Those Bones Are Not My Child Short Guide

Those Bones Are Not My Child by Toni Cade Bambara

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Bambara's cast of characters are intriguing, as some are fictional creations while others are public figures whose words Bambara documents from public records.

As expressed in the aforementioned interview, Bambara explains that the "fictional characters allow me to pursue the various theories, for example, about the murders and allow me to lift up the community voice without hustling anyone." And her description of the process of writing this book, contained in the "Acknowledgments," illuminates the fictional characters that are clearly developed in the context of the novel, and the real people that are only represented by their names in the work. While B. J. Greaves is a character Bambara describes as "originally devised solely to enable me to tell the reader about actual police officers," and Mason, Vernon, and Lafayette characters that "enabled me to tip my hat to the numerous vets and community workers who were on the case," the Spencer family is clearly defined for their roles in the tragedy, and the amazing changes that they undergo.

Bambara's creation of the family unit, their struggles to find their missing son, and their attempts at reunion and unification lies at the heart of the novel. In addition to her role as the first character introduced to the reader, Marzala Rawls Spencer occupies the central position throughout the novel. Although she is a young mother at only twenty-seven years of age, she first appears distraught, "worried," with "Smudged mascara from the day before....

She looked feverish, her lips cracked and peeling, salt streaked across her breastbone."

From her first appearance, she is out of control, angered at her twelve year old son who has failed to return home. She even appears alienated from her younger children, eight year old Kofi and seven year old Kenti, who complain that all of her stomping around the house awakens them. Marzala, or Zala, as she is called throughout the novel, is distracted and distraught. And she is tired, working two jobs as a manicurist at the barbershop and a teacher at the art center. She is estranged from her husband, as we learn at Kofi's question, "You call Dad?" and Kenti's thought, "But Daddy wasn't coming by so much no more." But once Marzala realizes that it isn't just a matter of Sonny disobeying her rules to go on a camping trip, she begins to change.

Initially "dragg[ing] herself behind Officer Hall," and pleading, "Would somebody help me please?", Marzala remains a passive victim of a system that does not regard her case seriously; boys that age were prone to run away from home, they assure her.

But, gradually, Marzala begins to "Question Authority," as her T-shirt reads at the end of the novel, at the community meeting where she finds her voice and encourages activism from her community. Quoting from Gwendolyn Brooks, Marzala begins, "'We are all each other's harvest, we are each other's business,'" and ends her speech with the words, "'.. . coerced silence is terrorism.'"

Marzala's estranged husband, Nathaniel Spencer, "Spence," is alienated from his family and his community. Hearing of his son's disappearance, he must travel a long way home to discover what happened. And his life is one of disillusionment, for we learn that "ten years ago, Spence had still been serious about becoming a community organizer." But he did not become one, and can no longer seem to find the passion he once had, "and now he was hurting..." As we learn of his history, Spence emerges as a character who fought to live his life under ideals, for he had ".. . gone in the army, fled in fact, still using the Black Power salute to repair the damage, ... hanging 'militant' posters over his bed.... Dogged, brave, noble, right on." But he had entered the war too late, and saw little action, so he returned disillusioned. He is in pain, and alone, for "he could think of no one to drop in on and say, 'Hey, man, I'm hurtin.'" But, like Marzala, Spence undergoes a change.

As he continually searches for Sonny and possible leads alongside Marzala, he is inadvertently brought home. Restored to the family, he changes, realizing as he holds Kenti, "that he wanted Sonny to be there not so much to complete the family portrait as to give him the opportunity to alter it and his own relationship to it. 'My family,' he said aloud, to see what it felt like to say it now. . . . 'Family,' he said again." When Sonny is also restored to the family, roles are again redefined, but this time nothing is transient, and they all learn to grow together— a new community, a new family.

As the source of the emotional turmoil experienced by the Spencers, Sundiata, "Sonny," Spencer is a complex character.

