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How Stella Got Her Groove Back

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ber 6, 1999. Reveals that Llewellyn concocted a fraudulent story about his life. His real name was Vivian Lloyd, not Richard Llewellyn; he was not, as he claimed, the son of a Welsh coal miner but was born in London, the son of a publican; and his first job was not in a coal mine but washing dishes in a posh London hotel.

Lindberg, Laurie. "Llewellyn and Giardina, Two Novels About Coal Mining." *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 1 (1989): 133-140. Identifies *How Green Was My Valley* as a regional novel that presents what is universal about the human character and its condition. Ideas explored include the growth from innocence to experience, the individual exploited by industrial power, and the loss of "Eden."

Price, Derrick. "How Green Was My Valley: A Romance of

Wales." In *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, edited by Jean Radford. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. Maintains *How Green Was My Valley* is more than a close view of a working-class Welsh community. Analyzes elements of romance in the story, including rural patriarchy, male-female relationships, replacement of the pastoral with the industrial, and the passing of old ways and beginning of new ways.

Woods, Katherine. "The Sound of Music on the Green Hills of Wales." *The New York Times Book Review*, February 11, 1940. Asserts that the novel strongly follows the Romantic tradition, while incorporating elements of realism and local color in depicting Welsh independence, pride, courage, and love. Slightly critical of the novel's nostalgic sentimentality.

How Stella Got Her Groove Back

Author: Terry McMillan (1951-)

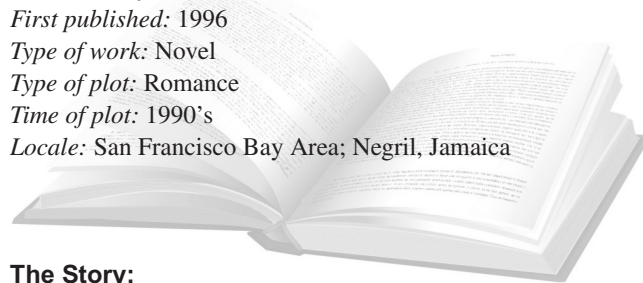
First published: 1996

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Romance

Time of plot: 1990's

Locale: San Francisco Bay Area; Negril, Jamaica



Principal characters:

STELLA PAYNE, a forty-two-year-old analyst for an investment firm

QUINCY PAYNE, her eleven-year-old son

WINSTON SHAKESPEARE, Stella's twenty-year-old lover

ANGELA and VANESSA, Stella's sisters

CHANTEL, Vanessa's daughter

NORRIS, Winston's roommate

The Story:

Stella Payne is an ambitious African American woman who holds masters degrees in fine arts and in business administration. A successful analyst for a large investment firm, she makes more than \$200,000 per year and has an impressive portfolio. Despite her accomplishments, she no longer finds her career satisfying and feels her life is simply boring and predictable. Anxious to get a respite from single motherhood, she watches her eleven-year-old son, Quincy, board a plane to Colorado, where he will spend a few weeks with his father.

Without professional commitments or mothering demands, Stella gropes for ways to fill her free time. Since her divorce from Walter, Quincy's father, she has not found a fulfilling relationship. Though she does date occasionally, she considers the men she dates as boring, arrogant, or insensitive, and she cannot muster any feelings for them. Stella longs to talk to someone she cares about. She wishes

she could call her friend Delilah, an impossibility because Delilah had died of liver cancer the year before. Desperate for noise to distract her from her own thoughts, Stella turns on the television and is immediately enticed by the Jamaican voice she hears beckoning her to visit the island. Duly persuaded, Stella calls her travel agent, buys summer clothing, boards a plane, and, after landing in Jamaica, endures the long van ride from Montego Bay to Negril.

Stella's two sisters, Angela and Vanessa, have opposing reactions to Stella's sudden vacation plans. Angela, who is four months pregnant with twins, thinks taking the trip is irresponsible and potentially dangerous. Still, she offers to travel to Jamaica with Stella, but Stella promptly turns her down. The two disagree about several fundamental ideas about womanhood. Stella believes women should be independent, and she cannot understand why Angela acts like her husband Kennedy's submissive robot.

