

Rene Maran. *Batouala*. (London: Heinemann, 1987) 149 pp., \$7.50 paper.

This book is a long-neglected product of the 1920s negritude movement, in which a new kind of primitivistic interest concerning the lives of black men and women in the African Diaspora took hold in the literary words of Europe and America. *Batouala* was written in French by Rene Maran, an Afro-Caribbean writer living in Paris in the 1920s, who had worked for several years in what was then known as French Equatorial Africa. This edition is a reprint of a 1972 English translation that adheres to the lyrical, sensuous style of Maran's prose and that follows the revised and unexpurgated version Maran approved of for publication in 1938. The book has been brought back into print in an inexpensive paperback format, which now makes this first great novel about Africa written by a black person readily available for use in literature classes and also for general reading by a wide public audience.

Batouala describes the life of an aging African chief, who must contend with a young man's desire for his wife. The novel is a story of love, the passing of generations, and the changing face of Africa caused by time and the Europeans. Although somewhat dated in its theme of anti-colonialism and in its sometimes idealized images of Africa, Maran's book is a fine achievement of poetic depictions of natural landscape, mythical enactments, and the storytelling powers of men and women whose lives are infused with a pervasive spirituality derived from the common earth and all the creatures who live upon it.

However, what is unusual about Maran's use of primitivism is his inclusion of the unpleasant realities of life present in the frequently harsh and dangerous African world. He mentions body smells, the foul stench of human excrement, the painful, vicious circumcision rites practiced upon the young bodies of male and female youths, and the cruel, deadly stalking of men and women by both humans and animals.

Maran employs the omniscient narrator device to enter the minds of his characters, including the mental and emotional states of animals. Chief among the beasts is Mourou, the panther, who looms in the story as the powerful force from which no man or woman can escape. At one point Batouala saves his wife from Mourou's attack, but later Batouala himself is destroyed by the panther. Mourou's actual and symbolic presence in the lives of the Africans even makes their disputes and hatreds of the white colonial masters seem subordinate to the life-and-death struggles the Africans wage for survival, and which are symbolized by their battle with Mourou.

This book won the *Prix Goncourt* in 1922, and deservedly so. Even through the translation, the reader receives an appreciation of Maran's sensuous, lyrical prose style, especially in the descriptions of the African country. The transcendental spirit suffusing the world of nature is evoked in the language of prayers and hymns. Here is a sample of

Maran's paean to fire:

Ah! Who will sing of fire? Who will praise as is fitting, with words right in bounty and in fervor; who will praise that miniature sun which gleams, sometimes alone, more often innumerable, night and day, in spite of rain, in spite of wind?

One must sing of its changing light, its diverse face and its heat, progressive, soft, insistent, intolerable and secret.

Glory be to fire!

There are many other remarkable passages in the book. Chief among them is the description of the wild and bloody initiation rites of circumcision. Another scene shows Batouala telling stories that explain the origins of illnesses and the traditions of tribal life. These myths Batouala passes on to his youthful rival, Bissibi'ngui, in an unconscious realization that he will be the one to survive him. There is also the frenzy of the hunt for Mourou conducted with destructive fires, wild dancing, and the intoxicating odor of blood.

In his portrait of Africa, Maran neither glorifies nor degrades the African men and women. He gives us a novel that resonates with all the terrors and pleasures of lives lived in intimacy with the spiritual forces of nature. In the last scenes of the novel, Batouala is shown attempting to kill his youthful enemy during the hunt for Mourou. Both the youth and the panther escape unharmed, but Batouala is mortally wounded by Mourou. Maran attaches no moral good or evil to these actions; man and beast do what is inevitable—the younger generation and Mourou's strength always succeed.

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