There are two Sonnys that emerge from the text—the one that everyone describes and fantasizes about returning, and the one that does come home. At the novel's beginning, Marzala frets about Sonny's whereabouts, angry at him for worrying her: "Twelve years old and out all night long.... She mouthed all the things she would say to him, all the things she'd been lashing together to flay him with since the day before when Kofi had shrugged and said 'Went.'

... He was asking for it, and he would get it this time." Even his siblings think that he is one to get away with everything, as Kofi complains, "'He always do what he wants.'"

But once the Spencers realize that something has happened to Sonny, that he has been abducted, he becomes transformed into a symbol of all the lost innocence in the world: "Sacrificial children. Little Lamb, they'd called their firstborn long before he was Sundiata, Sundi, Sunday, Sonny. Who didn't call their babies little lambs?" And yet when he is found, returned to the Spencers, he is a stranger to them all. At first, he is "The John Doe Jr. in observation in Pediatrics, found wandering in a daze on the highway, barefoot, in khaki shorts and a ragged child's undershirt four sizes too small, ... so badly battered ... " At her family's home, away from Atlanta, ready for the healing to start, Zala still cannot claim her son: "That is not my boy," she had told them... .

"Those bones are not my child." Brushing Spence's words away from her ear, she told them it was fruitless to try and palm the damaged boy off as their son. But Spence kept saying things to bring her around, to take a good look, to concentrate.

But once they start the process of healing, as a family, and learn to accept Sonny into the family again, to realize that he has changed, the family is able to piece together what happened. Sonny's abduction and return lie at the center of the story, for the family must redefine what they are, and ask that the community do the same, in the face of tragedy.

Kofi Spencer is the eight-year-old younger brother of Sonny, and a boy that must renegotiate his role in the family once his brother is abducted. From the onset of the novel, he is sullen, unruly, and envious of his brother, complaining that his mother is too easy on Sonny: "'You don't never say nothing to him. You jump on me all the time, though.'" At first, Kofi believes that Sonny has gone on the camping trip, and envisions all the fun that he was missing.

Kofi resents the way that Sonny treats him: "Bestor Brooks always spoke up and looked out for his younger brothers, but Sonny only sometimes ... " Once Kofi realizes that Sonny is gone, he tries to step into the role of the older brother, almost becoming Sonny, as he asks his mother, "'Since Sonny ain't here ... can I sleep on top and Kenti can take my bed?'" Then he goes to the closet and takes out a pair of cowboy boots, asking, "'Can I have these boots? I mean, can I wear them till I get new shoes?'"

Wanting to literally step into Sonny's shoes, Kofi proclaims, "'Well, Sonny ain't here....

He ain't here.'" But, eventually, Kofi becomes protective of his older brother, once Sonny returns, weakened and fearful. As he holds his brother, Kofi assures him, "'I got you. It's all right. Ain't nobody gonna mess with you. . . . Don't cry. Awww, don't cry, Sonny.... It's okay... . I got him, Dad. Let go, ya'll. I got him.'" And Kofi does not let go.

Kenti Spencer is the youngest of the three Spencer children, and vacillates from extreme skepticism to idealism. She watches her mother with a critical eye, thinking, "If Daddy came by he would get on her about that." But only eight years old, she easily falls back into the role of the little girl, and curls up under the covers with her Baby Crawler. While waiting for her father one day after Sonny's disappearance, Kenti prays that she will be able to go to church, and declares that she would ".. . pray for Sonny to come home and put on his birthday bathrobe and get everybody to act right."

Despite her belief that ".. . house praying wasn't as strong as church praying," Kenti holds her Baby Crawler tightly and continues to pray. But Kenti's role is intriguing, for she has insight that many of the adults lack; she is the first to learn the lesson that the adult members of the community fail to realize: ".. . the lesson was that people who struggled in the dark and got scared should keep on with the struggling and then they'll be blessed and can change ... "

And she is a storyteller, like Bambara herself, for, at the end of the novel, Kenti stages a play for the young people while the adults discuss the state of the community; it is Kenti who attempts to write a "good last scene" as the novel spins to a close. And she is an activist, and will not sit by and wait for such a change, for ".. . she had her own work to do," while her mother stands before the group to speak.

