

The Healing of Velma Henry

THE SALT EATERS

By Toni Cade Bambara.
295 pp. New York: Random House.
\$9.95.

By JOHN WIDEMAN

TONI CADE BAMBARA is the author of two books of short stories, an anthology, "The Black Woman," and a collection of "Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk." In her highly acclaimed fiction and in lectures, she emphasizes the necessity for black people to maintain their best traditions, to remain healthy and whole as they struggle for political power. "The Salt Eaters," her first novel, eloquently summarizes and extends the abiding concerns of her previous work.

The central action of the novel is the healing of Velma Henry, an attempted suicide. Velma, a black woman, a survivor of the civil-rights marches, sit-ins and police riots of the 1960's, is a computer expert who freelances her services to industry. But her real work is spying on the enemy. Using her technical skills as a kind of Trojan horse to breach the walls of the Trans-chemical Corporation, she gathers evidence against

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the corrupt, poison-spewing company that squats in the midst of Claybourne's black Southwest Community. Velma's life is complicated by a series of betrayals, public and private. Her husband, James "Obie" Henry, who runs the Southwest Community's Academy of the 7 Arts, is sleeping around; her son, Lil James, is fast becoming a stranger to her; undercover espionage in the enemy camp exhausts her in mind and body, so that she "had begun to doubt her perception of everything." Her private frustrations were intensified by the failure of the Movement. Once she had believed that "the workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of range of the serpent's fangs. . . ."

Through flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, a complex interweaving of plot, subplot and digression, the substance of Velma's life and the lives of the black people of Claybourne are gradually revealed. The reader must synthesize the mosaic, piece together fragmentary bits of character, scene, story-line as they flash in and out of the narrative. With the force and freedom of great traditional storytellers — the "boldness and design" that one character asserts is the essence of black creativity — the narrator shuttles backward and forward in time, plunges the reader into the middle of conversations, thoughts, dreams. Characters at the periphery of one scene suddenly take center stage in others. Part of the pleasure of the novel derives from these dislocations and affronts (are we really supposed to believe the conversations between people and spirits?), the sudden juxtaposition of the real and unreal, the imaginary and the ac-

tual (did Fred Holt drive his bus into a swamp or not?). "The Salt Eaters" questions and finally erodes the basis upon which such distinctions customarily depend.

To accommodate her complex vision, Toni Cade Bambara takes lots of chances. Her novel is set in the black section of a large Southern city, a city much like Atlanta, perhaps, with problems of urban blight, pollution, corrupt politicians, racial tension, and so on. But her characters also inhabit the nonlinear, sacred space and sacred time of traditional African religion — the realm of Great Time, in which man lives both on the earth and in the presence of his gods. To assist in the curing of Velma, Minnie Ransom, the fabled faith healer, must call down cleansing, invigorating "loa," the immortal spirits of the ancestors. Preparations for Spring Carnival take on a mythic dimension: they are a communal reflection of the ritual, the magic that must be celebrated to restore Velma. When thunder, lightning and rain burst from the sky at the climax of the novel, the Southwest Community's prayers for renewal, for healing and health have been answered, a new day is possible. The novel also flashes forward into the future, capsulizing the characters' immanent lives, hinting at the texture, the brightness of the days after the storm.

In its best moments the novel recalls Faulknerian montage, the harmonic counterpoint of the poetry and prose of Jean Toomer's "Cane," the symbolic and imagistic richness of Toni Morrison's "Song of Solo-

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mon" and Leslie Silko's "Ceremony," the interplay of history, folklore and black speech in the works of Albert Murray and Leon Forrest. The novel's perspective is multi-cultural; its language rings the changes from scientific jargon to street slang. The gift for rendering accurate, snappy, allusive dialogue is as evident in Toni Cade Bambara's novel as it's been in her short fiction.

The novel's strengths are related to its weaknesses. Velma's trouble is obviously more than an individual neurosis, but how well do we get to know *her*, her plight, its resolution? Luminous moments imprint Velma's reality on the reader's consciousness, but do the scattered moments ultimately fuse, coalesce, so that we know and care who Velma is? Yes, we're all on this contaminated, exploited earth together and will have to learn to eat a lot of salt together before things get better, if they ever do, but does this truth justify the novelist's tendency to include all the woes besetting us? Digressions may be a way to achieve a panoramic, comprehensive overview, but they stretch the fabric of the narrative dangerously thin. The baroque convolutions of individual sentences, the proliferation of character and incident sometimes seems forced, detracting from the forward flow of the book.

Yet this demanding, haunting, funny, scary novel is persuasive. The words that open the book, the words Minnie Ran-

som addresses to Velma Henry as the two women perch on stools in the Southwest Community Infirmary — "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" — ask a question of all of us. Getting well entails risk, honesty, a commitment to struggle, a collective effort that Toni Cade Bambara documents with the voices and lives of the Southwest Community's people. She makes us understand that what is at stake in Velma Henry's journey back to health is not only one woman's life but the survival of the planet: "tap the brain for any knowledge of initiation rites lying dormant there, recognizing that life depended on it, that initiation was the beginning of transformation and that the ecology of the self, the tribe, the species, the earth depended on just that." ■

Authors' Queries

For an authorized biography of Wrenfield Martin, English soldier and adventurer, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who served with him or has correspondence from him.

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For an authorized critical biography of Harold Clurman, director, teacher and theater critic, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who has anecdotes, correspondence and photographs.

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