

The Book, *Voodoo Season*, by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Voodoo Season, Rhodes's fourth novel, revisits the mystical landscape of Louisiana, but now, for the first time, the celebrated author of historical fiction presents a mystery set in the here and now. This is the story of Marie Levant, a great-great granddaughter of Marie Laveau and a medical doctor compelled by unseen forces to relocate from Chicago to her family's native home. This is New Orleans, where the slave-holding past merges with the twenty-first century, a place where women of color are still being abused, raped, and -- even more horrifying -- rendered "un-dead," zombie-like Sleeping Beauties. The Quadroon Balls of yesterday are a present reality and only Marie Levant can untangle the medical mystery.

A smart modern-day heroine, unafraid of her sexuality, Marie Levant extends the Laveau legacy of spiritual empowerment, prophetic vision, and voodoo possession. *Voodoo Season* is a fresh and original work of fiction that is a magical womanist tale of mystery and power.

Discussion Questions

1. In the journal of Louis DeLavier, the man who loved Marie Laveau and chronicled her story, Laveau is quoted as saying, "A story should begin at the beginning. But in this story, the middle is the beginning." In that same way, so begins the novel *Voodoo Season*. It starts with "The Middle." Discuss the significance of the events that occur in relation to titles of each subsection: "The Middle," "The Beginning," "Another Beginning," "The End," and finally, "Never Ending."

2. Marie Levant, the heroine, seems to resist the telltale signs that she is connected to the spirit world. On page 47 the narrator states, "Marie knew she often noticed things about other people -- she was smart, intuitive. But that didn't mean she had sight." Nevertheless, everyone -- DuLac, Reneaux, El -- believes in her powers. Why do you think she is so reluctant to accept her gift? Were you convinced of Marie's gift? Explain.

3. New Orleans, "The City of Sin," has long been known for its association with voodoo. Stereotypes abound, describing voodoo as "barbaric, exhibitionism without the spiritual." At the end of the novel, having experienced the many faces of voodoo firsthand, Marie vows to "spend her life letting black people, all people, know that voodoo was loving and good, not hurtful and evil" (page 259). Discuss your perceptions/knowledge of voodoo before reading the book. In what ways have they changed or stayed the same as a result of what you've read in this novel?

4. Throughout the book there is a paradoxical tension that exists between the old world versus the new, Catholicism versus voodoo, good versus evil, sinners versus saints, slaves versus masters, revenge versus love. How does Marie negotiate these boundaries/territories and eventually make peace among these contradictions?

5. As an interning doctor-to-be, Marie is an independent woman who had to raise herself when her mother died and foster care failed her. As an adult, she claims that "all she ever needed was sex, not love." Nevertheless, love is a necessity. Explain the ways in which love eventually finds its way into Marie's life.

6. As the first novel in a contemporary trilogy (inspired by the historical novel, *Voodoo Dreams*), there are many things that still remain unresolved. Evaluate the loose ends. Imagine how the author might proceed in the last installment of the trilogy. What do you think will become of Marie Levant? What about her friends/followers at Charity Hospital? And the newborn of Marie-Claire who Marie was so determined to rescue?

7. While the book hinges on the discovery of who is responsible for the series of murders, the book is also about Marie's self-discovery. To be sure, Marie admits to Reneaux, "I've been hiding. Time to grow up. Discover who I am" (page 144). From what has she been hiding? How does her self-discovery aid in solving the mystery? Do you think she is content with what she has discovered about herself? Her mother? Her family legacy?

8. As a preface to "The Beginning," the reader is allowed a glimpse of Marie's journal in which she wonders, "How was I to know they were all in my blood? Seven generations. All of them -- whispering,

punishing, crying to get out." In fact, blood is a recurring image throughout the novel and the theme of "mixed blood" resonates. Discuss why blood, in relation to heritage, can be a mark of pride or shame, particularly within the African American community.

9. In many ways, this novel is a testament to the magical strength of women in general, black women in particular. As Marie's African ancestor, Membe, affirms, "Life be a celebration. Being a woman be just fine." Discuss the male versus female power dynamic that exists in *Voodoo Season*. If you were asked to keep score in this installment's battle of the sexes, who would be the winner and why?

10. Initially, Marie is drawn to New Orleans for some inexplicable reason. Inevitably she realizes "that coming to New Orleans had been her *fa*, her fate" (page 185). Do you believe that it was fate that brought Marie to the city of sin? Do you believe people have the power to change their fate? Is one's destiny written in stone?

11. Marie Levant descends from a long line of women who were well-versed in the ways of voodoo. As Marie Laveau asserts, "Voodoo is worth passing on" (page 184). From what you learned and know about the faith, do you agree? Why or why not?

Book Club Tips

1. Visit the author's own website at <http://www.jewellparkerrhodes.com> for her bio and upcoming event information

2. Add a mysterious ambience by hosting your reading group as a masquerade party in the New Orleans tradition of Mardi Gras. You can order masks for under \$3 per mask at this site: <http://www.nightmarefactory.com/mardigras.html#feather>. Or, have readers purchase their own. Serve festive drinks and unmask the fun!

3. Host your group meeting at a New Orleans style restaurant or café and enjoy heaping bowls of gumbo or beignets and café au lait. Or, if you're in the mood, you can find a good gumbo recipe at: <http://www.gumbopages.com/food/gumbo.html>, and try making a pot of this spicy New Orleans favorite.