Beyond the immediate family is the extended family, compiled mostly of a community of women. Paulette, "Aunty Lette," is a nurse, a healer by nature, and Zala's best friend and neighbor. When Zala falls apart, Paulette is there to clean her up, and her house, taking care of the Spencer children and inciting Zala into action. And it is Paulette's marriage at the end of the novel that brings hope to the Spencer family, for they are able to move on, and move out, into Paulette's vacated home. With more space to live, and a new commitment to each other, the family thrives as a result of Paulette's growth, symbolized by her wedding. And there are more women healers in the novel—Marzala comes from a family of healers. When Sonny is returned home, he is brought to Marzala's family, her mother, Mama Lovey, and her sister, Gerry. There, the family opens their arms to the Spencers, encouraging healing. But all must find ways of coming together, for Gerry only knows her own work in Africa and must try to help the Spencers from her experience; Gerry is 391 able to help them understand Sonny's silence, while offering them all that she has: "'I hope I'm making sense. It's the only context I know.'" And the environment differs from Atlanta, for things heal here, as Mama Lovey takes medical students on a tour of her grounds explaining the medicinal plants, "'Just one more instance of that law of life, time. Right how, it's poison. In a few days, good medicine.'" And here, in this magical place, Sonny can heal, for evening primrose blooms in September, to everyone's surprise—under the right hands.

It is finally Mama Lovey who tells Sonny that he must tell the truth, as she tells him, "'... you'll be called upon real soon to do something big that requires the kind of straight-up courage you've let strangers trash somewhere.'" He tries to lie to her, pretending he does not intend on running away, but she leads him to his truth. Out of love for her daughter, Lovey tells the boy that she will make certain he doesn't leave, for Marzala's sake: "'You can mend. But my girl, you see, I don't think she could take your going off, and she's my child.'"

And, with that truth, Sonny surrenders himself to Lovey's embrace, to begin the healing, and the telling.

Social Concerns

B ecause Toni Cade Bambara'sThose Bones Are Not My Child is based upon the Atlanta child murders of the late 1970s and early '80s, her novel is a curious blend of fiction and nonfiction—what she identifies, in an interview for the American Audio Prose Library in 1982, as "the contradictory pull of the documentary impulse and the fictional impulse." The product of twelve years of research, Bambara's novel focuses on the political and social climate of those decades. But the novel is not merely documentary, for "The City Too Busy To Hate" is richly rendered as an Atlanta intimate to the author. With Bambara's insights as a member of its African American community at the time, the novel becomes an exploration of the emotions of that community. Through Bambara's focus on the struggles of a fictive black family, the Spencers, devastated by the abduction of their oldest son, Sonny, the story illustrates the community's tale of loss, desperation, hope, and rejuvenation.

While the narrative takes place between 1980 and 1982, its location in time appears fluid. Individual sections are marked by a specificity of day, month, and year, sometimes lapsing days and, at others, entire months. Although each moment is important to the Spencers who first notice the disappearance of their eldest son in the first year, and then discover the truth behind his abduction in the last, this ephemeral sense of time is telling for all of its characters, and the setting. In this world, the Atlanta of the early 1980s, there is a sense of hope and progress in the city's technological advances; it is "The City Too Busy to Hate." But there is another Atlanta in the novel, haunted by the ghosts of past wars, embodied in the Vietnam veterans who are alienated from the community at large and each other.

And many members of the black community in Atlanta fail to reap the rewards of the budding economy and must struggle to make ends meet. Locating the story within the black community, Bambara tells us about this other Atlanta.

The African American community is in trouble—Atlanta's young are disappearing in frightening numbers. The government is stalling—Atlanta's authorities fail to alert the community of these abductions and murders. Despite the prosperity in Atlanta, parents struggle to keep food on the table, watchful eyes over their children, and their own lives intact. And, once they learn of the abductions and murders, families begin to live in fear. The government drags its heels and fails to publish a list of the "Missing and Murdered," denying any connection between the individual cases. And the black community itself is torn, some hopeful for the government's assistance while others are angered by its indifference. The Atlanta of Bambara's novel is one with multiple fissures; individuals attempt to come together to locate the lost children, but often become lost in a maze of unanswered questions and new complications.

In simple terms, Those Bones Are Not My Child is a story about a black community under siege. The community is threatened by the abductions and murders as well as the government's indifference. But it goes even further than that, for this community is

one that has been suffering. While the immediacy of the Atlanta child murders threatens the bedrock of the community, the community itself is already in crisis.

Families are divided, neighbors distanced.

Spence, the father of the missing Sonny and a vet who is still shell-shocked from two tours in Vietnam, is the focus of much of the narrative. He is estranged from his family and any sense of community: "over a million and a half Black people in the city, two and a half million Black vets active and organized in the Southeast region, twentyfive of his thirty-one years on earth spent in Atlanta, and he could think of no one to drop in on and say, 'Hey, man, I'm hurtin'."

As we learn of Spence's plight, we feel the alienation experienced during this period.

In response to these feelings of alienation, individuals fight to find new ways of raising their voices, banding together and making change. As Marzala Spencer, a mother driven to find her child, reflects on the indifference of her city and its people, she illustrates that she must find another way to tell her story, for even the newspapers fail to express it: "Children had been bludgeoned, shot, stabbed, and strangled, and nothing had stopped. Conventions came to town. Save the Fox Theatre luncheons were served at fifty dollars a plate. Newspaper and magazine articles put asterisks alongside the Fortune 500 branches in Atlanta.

Suits were pressed, briefcases polished. And nothing stopped." In response to the indifference around them, Spence and Marzala attempt to find meaning in their world, beginning with an examination of their own community.

In the novel, issues of race, class, and gender conflate to tell a story that is specifically rooted in the problems of this African American community. As Marzala wonders, "Had the children been killed because they were Black, or should she say because the murderers were white? Had the authorities marginalized Dettlinger because he was white, because the high command was Black? Had the memo writers' warnings been trivialized because they were females, their supervisors male?" she illustrates the dangers at the center of this story— misunderstandings and misreadings of the "other." While most of the novel's narration consists of an omniscient narrator's exploration of and free indirect discourse with Marzala and Spence, both characters continually question how the white community is reading them. When Marzala is questioned about Sonny's disappearance, she wonders if she is suspected of neglect or violence. Each character, including the members of the Committee to Stop Children's Murders (STOP), children, clergy, psychics, and community members, wonder why little or no action is taken in response to the cases, leading to numerous allegations, racial conflict and division.

And often it appears that divisions are drawn along the lines of race, for, despite the fact that STOP explores the idea that the KKK is responsible for the crimes, authorities deny these links: "'Paranoia,' said the media to Blacks pointing out connections.

'No connection,' the FBI said in response to Black organizations all over the country."

When Wayne Williams is brought to trial, the community is not surprised that he is black, for they knew that it was far more "safe" in the eyes of the city's authorities to point the finger at a member of the black community and contain the threat, dividing the community in the process. Within this African American community, men become alienated from women, parents from children, neighbor from neighbor, and the reader is left to wonder if the community will survive.

Ultimately, the scope of Those Bones Are Not My Child transcends the historicity of the Atlanta child murders; the immediate threat of the murders becomes the setting for Bambara's exploration of the future of the African American community. While the novel's focus is the Atlanta of Bambara's experience, it symbolizes a larger world inscribed with fissures resulting from individual fears, insecurities, and needs. As a precarious balance of fiction and reality, Bambara's Atlanta reflects the horrors and atrocities of the time—the violation of children and the community at large. Detailing the historicity of that Atlanta, Bambara includes the key players and the events of the time, but she invents characters that allow her to explore the community's reactions to these events. As the medium for the community's forgotten story, Bambara is able to examine what community is and bear witness to its potential to overcome such tragedies.

