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An American Marriage

By Nayari Jones
Algonquin Books
306 pp.

The recent entry into Oprah's Book Club, *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, proves to be an intricate look into American society driven by strong characters and expert story-telling. In it, she examines what marriage means, and how outside forces beyond anyone's control can threaten such a complicated relationship. Though this type of tale could easily fall into cliché, Jones expertly juggles complex issues such as family, marriage, gender, and race by examining the reactions of her main characters and those around them.

Jones's story follows a young African-American married couple in Atlanta, Roy and Celestial, as their lives are thrown into chaos by an event beyond their control. Roy is on the road to becoming a success in the business world, while Celestial is building her reputation as an artist through creating high-end dolls. While the couple is visiting his family in Louisiana, Roy is wrongly accused of raping an older woman and subsequently sentenced to twelve years in prison. All of the action of the novel revolves around this cataclysmic event that affects the relationship between Roy and Celestial and the trajectory of their own individual lives.

A large portion of the novel deals with Roy's struggle to survive in prison and how this strains his relationship to the outside world. His unjust incarceration provides an intriguing perspective on a variety of issues, both societal and personal. Though Jones largely wants to focus on the lives of the individual characters, one of the overarching themes of the novel is the unfairness of the justice system to a young African-American male and the strain caused by being looked at with suspicion by a portion of society based simply on race. However, the author expertly weaves these pressures into the story without letting it overwhelm the personal tales of Roy, Celestial, and their families.

Ultimately, *An American Marriage* is about the complexities of family that succeeds in being both unique and universal. There are generational issues at play as both Roy and Celestial must deal with the expectations of both their own families and each other's. Everyone involved has their own definitions of success and what marriage means, and perhaps the true tragedy of the novel is these ideas are torn asunder by Roy's imprisonment. In a way, Roy's life becomes frozen in time, as he watches the years drift by from a cell before eventually having his sentence overturned. In a strange turn of events, Roy meets his biological father for the first time while there and develops a relationship with him that adds to the complexity of his situation. Meanwhile, Celestial must continue on with her life and determine if that includes Roy, unfair conviction or not. Her artistic career booms and she falls for her close friend from childhood, Andre. Jones makes the emotional strain on both of her primary characters evident throughout, as each has to make difficult decisions on what their future holds and what that means for their relationship with each other.

Something that adds to the personal feel of the novel is the way Jones decides to structure its telling. By showing the individual perspectives of Roy, Celestial, and eventually Andre, we get to see the

angst created within each character by the turmoil of the events. It also allows Jones to focus on how each character brings a distinct viewpoint on what family means. Each experienced their own version of turmoil when children, as none of their parents had what you would term 'normal' marriages. Here, the past works to shape how they define terms such as loyalty, and what it actually means to be a husband or a wife, a man or a woman.

Jones also decides to tell the part of the novel where Roy is imprisoned through letter written mostly between him and Celestial. For the reader, it shows the loneliness, uncertainty, and, at times, anger and frustration felt by each character. It also displays how such a shocking event as incarceration can change the way time moves for the individuals involved. There are intentional gaps in the story, as the situation doesn't allow the characters to know what is going on with each other for long stretches. It also works to display how Roy and Celestial change separately, in small ways and big, while they struggle to understand what the other is going through.

Perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of Jones's novel is that it shows how even stories that appear commonplace are all extremely personal. Her characters go through things that unfortunately happen to people every day. However, each one experiences the central event of the novel in different ways, just like in real life. They have to take in to consideration not only themselves, but how their decisions under such difficult circumstances affect everyone in their lives. This complexity adds to the richness of *An American Marriage*, and shows how life is, in the end, a fluid process that can never stay the same.