

The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste: Father and Mother, First and Last

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New York University Press (May 1999)

\$23.00 (249pp)

978-0-8147-2209-1

Winner of the 1998 New York University Press Prize for Fiction, this is the story of an escaped slave's life and his people's ways in the sugar isles during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Born in Guinée, but captured as a babe with his mother, Pierre is taken from his mother and shipped to a Caribbean sugar cane plantation; where he becomes the personal servant of Master Dufay while still a young boy. After a few years, in order to save the salary of an accountant, Dufay has Pierre educated in letters and numbers. Studying further on his own, Pierre's eyes are opened to beliefs other than what he has observed around him—including how truly lustful and greedy Dufay and his son are, though kinder than most masters.

From this point, Pierre uses his knowledge in subtle ways: angered that slaves are ordered to marry in order to breed more slaves, he circumvents punishment by marrying Pélérine Vélite, the barren voodoo witch; and with hope of having freedom eventually granted to himself, he acts kindly toward the young Madame of the house. When Madame wishes more attentions than Pierre will provide, however, his only salvation from sure torture and death is escaping in a barrel on the sea. After countless days and nights adrift, Pierre is washed up upon an island where he meets a strange creature from the sea—with whom he has four children. Pierre's tale continues with the raising of his children and in the sudden, shipwrecked arrival of the Dufay's son, Pamphile, along with surprising news from the plantation.

Interspersed in this story are all of the vignettes that bring the people of the plantation to life: the Master's eccentricities; Madame's attempts at running the household; the fall from grace of the slave driver called Squint; the cruelty of Pélérine's first owner; Pamphile's observations in France and his subsequent behavior. Also adding to the atmosphere of the story are the slaves' ever-present religion and the various legends that guide Pierre's many decisions.

From the very first pages, this wondrously different world of Pierre Baptiste emerges out of the colorful, conversational mouth of Pierre himself. Readers will laugh at the tomfoolery, cry in horror at the brutality of torturous punishments and then thank Uncle God they were never born a slave.

NELLY HEITMAN (May / June 1999)

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