Techniques

As a contemporary work of fiction (written after 1945), Those Bones Are Not My Child illustrates concerns about the individual's role in the society, concerns best revealed through narration. The novel's narration is always located in the third person, and yet, with a modern sweep, in a technique experimented with by James Joyce and, later, Virginia Woolf, plays with free indirect discourse, where the boundaries between narrator and character disappear although the third person voice does not. Experimenting with narration, Bambara is able to vacillate between her two main characters, Marzala and Spence, without impeding the pace of the novel, itself a frenzied search to find Sonny. In the aforementioned interview, Bambara explains her use of the narrator as a medium, or force, a magnet through which other people tell their stories. Such a narrator, she explains, is different from what she classifies as the narrator contained in EuroAmerican letters, the omniscient narrator that she finds "arrogant," imposing. And it is this type of unique narration that we find in the "Prologue" and "Epilogue," a type of narration that marks a significant departure from the "traditional" novel, as it is written in the second-person, invoking "You" at the first lines. Inviting the reader into the world through direct invocation illustrates the play with form that Bambara so readily executes within the novel.

Written after two world wars, and numerous others, the contemporary novel focuses on the plight of the individual living with knowledge of the wars, Depression, and a general disillusionment about their world. Bambara's characters fit this model, for the Vietnam vets appear shell-shocked, detached and haunted by nightmares day and night. Atlanta itself seems disillusioned, despite its seeming progress. The African American community feels its reality slipping, as they become sleepwalkers, hustling from job to job, or wandering in search of employment. Those Bones Are Not My Child reflects fears about the stability of family and the security of well-being.

Along with this sense of disjointedness experienced by the characters is a sense of longing for completion. And yet characters remain fragmented, alienated from others and their own fulfillment. Distinct from the modern novel, the postmodern novel explores these issues of fragmentation, a questioning of meaning now that the old orders have disappeared. In the postmodern novel, the classical unities of place and time are disrupted. Physical location(Atlanta) remains a constant, but we are often placed within the characters' minds. Time is dislocated, nonsensical, for days pass between brief sections while hundreds of pages mark the progress of a day. And yet Those Bones Are Not My Child retains elements of the modern novel as well, in which religion and romance are not banished, but return in new forms. At the novel's end, the church is transformed into a political forum where Marzala, replacing the clergyman, advocates action. Combining the communal spirit and a call for activism, the church is invigorated through a new metaphor.

Most distinctly, Those Bones Are Not My Child is part of the literary genre of African American fiction, for which the field of study is continually growing. Asked if her work should be classified as "black literature" in the aforementioned interview, Bambara

responds, "There is a distinct black literature with very particular kinds of traditions ... " She defines her work against works of Euro-American literature, stating that all that happens in Ernest Hemingway's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels could take place in Europe, while ".. . the literature in this country that confronts what is particular and peculiar about this country is black literature." And as a work of African American fiction, Bambara's novel is the child of a rich literary tradition. Drawing on oral storytelling, many African American writers transfer this orality to the written page. Bambara's novel, at times, sings with a lyricism rivaled only by poetry. While the novel contains less of the sheer translucency of language found in The Salt Eaters, in the moments when Marzala returns home to help Sonny get well, the language reaches such heights. And, thematically, the novel's concerns with the fate of the African American community, the raising of its voice, marks it as representative of this genre.

Themes

Those Bones Are Not My Child illustrates Bambara's attempt to tell her community's story. Locating the novel in the historical moment of the Atlanta child murders, Bambara examines its black community, voicing the stories overlooked by the journalists and authorities at the rime. As Bambara states in the aforementioned interview, "We've gotten the media story, or the media version, the police version, but we've yet to get the domestic version or the community story." Although its focus is the abductions and murders of forty children, it presents a larger picture; perhaps most importantly, the novel seeks to redefine the African American community.

