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Passionate 'Fisher' gets reader hooked

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FICTION

The Fisher King. By Paule Marshall. Scribner. \$23. 224 pages. The verdict: A master storyteller at the top of her game.

Paule Marshall made her literary debut more than 40 years ago, with "Brown Girl, Brownstones" in 1959, a novel that was heralded as groundbreaking, by African-American readers as well as by the likes of Grace Paley and Malcolm Cowley. The author of five other critically acclaimed books (including "Praisesong for the Widow" and "Daughters"), Marshall has won the MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, a Guggenheim fellowship and numerous other awards. Yet the real beneficiaries of her talent, her new novel makes clear, are her readers.

"The Fisher King," Marshall's first novel in nearly a decade, begins by introducing readers to a delightful little Parisian boy named Sonny. He is the grandson of Sonny-Rett Payne, an African-American jazz pianist who moved to Paris in the 1940s to pursue his musical career unhindered by American racism or his family's disapproval. Young Sonny has just arrived in Brooklyn, accompanied by his guardian, Hattie, for a tribute to his famous grandfather. He also meets his grandfather's brother and his great-grandmothers, learning of a family feud that the women -- neighbors, no less -- have stoked for more than 50 years.

Yet the novel is as much Hattie's story as it is Sonny's. Hattie Carmichael is, as Marshall puts it, Sonny's "fathermother'sisterbrother and the only 'kin' he'd ever known." An aging Hattie hides the thickening around her torso with layers of clothes, her standard outfit "a sweeping ankle-length skirt and a matching loose-fitting tunic with a high neck and great bat-winged dolman sleeves," Marshall writes. "And all the outfits were Parisian-chic, widow-weeds black."

Beneath the layers, Hattie also hides generations of secrets. With her perpetual "pinch of a frown," she at first seems austere. But as the narrative leisurely unfolds, readers come to understand that Hattie loves Sonny as she has loved each of his forebears: his mother, grandmother and grandfather.

Placing no boundaries on love, Marshall has crafted a daring novel that explores the limitless possibilities of passion and the elasticity of family. She deftly links the past with the present, shuttling between Paris and Brooklyn, between Sonny's perspective and Hattie's.

Here's how Marshall describes a simple moment in the Parisian life of the pair:

At home, before leaving for work in the evenings, Hattie regularly went for a walk, taking Sonny with her. She did not allow him to go out to play after school -- too many bad elements on rue Sauffroy -- and so to make up for it, she took him walking with her. The daily stroll took place even in the rain. Not in a downpour certainly, but the chilly, gray, off-and-on light rains that plagued the city like a mistral winter and spring seldom deterred her. Rain, rain, rain, Hattie would fuss. A city nearly always in tears. Whoever called it gay?

Marshall's unhurried pacing is pitch-perfect, and each character is distinctively and memorably drawn. Reading this novel, you can't help but realize you are in the hands of a master craftswoman.

In fact, Marshall often has been compared to **Toni Morrison**, and she is an acknowledged foremother of many younger writers. But Marshall's strength isn't so much the virtuosic turn of phrase as it is the sheer ability to tell a captivating story. And "The Fisher King" amply illustrates that she is still at the top of her game.

Lean and beautifully written, this novel -- like the jazz at its core -- swings and soars and deeply satisfies.

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Photo: Paule Marshall

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