ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Shackles Across Time
Odie Hawkins
AuthorHouse
978-1-4343-7540-7
Three Stars (out of Five)

"Grandfather Odei…stabbed his cane at trader Quartey's testicles, his heart, his head, and pronounced a curse…that would affect future generations of Quartey's descendants." This curse, made in Ghana in the dark days of the African slave trade, is the first link in *Shackles Across Time*.

Odie Hawkins, a prolific writer in what he calls the "Pan African Occult" genre, has created his new novel in that vein. *Shackles Across Time* is a story about three African-American families, descendants of slave trader Quartey, who want to determine if they are victims of the centuries-old Ghanaian curse. The families, generally blessed with intelligence and success, share a common tragedy. The third child of each couple is stricken with a disability: a physically deformed son, a schizophrenic daughter, and a daughter afflicted with nymphomania.

Gathering in an unusual "reunion," the families convince Chester Simmons, a best-selling author who has mentioned the curse in his latest novel, to investigate its possible validity. Impressed by their desperation, their determination, and a hefty payment, Simmons goes to Ghana to explore the family histories; there he finds that he is inextricably linked to the curse. To lift the spell, an African bokor (sorcerer), will test Simmons to his mental and physical limits.

Hawkins story has verve and originality, and the cover, with its symbolic map of Africa decked in Pan-African colors, is refreshingly non-formulaic. Centering on the curse and its resolution, the book's plot is intriguing and carefully devised, and the ending satisfies.

But the novel lags when Hawkins diverts the reader's attention to Simmons's chores as an author; lengthy episodes about interviews and book readings pull us far away from the main story line and add little to the rather thin depiction of Simmons as a creative, radical thinker and unrepentant womanizer. The characterization of the couples (the Quinns, Quists, and Quarles') is similarly shallow; apart from the differences in their children's disabilities, there is little to distinguish them from one another. None of the characters show growth, despite the unusually

trying events they experience.

A consistently repeated error in the book is the lack of opening quotation marks in succeeding paragraphs of dialogue, making it difficult to distinguish dialogue from narrative text; this is particularly irksome because long passages of dialogue broken into short paragraphs are a notable feature of Hawkins's style. Secondarily, there is the capitalization of the racial designations "black" and "white," which is not a recognized convention.

Hawkins's book is clearly targeted to his established fan base. It could make an above-average screenplay or television miniseries because it peripherally examines larger issues: the cruelty of the slave trade, the ensuing racial memory of oppression, and the connection of black Americans to their African heritage. But as a novel, *Shackles Across Time* cries out for more judicious editing and more thoughtful character development.

Barbara Bamberger Scott