This is a community desperately in need of healing. Steeped with racial tension, Atlanta is divided between parents and policy-makers, the community-run STOP organization and the government-appointed Task Force, activism and indifference. Ostensibly, the community has only itself when all other avenues fail to assist, or even to lend a listening ear to individual suffering.

Bambara continually reasserts the need for community; her character Marzala repeatedly voices concerns about the community's indifference and need for activism, for they must save themselves. The African American community is isolated, Bambara tells us, and she drives this point home in an exchange with a journalist who tells Marzala, "'Blacks just aren't news anymore, Mrs. Spencer. . . . The news of the moment is Iran, when it's not the election or stories about international terrorism . . . the Atlanta story lacks scope.'" But rather than become despondent and hopeless, Marzala continues the fight, searching for her son and a new sense of community.

Viewing Bambara's work in its entirety (as, sadly, her death in 1995 prematurely brought her career to a close), one notices the theme of community throughout—a concern for the welfare of children and women, as seen in her earlier works, the collections of short stories Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, as well as her novel, The Salt Eaters. But in Those Bones Are Not My Child, Bambara widens her gaze to take in all that is Atlanta—her immediate world, her black community (as Bambara had relocated herself there years before her death)—to recognize its limitations and potential. Without positing a solution, for the story is rooted in nonfiction and the case remains officially "closed," Bambara tests the limits of community. Even Marzala, STOP'S driving force for much of the novel, retreats into the familial realm—the embrace of her mother and sister—after they find Sonny. Fearing the possibility of losing him again, Marzala turns away from Atlanta and the African American community there, reluctant to return.

But Bambara's solution is not one achieved by severing ties, for Marzala must return.

And she cannot keep Sonny safe at home, for he must be able to go out into the community. Marzala and Spence force themselves to unearth the truth behind his disappearance, and, in doing so, realize the importance of community. In her speech to the congregation in one of the last scenes of the novel, Marzala implores that they question authority and raise their voices together. As a symbol of feminism and activism,

Marzala leads the community to act, a message delivered throughout Bambara's earlier works, but now defined on a larger scale in Those Bones Are Not My Child. And members of the community respond to Marzala's speech with acceptance, "Say it again, sister," encouraging her to voice their story, while naming her their "sister." Ultimately, through the act of connecting with the congregation, encouraging their action and reaction to the events in Atlanta, Marzala's speech illustrates hope for the future of the black community. With the community's support and their activism, Marzala and Spence are finally able to lead Sonny to reveal the truth.

Although Bambara suggests this reformed notion of community, the case is not easily resolved, and a new theme emerges, one alluded to at the novel's beginning. The role of the storyteller, the writer herself, becomes important as Bambara seeks closure to the story that defies neat resolution.

While we witness that the writer is the voice of the community, the Marzala, like Bambara, who speaks to and for them in that last address, the closing of a story that is so much fact and so much fiction proves complicated. After Sonny's truth is revealed and his case is "closed," we are reminded that these are fictitious characters placed in real circumstances, for Sonny's abductor is revealed as a fictional character (Bambara neatly distinguishes the fictitious from the real in her "Acknowledgments").

In the "Epilogue," Bambara invokes the figure of the writer compiling the facts and the story itself to illustrate this tension between reality and fiction for a story that has so much of both. In it, she dismisses the "official accounts" posited in FBI records, reports, and newspaper articles to raise new questions. As her writer-character assembles reports for a friend who asks about events in Atlanta, we are left to weed through what she finds, clarifying and yet complicating the writer's role.

But the writer becomes a familiar figure, for it is "You," the writer first rendered in the "Prologue." Now, rather than frantically searching for your daughter, only reading your notes when she is safely accounted for, under your watchful eye, you are finishing the story. You see the television, and its images:"... the man being turned into a matinee idol. In addition to arming the thug Savimbi to topple Angola, Oliver North also organized the invasion of Grenada."

