

A Taste of Eternity

Gisèle Pineau

C. Dickson, Translator

Texas Tech University Press (May 15, 2014)

Softcover \$21.95 (161pp)

978-0-89672-870-7

Social and cultural beliefs can imprison people and separate them from love—this is a powerful theme Pineau conveys with emotional weight.

“Black folk with black folk, white folk with white folk, and the world will keep on turning round” is a message repeated by a minor character in *A Taste of Eternity*, yet it shapes a number of the troubling relationships in this earthy look at love, memory, and betrayal. Setting her novel in places that appear to be different on the surface—Guadalupe, St. John, Paris, and America—Gisèle Pineau, a nurse of Guadeloupean ancestry, craftily points out that the locales are filled with individuals who share similar attitudes and opinions about cultural/ethnic differences and their relationship to a past that spawned mental and physical violence because of it.

This circular story begins and ends with the narrator, Sybille, reflecting on the life and death of Lila, a white Parisian woman who develops a maternal relationship with Sybille and her son. Lila has lived and loved furiously, if at times irresponsibly, and in her old age, she feels compelled to confess a few sins. Sybille listens intently as Lila recounts unflattering moments, including an affair with a German soldier and her decision to look away when Jewish tenants, whom she believes are now haunting her, were evacuated.

Pineau relies heavily on interlocking stories told through lengthy flashbacks, creating a tapestry of connected characters imprisoned by beliefs that separate them from love. The stories are profoundly sad and thought provoking. During the Liberation Day celebrations in Paris, a black soldier named Henry falls in love with Lila. Suggesting her views on race, Lila tells Sybille about Henry’s mother’s consensual relationship with her white employer. To adhere to society’s mores, Jenny agrees to marry a black man and tells him he was Henry’s father. Henry believes racial attitudes have changed, but Lila shows him they haven’t. Even in the 1990s, Lila uses racially charged language toward Sybille, who inexplicably chooses to ignore it.

This novel is contemporary fiction tinged with historical sensibilities, places, and events coupled with a large cast of characters who are immersed in emotionally charged interactions. A tale told in Jenny’s community features two slaves who, forbidden to love freely, settle on suicide only to have their deep love live eternally in a bird. The message in *A Taste of Eternity* seems to be that though love seldom endures in the physical realm because it is plagued by betrayal, guilt, loss, and the weight of society’s expectations, it remains eternal in its own sphere.

KAUVONIA HINTON (Summer 2014)

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