urban pieceworker at her factory bench." Chapter 12, Gede, p. 345



Topics for Discussion

How does jealousy play a role in this story, and in Haitian culture as a whole, and why is it important?

Explain the idea of reciprocity and why it is important. How does Karen learn about this concept and how does it change her view of Haitian culture? Discuss in terms of the idea that it is often necessary to give something - even a penny or two - in exchange for a treatment.

At the end of his chapter, we hear the idea that Danbala is taking his "foot off the land" in disgust over the politics of Haiti. It brings to mind an interesting thought to ponder: what would Mama Lola have to say about the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti? Could the removal of Danbala's foot from the land have anything to do with it? In the book, it is a reference to the drought plaguing the land, but the earthquake occurred years after the final afterword. Thoughts?

Discuss feminism and the matrilineage of Mama Lola's family. How does, as an example, the Vodou practice of Sina differ from the practice carried out by Alphonse Macena?

In the afterword, we read about a row between Karen and Mama Lola. Articulate your thoughts on this matter in terms of racism, both towards Alourdes and towards Karen. Is Karen a villain because her ancestors were slave owners, and is Mama Lola justified in her separation from her friend considering the powerful vision she experienced at the slave memorial?

Upon beginning this book, the reader generally has an opinion or an idea about what "voodoo" is. By the end of the read, however, one's attitude is inevitably changed. Explain your own personal transformation in consuming this information.

Discuss the idea of Haitian confidence as articulated in chapter 11, 'Plenty Confidence'. Why is this confidence important and how does it differ from pride?

Discuss how you as the reader felt when you heard that Karen was planning to marry Papa Ogou, then Papa Danbala and finally takes the ultimate plunge into the world of Vodou and takes the initiation rites. Do you feel like she is going too far in her research, or do you feel that this transformation is a result of changes she needs to make in her life?

Explain why and how Vodou is a real and legitimate religion, and discuss the parallels between the Vodou lwa and the Catholic saints.

Of all the Vodou spirits, which is your favorite, which do you identify with most and why? What are the lessons we are meant to learn from these various spirits and how do they relate to the people they serve?