Sister Vanessa, however, is unmarried, adventurous, and nonjudgmental. She both supports Stella's decision to go on vacation alone for eight days and applauds her for being brave enough to do it. Vanessa even offers suggestions for preparing for the trip (tips like how to pack and how to style her hair) and tells Stella she hopes she finds a paramour while she is there.

On her first morning in Jamaica, Stella goes for a run along the beach and then has breakfast. She notices a young, handsome man seated at a table near her, also having breakfast. They greet each other, and the man eventually joins her. Stella learns his name is Winston Shakespeare. He has just completed classes at Kingston University and has come to the resort area to find a job as a chef's apprentice. Winston's father is a surgeon and his mother is a nurse; for two years he had attempted to follow their wishes by studying biology at the University of the West Indies in Kingston. Uninterested in medicine, he decided he would rather study food preparation or hotel management. While Winston shares details about his life, Stella chides herself for being attracted to him. By the end of breakfast, she reluctantly makes plans to meet him at a pajama disco later that night.

Stella never has to worry about dining or lounging alone, as Angela suspected she would. In fact, Stella befriends a number of vacationers, like the Canadian honeymooners Sasha and Ben, who also plan to go to the pajama disco. Outside the dance, Stella feels self-conscious in her nightgown but decides to enter the party anyway. Winston seems happy to see her, but while dancing, they are interrupted, and he is told he has to change into pajamas if he plans to remain at the party. Stella waits for him, but the party takes an unexpected turn as she looks around at the scantily clad crowd and scoffs when Abby, one of the hotel's social directors, encourages them to disrobe. Feeling too old and uncomfortable with such behavior, Stella leaves the party before Winston returns.

The next morning Winston makes it clear to Stella that he is disappointed because they had not spent time together at the party, and Stella experiences a twinge of disappointment of her own when she realizes she and Winston will not be having breakfast together. Stella focuses on enjoying the ocean until an unattractive man named Nate begins making advances toward her. Struggling to ignore him, she sees Winston and asks him to talk to her so Nate will leave her alone. He does, and they have an open discussion about being sexually attracted to each other.

Stella and Winston make plans to have sex, but Winston adds that he enjoys her company and would like to go to dinner and dancing before they become intimate. Surprised, Stella questions Winston's decision to date her rather than

simply have sex with her. In response, he explains that he cannot understand why she does not realize that he is attracted to her and likes spending time with her. They fall in love, but on day three of Stella's vacation, Winston learns he has a job as an assistant to the head chef at Windswept, a hotel a short distance from the one Stella is staying in. He tells Stella he has to break their second date because he has to return to his parent's home to get his things. Stella thinks he is breaking the date because he now realizes he does not want to be involved with an older woman. Once again, Winston reminds Stella that he actually cares for her. Before he leaves, he tells Stella that he will visit her before her vacation ends, but she is disappointed because they will not be able to spend any time together. Later, she misses him but tries to enjoy the rest of her evening.

Winston's roommate, Norris, talks to Stella about Winston, leading Stella to wonder if Norris is gay and interested in Winston. The next day, she wonders about Norris again when he seems anxious to tell her that Winston had come back to return his key, but had not bothered to visit her. Tonya and Patrice, two women Stella has just befriended, also suspect that Norris has a crush on Winston, but they quickly urge Stella to forget about Winston when they see Judas Germaine Rozelle. Judas is a handsome man who designs business parks in Atlanta, but he was born in Senegal and grew up in London. Though Stella tries to get to know Judas, she continuously compares him to Winston. She eventually concludes that Judas is boring, but she still decides to see if he is good in bed. When he is not, she asks him to leave her hotel room and ignores his request for another opportunity to satisfy her.

