

The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution

November 27, 1994

Section: ARTS

Edition: The Atlanta Journal Constitution

Page: N/9

LILIANE

Resurrection of the Daughter

BOYD, VALERIE STAFF

By Ntozake Shange. St. Martin's Press. 288 pages. \$18.95.

BOOKS: REVIEWS AND OPINION

`Liliane' travels with baggage

By **Valerie Boyd** STAFF WRITER

Ntozake Shange's new novel is perfectly titled. Rich and evocative, "Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter" signals a resurrection of black women writers - daughters, if you will, of literary foremothers like Zora Neale Hurston - who can craft stories about contemporary black women that are as well-written as they are entertaining.

The title character, Liliane Lincoln, is a visual artist, intelligent, sexy and independent - a '90s version of Sula Mae Peace, the unforgettable character that Nobel Prize-winning novelist **Toni Morrison** created in 1973's "Sula."

"I travel a lot," Liliane tells us early on. "I look at men and take some home or leave the country, borders have never intimidated me. My passport is in order and I carry letters of credit, perfume, four fancy dresses and six nightgowns. I always sleep naked alone at least once a week. I pray and say hail marys by some window at dusk. It's always best for me to deal with the sacred when I'm naked. For me it has something to do with humility."

Gracefully navigating her way through life despite the considerable baggage she carries, Liliane is working with a sympathetic psychoanalyst to piece together the fragments of her past. Appropriately, Liliane's story is told to us in fragments (Liliane's intimate conversations with her analyst alternate with the distinctive voices of friends and lovers) that together form a colorful patchwork quilt. Not the kind of quilt your grandmama would make for everyday use, mind you, but one that a brilliant black woman artist like Faith Ringgold - or Liliane herself - might make, one you would frame and display in your favorite room, a crazy quilt held together only by its own supremely enigmatic logic.

Ruled by passion rather than logic, Liliane carries the baggage that is shared by all black women, all black people. With insight and humor, Shange, perhaps most famous for her innovative and widely acclaimed 1976 choreopoem, "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf," explores the notion that all African-Americans - "as we try to live where we are despised" - are a little bit crazy as a result of our collective history.

But most of Liliane's baggage is hers alone, a result of her individual history. The daughter of a judge - a devoted "race man" despite his commitment to upper-middle-class ideals - and a beautiful, eccentric mother who revels in her glorious garden and the sound of her own voice singing to raunchy Ruth Brown records, Liliane grows up as a child of privilege during the last moments of legal segregation in the South. But Liliane's mother - made magnificent by the power of her daughter's memory - leaves one flower untended: Liliane herself.

The murder of a friend by her lover unleashes Liliane's volcanic rage at her mother, whose disappearance during

Liliane's childhood, it turns out, was due not to an untimely death, as Liliane was told, but to her running off with a white man.

"How did your mother die, Liliane?" her analyst asks.

"She walked out the front door and went past the weeping willow tree, the azaleas, the roses, and Japanese ivy and died."

"But how, Liliane?"

"My father said she was dead, that's how. If she set foot out the door, she was dead as far as he was concerned."

Liliane sets about the task of resurrecting her mother - and struggling to forgive her. In the process, she resurrects and reinvents herself. But Shange offers no pat answers, no happy endings. "Liliane" is, first and foremost, a story about life - one woman's life.

Though beautifully written and deftly crafted, "Liliane" - like Shange's two previous novels, "Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo" and "Betsey Brown" - may not be for everyone. It's challenging, full of hip political and cultural references ("I told him I heard Eric Dolphy in his eyes") that some readers won't get.

But if you've been longing for a novel whose language is as lush as an Eric Dolphy solo, a novel that is as sensual as it is sexy, a novel that serves up as much lyricism as it does laughter, a novel whose black female characters are as complex as they are contemporary, this is the one you've been waiting for.

Photo: cover of the book, "LILIANE - Resurrection of the Daughter"

Copyright 1994 The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution