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Waiting to Exhale

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Waiting to Exhale

Author: Terry McMillan (1951-)

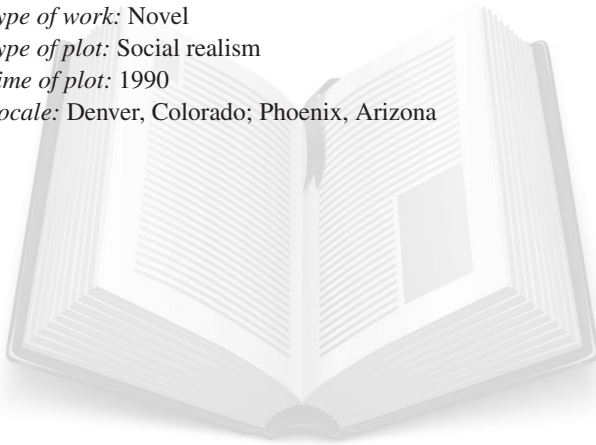
First published: 1992

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Social realism

Time of plot: 1990

Locale: Denver, Colorado; Phoenix, Arizona



Principal characters:

SAVANNAH JACKSON, a thirty-six-year-old woman who

hopes to succeed in the television industry

BERNADINE HARRIS, a thirty-six-year-old divorced mother

JOHN, Bernadine's former husband

JOHN JUNIOR and ONIKA, their children

GLORIA MATTHEWS, a hair-salon owner

TARIK, Gloria's teenage son

ROBIN STOKES, a thirty-five-year-old underwriter

RUSSELL, Robin's married lover

MICHAEL, a colleague whom Robin dates

DR. KENNETH DAWKINS, Savannah's married lover

MARVIN KING, Gloria's neighbor and love interest

JAMES WHEELER, a civil rights attorney who befriends

Bernadine

The Story:

Savannah Jackson's sister Sheila tells Savannah about a business owner named Lionel, and Lionel invites Savannah to attend a New Year's Eve party. As Savannah gets ready to ring in 1990, she reflects on her annoyance with Sheila and their mother, who have suggested that Savannah is miserable because she does not have a husband and does not live closer to her family. She realizes she does not need a man to validate her but admits that, as she broke up with Kenneth Dawkins four years ago, she wants to be in love again.

Even though she has already moved four times in fifteen years, Savannah is about to move again because she finds Denver, particularly the men, boring. The only person she knows in Phoenix is her college roommate, Bernadine Harris, but this does not prevent her from interviewing for a job there after visiting and learning about an opening in the publicity department at a local television station. Savannah is excited about securing the job since it will help her get closer to her dream of producing television programs. However, her new job will pay twelve thousand dollars per year less than her old job.

The prospect of a pay cut worries Savannah because it could interfere with her ability to take care of her mother. Her mother receives Social Security benefits and food stamps, but her monthly income is so low that she has difficulty taking care of her financial obligations in Pittsburgh, where she lives in a Section 8 apartment. At the New Year's Eve party, Savannah sees Lionel and is attracted to him, but she becomes annoyed and leaves when she discovers he has a date.

Bernadine Harris has been married for eleven years. She is stunned when her husband John tells her he wants a divorce because he intends to marry Kathleen, his twenty-four-year-old white bookkeeper. Bernadine knew that their relationship was disintegrating and even wanted to end it herself, but she is still unprepared for the anger and dismay she feels when John tells her he has filed for divorce. At first, she feels betrayed because John has chosen to leave her for a white woman, but then she realizes that the real betrayal stems from John's attempt to control her.

Bernadine looks back on her marriage and realizes that, at John's insistence, she delayed beginning a catering business so they could develop his computer software company. After John Junior and Onika were born, John insisted that Bernadine stay home with the children. A few years later, Bernadine grew tired of being a stay-at-home mother and took a job as a controller at a real estate agency. She planned to save enough money to fund a catering business, but she never followed through on this plan. Now an angry Bernadine takes Xanax to try to cope with the pain of a failed marriage.

Robin Stokes is just as unhappy as Bernadine but for different reasons. She depends on psychics, numerologists, and astrologers to determine the course of her personal life, but nothing has prepared her for the disappointing relationship she has with Russell. She tries to convince him to marry her, but he marries someone else instead. When Russell stops living with her for a while, she gets involved with a coworker

named Michael, whom she describes as overweight and uninteresting.

Gloria Matthews has decided that relationships with men are not worth the trouble they cause and has settled into a life of single motherhood, running her hair salon, watching prime-time television, and overeating. Her morning begins with an argument with her seventeen-year-old son, Tarik. Tarik does not want to be home when his father David comes for a rare visit because he realizes David is coming only out of obligation. Gloria became pregnant with Tarik during her senior year of college. As a Catholic, Gloria felt that having an abortion would be unbearable, so she gave birth to Tarik and asked only that David visit him sporadically.

Bernadine, one of Gloria's clients, is the topic of morning gossip at Oasis Hair when Gloria enters the salon. Gloria is alarmed to learn that Bernadine—distracted after John left her—shopped at Circle K in her bathrobe while her children were home alone. Gloria tries to telephone Bernadine but cannot reach her. Later that evening, Tarik is not home when David visits. The teen calls Gloria to ask for permission to spend the night at a friend's house. Reluctantly, Gloria acquiesces. David prepares to leave, but Gloria attempts to convince him to spend the night with her. She stops when David announces he is gay.

Bernadine takes John Junior and Onika to her mother's house. Later, she throws John's clothes in the front yard and sets fire to his BMW. She spends the rest of the week in a depressed stupor that gives her the strength to go back to Sun City to pick up her children. On Saturday, Bernadine and the children watch as neighbors purchase John's antique car and other possessions for a dollar.

The next day, Gloria waits anxiously for Tarik to come home; when he does, she discovers that he has been sexually active. As she asks more questions about who he is sleeping with, she notices he prefers white and light-skinned girls. She tries to discuss the issue of color with him, but sharp pains in her chest make it difficult.

Savannah is disappointed because her friend cannot help her drive to Phoenix. She mentions the situation to Lionel, who offers to take the trip with her. While on the trip, Savannah has sex with Lionel but realizes he is not the kind of man with whom she would like to be involved.

John is concealing his income and other assets from Bernadine, so she hires a lawyer to uncover his actual worth. When her divorce is final, she celebrates at a hotel, where she meets and falls in love with James Wheeler, a civil rights attorney. James is married to a white woman who is dying of cancer.

Savannah's mother gives Savannah's telephone number

to Kenneth, who is supposedly unhappily married. He visits Savannah, and they rekindle their relationship. Gloria develops a friendship with her new neighbor, Marvin. He helps her accept that Tarik is capable of making his own decisions, even decisions she questions, such as traveling around the world performing with the service organization Up With People. When Gloria is hospitalized and told she has a clogged artery, Marvin tells her doctor he is her husband and pledges to be supportive during her recovery.

Just when Bernadine feels that she is settling into her new life, the children tell her that John has remarried and Kathleen is pregnant. Similarly, Robin gets a jolt when things do not work out with Michael, and she meets Troy, a drug user who rarely goes to work. When Robin is not distracted by men, she is devoted to helping her mother take care of her father, who has Alzheimer's disease. Robin writes a successful proposal for a ten million dollar account, gets a raise, and is promised a significant bonus. She plans to use the money to pay off her debts and help her parents. She is hurt when her father dies, but relieved that her mother will not have to continue to put her own health in jeopardy. Bernadine's case is finally settled, and she is awarded nearly one million dollars. She decides to abandon her dream of starting a catering business. She will open a store instead and call it Bernadine's Sweet Tooth.

At the end of 1990, each woman has grown in some way. Savannah is finally given an opportunity to compete for a position as an assistant producer. She stands up to her mother and tells Kenneth she is no longer interested in him. Bernadine learns she is strong enough to fight for her own happiness. Gloria finds the courage to love someone other than Tarik. Robin realizes that Russell will not support her or the baby she is carrying, but she finds comfort in her friendships, and this assurance is all she needs.

Critical Evaluation:

Waiting to Exhale offers a realist depiction of African American women's romantic, platonic, and familial relationships. Written in both the first person and the third person, each of the twenty-eight chapters alternates between the perspectives of the four main characters. In the beginning of the novel, each of the women believes she will exhale once she has found the man who complements her, but by the novel's end the women realize they will exhale when they love themselves, their families, and their community.

Terry McMillan uses each character's life as an opportunity to highlight health and social issues prevalent in African American communities. For example, Robin's mother has

had a double mastectomy, and Gloria suffers from hypertension. Tarik's father confides in Gloria about his sexuality, and one of her employees contracts AIDS, providing a forum for discussions about homophobia, bisexuality, and sexually transmitted diseases. Black Women on the Move, an organization committed to serving the community, is reminiscent of historic social clubs made up of African American women. The group raises money for scholarships and various service projects that will address social issues.

Waiting to Exhale was the first of McMillan's novels to achieve "cross-over" success beyond an African American readership. Professional women were intrigued by McMillan's depiction of female characters in their thirties who seem to be succeeding in every area of their lives except in relationships with men. McMillan has been criticized for her depiction of African American men, as most of the male characters are unemployed, irresponsible, and dishonest. The novel, however, includes honest and admirable men such as James, Michael, and Marvin.

Shortly after the novel's release, it was placed on the *New York Times* best-seller list, alongside the works of notable writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Audrey Edwards noted that three weeks after its release the novel went into a tenth printing, and three weeks after that, paperback rights were auctioned for \$2.64 million.

Waiting to Exhale is noteworthy because when it was published few books depicted self-empowered African American women who were not primarily victims of racism, classism, and sexism. There were also few contemporary books that posed questions about African American male and female relationships, the African American middle class, and the strength of African American female friendship.

McMillan has been credited with paving the way for similar novels to be published.

KaaVonnia Hinton

Further Reading

Canty, Donnell. "McMillan Arrives." *English Journal* 85, no. 4 (April, 1996): 86-87. Praises McMillan's storytelling and voice.

Edwards, Audrey. "Waiting To Inhale." *Essence* 23, no. 6 (October, 1992): 77-80. Explains the success of the novel in terms of book sales and bids for paperback rights.

Ellerby, Janet Mason. "Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family." *MELUS* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 1997): 105-117. Looks closely at McMillan's depiction of family in *Waiting to Exhale* and other novels.

Larson, Charles R. "The Comic Unlikelihood of Finding Mr. Right." *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1992, p. 6. Suggests that McMillan wrote *Waiting to Exhale* with hopes of selling the movie rights.

Mitchell, Carmen Rose. "Re-thinking Agency in *Waiting to Exhale*." In *Black Professional Women in Recent American Fiction*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004. Argues that McMillan provides a unique view of professional African American women in the workplace.

Reid, E. Shelley. "Beyond Morrison and Walker: Looking Good and Looking Forward in Contemporary Black Women's Stories." *African American Review* 34, no. 2 (Summer, 2000): 313-328. Suggests that McMillan and other African American women writers are writing books that are in the tradition of those written by celebrated writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

Walden Or, Life in the Woods

Author: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

First published: 1854

Type of work: Essays

Early in the summer of 1845, Henry David Thoreau left his family home in the village of Concord, Massachusetts, to live for two years by himself in a rude house that he had constructed beside Walden Pond in a far corner of Concord township. While there, he wrote in his journal about many of

the things he did and thought. Thoreau was not the owner of the land on which he settled, but he had received the owner's permission to build his house and to live there. His objective was really to live simply and think and write; in addition, he proved to himself that the necessities of food, clothing, shel-