On her last day in Jamaica, she finally gets a call from Winston; they say good-bye at her hotel and promise to write and call each other. At home, Stella learns she has been fired. Relieved, she accepts unemployment as an opportunity to find work she enjoys. In the meantime, she misses Winston and tries to resist calling him, but she cannot. When she telephones him, Winston says he plans to visit her. Her son, Quincy, returns home and convinces his mother to take him and his cousin Chantel, Vanessa's eleven-year-old daughter, to Jamaica instead of Martha's Vineyard. Stella believes that seeing Winston again will help her decide if she is truly in love with him.

Back in Negril, Stella reconnects with Winston, and it becomes clear that the two share something special. Their age difference, however, continues to haunt Stella. A few days later, she returns home to California. She misses Winston, and after talking to her family and friends, she finally decides to send Winston an airline ticket so he can spend three weeks with her and Quincy. In California, they discover the rela-

tionship is more than a vacation fling, and by the end of the novel, Winston proposes and Stella accepts.

Critical Evaluation:

Despite professional success, the 1990's was a difficult decade for Terry McMillan. Her mother, Madeline Tillman, died in September of 1993, and the following September her best friend, Doris Jean Austin, died. Emotionally drained, McMillan traveled to Jamaica in June, 1995, with Deborah Schindler, the producer of the film version of McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). In Jamaica, McMillan had met Jonathan Plummer, a twenty-four-year-old resort employee. Though McMillan had been concerned with the difference in their ages—she was nineteen years older than Plummer—the couple still fell in love.

Inspired by her experience in Jamaica with Plummer, McMillan returned home and spent the first three weeks of September writing the first draft of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Her editor, Carole DeSanti, said that McMillan had written about her experience in Jamaica in several genres (that is, as a poem, a short story, and a novella) before the work evolved into a novel. McMillan's ability to work had been surprising because prior to her vacation, she had been suffering writer's block, unable to complete the manuscript for the novel *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, which was published in 2001. Before December, 1993, McMillan had invited her muse—Plummer—to join her in California. Known for creating works thinly veiled as fiction, McMillan admits the novel comes close to mirroring her experiences.

The novel depicts the details of a romantic relationship between Stella, a forty-two-year-old woman, and Winston, a twenty-year-old man. Concerned by the age difference between them, Stella worries about what people will think of her until she remembers that men are often admired when they date or marry women half their age. She resents this double standard and decides she is brave enough to live her life in a way that pleases herself, not others. This type of empowerment is often found in McMillan's novels, in which her protagonists are generally successful, professional, and courageous women who are also autonomous and strong.

Friendship and romance also are important themes in McMillan's work. The skillful way in which she uses vernac-

ular, realism, and humor is reminiscent of work by Ann Lane Petry and Zora Neale Hurston. However, McMillan's work has usually been labeled popular fiction, often to her chagrin.

Some critics had been unimpressed with the style and structure of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, citing its use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, its minimal punctuation, and its excessive profanity. Other critics believed that her focus on romance pushed her farther away from her goal of being a "literary" writer. Despite the criticism, McMillan's readers helped make the novel a best seller.

McMillan has been credited with showing the publishing industry that readers will support African American writers. In 1996, when the novel was in production, no other African American writer had been promised a first printing as large as the 800,000 copies that had been planned for *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Two years later, a film version was released, and it, too, was a success.

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Further Reading

Fish, Bruce, and Becky Durost Fish. *Terry McMillan*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002. Discusses McMillan's life and novels from *Mama* (1989) to *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Part of the Black Americans of Achievement series.

Patrick, Diane. *Terry McMillan: The Unauthorized Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Patrick traces McMillan's life from her birth in Port Huron, Michigan, in 1951, to the publication of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and years following.

Putnam, Amanda A. "Hot Combs, Curling Irons, and Contradictions: Portrayals of African American Women in Mid-1990's Pop Fiction." *Alizés* 22 (June, 2002): 35-54. Putnam argues that books like *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* sparked a literary trend that paved the way for literature that features professional African American women.

Richards, Paulette. *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999. Richards provides a close reading of four of McMillan's novels, including *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.