



A Clay Jar Marked for Miracles

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Set in southern Maryland, *A Clay Jar Marked for Miracles* follows the life of Tzipporah Imara Simms-Stone, descendant of African slaves who were shipped to Barbados from Kenya and Ghana.

Upon Tzipporah's death at an old age, her daughter, Solorah, inherits her mother's African trunk, a treasured family keepsake. Solorah's grief delays her opening of this heirloom, but when she finally does so, she discovers artifacts from her mother's ancestors, and a manuscript written in code with an accompanying letter. This document is the tale of Tzipporah's life: her distant parents, her beloved Memaw Taraja (maternal grandmother), her first love, Mathieu, and her experiences growing up as a black woman from the 1950's onward. Tzipporah's bequest to her daughter is a continuation of that personal history; the coded manuscript contains her family's history as told to her by her grandmother, it forms the written history of what the *griots* (storytellers) of her ancestors preserved in oral form.

Sogah has woven a rich tapestry of life in this novel, based on actual events which she has fictionalized. As has become sadly familiar, the lives of black Americans in the first six-decades of the 20th century were seldom without tragedy and loss. Tzipporah has her share of tragedies and more, but through all the darkness, she emerges at the end of her life as a strong, spiritual woman, thanks to a beloved grandmother who taught her all she knows about being proud of her heritage.

Although the prose sometimes gets overworked—multiple adjectives for nouns, repetition of names and phrases where none are needed, among other things—Sogah's novel overcomes its faults by being highly readable and well paced. Tzipporah's story incorporates some Jose Luis Borges-like magic realism in her family's matter-of-fact attitude toward dreams, visions, and spirituality, reminiscent of Nalo Hopkinson's Caribbean-inflected fiction.

The eponymous jar in the title has its own place in Tzipporah's story, and to describe that would be giving away too much. Readers of African-American fiction, history fans, and those seeking to broaden their knowledge of how black experience shaped America, will find much of interest in this novel.

J. G. STINSON (November 9, 2010)

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