With this juxtaposition of the writing in hand, the story of Atlanta's child murders, and the images on screen, you begin to question everything proposed as "fact" and "fiction."

But we leave that world with many questions, and many ideas about who that writer is—the familiar purveyor of fact and creator of fiction. And while the use of fact and fiction is important for understanding Bambara's project, and the novel itself, we return, in the last moments, to the central theme, the community. You, the writer, leave your apartment with your daughter.

As you walk into the street, it's "1981 all over again until you two reach the sidewalk heading for the post office." The chaos in the street leads you to worry about the present, for "People are shooting off guns still and flinging firecrackers all over the

street." But there is hope, because the image is transformed into one of unity, for "they must have foreseen that you two would need an extension of the Independence Day celebrations." And you are not alone, for you are part of "two" and the two join the larger community. While this notion of community is not fully defined, it is a symbol of a new beginning: potential.

Key Questions

As Bambara's intent was to tell the community's story, issues of narration are extremely significant. From the "Prologue's" invitation for the reader to join the story, to the vacillation between Marzala and Spence's perspectives, to the reader's revised role in the "Epilogue," the shifts in narration provide an intriguing model for exploring the role of the writer. The reader is invited into the novel so that the community's story will be heard; Marzala's and Spence's words become the medium through which the silence is broken. Ultimately, Those Bones Are Not My Child represents one family's struggle to find their son, and, in the process, unify the entire community. The Atlanta of Bambara's novel is one steeped in racial conflict and division, tension that threatens the future of the African American community. Struggling in silence, the members of the community have no recourse and suffer until they are able to recognize their commonality and fight against a system guided by prejudice, blindness, and injustice.

1. Woven throughout the novel are numerous characters, some "real" people and others literary creations. Whose story is Those Bones Are Not My Child?

Which perspective(s) does the reader feel most closely aligned with? Why?

2. In the "Prologue," the reader is addressed as "You." Why does Bambara begin here? What is the function of the "Prologue"?

3. How does Bambara's coupling of fiction and documentary depart from your expectations of the "traditional" novel?

Why does she rely on both to tell this story?

4. Whose Atlanta is depicted in the story?

Is there only one? What are the different depictions of Atlanta and why are they all contained in the story?

5. Identify the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) of the novel. Considering the number of characters within the novel, how many fit into each category? What are the conflicts between these characters?

6. Critical commentators often focus on Bambara's depiction of the state of the African American community, as well as her visions of its future. How does the community function within this novel? Is Bambara advocating change?

Of what kind?

7. The novel consists of multiple settings, most predominantly a focus on the political and familial realms. How are the two connected in the novel, and why are they woven together?

8. Many critical commentators have discussed the portrayal of the African American man in works by African American women writers. How does the representation of gender differ in the story?

9. Bambara's novel, taking place after the Korean and Vietnam wars, focuses on the role of the "vet" in Atlanta. How does his role illuminate the position of text of the novel? Who is the "child"?

the individual in this society? How might it be both a literal quote 10. The title, "Those Bones Are Not My and a metaphor?

Literary Precedents

Those Bones Are Not My Child is part of a distinct tradition of contemporary African American literature. It should not be surprising that connections between Bambara's work and another prominent African American woman writer, Toni Morrison, exist, for the latter was Bambara's editor at Random House for years, and the two became close friends, and admirers of each other's work.

As Bambara expresses in the aforementioned interview, ".. . we're friends ...

very much interested in each other's work, as women, as members of the same community.... "

Morrison's Beloved (1987) focuses on issues of community, the need for understanding the past for an active future. Both Bambara's and Morrison's novels focus on the loss of the children of the community, though in Morrison's work the death occurs at the hands of the mother, in desperation. But, perhaps more significantly, the source of Morrison's Beloved is an article that the author found, detailing a woman's murder of her child. Both Bambara and Morrison draw on fact and spin their fictional worlds around it, creating worlds familiar to them, locating the stories close to home.

And like Beloved, Morrison's Paradise (1997) focuses on the community, though this time it is a community of women cast outside the town of Ruby. Similarly, Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1980) focuses on the African American community struggling in Brewster Place, a hopeless place where dreams seem to die. But, in each of these works, like in Bambara's novel, hope is found through a shared vision— raised voices. But while Bambara's The Salt Eaters (1981) seems to resonate more with this theme with its focus on a community of women, Marzala's interactions with her mother and sister prove no less telling. And yet Those Bones Are Not My Child is filled with cries for activism, a redefined community achieved through action. Bambara's emerging feminist protagonist Marzala reminds us of Alice Walker's Meridian (1976), both novel and title character that explore, and take part in, the civil rights movement.

Beyond its connections to other works by African American women writers, Those Bones Are Not My Child is a portrait of the Atlanta child murders and one family's experiences, mixing elements of nonfiction with fiction. And Bambara's novel is connected to nonfictional accounts of the murders, specifically, Chet Dettlinger and Jeff Prugh's The List, now out of print, and James Baldwin's Evidence of Things Not Seen (1986), both referred to in Bambara's "Epilogue," that question the "official version."

And while Bambara's novel is based on the Atlanta child murders, the fictitious Spencers' search for their son reads as a thriller, connecting it with yet another genre. The suspense with which the reader awaits the discovery of Sonny, and his abductor, at times, reminds the reader of the breathless anticipation with which he reads the

contemporary thrillers of John Grisham. Despite the apparent differences between the Those Bones Are Not My Child and Grisham's The Pelican Brief (1992), the latter's focus on the discovery of a conspiracy behind the assassination of two Supreme Court justices leads the female protagonist through a labyrinth of political cover-ups and deception, much like Marzala Spencer's struggle to find her son and piece together the story.

Related Titles

In Race, Gender, and Desire, Elliott ButlerEvans draws a connection between Bambara and Walter Benjamin's definition of a storyteller, "a person 'always rooted in the people'" through whom "the story becomes a medium through which groups of people are unified, values sustained, and a shared world view sedimented." But where her earlier works, collections of stories, Gorilla, My Love (1960) and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive (1974), and the novel, The Salt Eaters (1981), focus upon segments of the African American community—young girls and women—Those Bones Are Not My Child extends its definition of community.

Bambara's "A Sort of Preface" to the first collection, Gorilla, My Love, provides an interesting lens for comparison between the works, as she writes, "So I deal in straight-up fiction myself, cause I value my family and friends, and mostly cause I lie a lot anyway," for even in response to her early works critics comment on her stories' connections to her own life, her own causes.

So when Bambara states in the aforementioned interview that her role as a writer is to ".. . transform actual experiences you have been through ... in order to make usable whatever lesson it is you've extracted from that experience that you want to lift up and share with other people," we are able to see how this theory applies to each of her works. Those Bones Are Not My Child marks a redefinition of Bambara's work, one in which the call for activism is sounded as a result of the real horrors of her Atlanta.

In her last work, all members of the community, men and women, are soldiers in a struggle, but are each alienated from the other, as families and individuals. The shell-shocked war veterans are haunted by solitude, and single mothers fight to keep their children safe as they leave home for their third jobs. This final novel, published posthumously, reflects a larger scope, a sweeping portrait of the black community.

In Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations (1996), Bambara articulates her visions. Writing about the role of the storyteller, Bambara discusses her interest in stories about resistance. Those Bones Are Not My Child is one such story.

Facing internal tension and external pressure, the community in Those Bones Are Not My Child is disjointed. But, through the positioning of Marzala and Spence, the parents of the missing child, Sonny, the narrative returns us to the family, and the possibilities of unification for the community at large. While The Salt Eaters illustrates how the faith healer Minnie Ransom is able to lead Velma Henry to life after an attempted suicide, the vision behind Those Bones Are Not My Child extends further. Marzala Spencer is healed by her community of women, at home, but must return to Atlanta to advocate change for her entire community, men, women, and children, all.

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