



The Conjure Woman

Charles W. Chesnutt

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Summary

The stories in *The Conjure Woman* were Charles W. Chesnutt's first great literary success, and since their initial publication in 1899 they have come to be seen as some of the most remarkable works of African American literature from the Emancipation through the Harlem Renaissance. Lesser known, though, is that the *The Conjure Woman*, as first published by Houghton Mifflin, was not wholly Chesnutt's creation but a work shaped and selected by his editors. This edition reassembles for the first time all of Chesnutt's work in the conjure tale genre, the entire imaginative feat of which the published *Conjure Woman* forms a part. It allows the reader to see how the original volume was created, how an African American author negotiated with the tastes of the dominant literary culture of the late nineteenth century, and how that culture both promoted and delimited his work. In the tradition of Uncle Remus, the conjure tale listens in on a poor black southerner, speaking strong dialect, as he recounts a local incident to a transplanted northerner for the northerner's enlightenment and edification. But in Chesnutt's hands the tradition is transformed. No longer a reactionary flight of nostalgia for the antebellum South, the stories in this book celebrate and at the same time question the folk culture they so pungently portray, and ultimately convey the pleasures and anxieties of a world in transition. Written in the late nineteenth century, a time of enormous growth and change for a country only recently reunited in peace, these stories act as the uneasy meeting ground for the culture of northern capitalism, professionalism, and Christianity and the underdeveloped southern economy, a kind of colonial Third World whose power is manifest in life charms, magic spells, and haunts, all embodied by the ruling figure of the conjure woman. Humorous, heart-breaking, lyrical, and wise, these stories make clear why the fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt has continued to captivate audiences for a century.

Here are some of Amazon's Excellent Reviews

- "Julius' seems to be telling fanciful fairy tales, but with a closer look, one realizes that Chesnutt has no fondness or nostalgia for the times of slavery. This is a well-written and thought-provoking book and it is an important novel of America's history."

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The Conjure Woman Details

Date : Published June 15th 1969 by University of Michigan Press

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Author : Charles W. Chesnutt

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From Reader Review The Conjure Woman for online ebook

Sal Bo says

This book was really interesting. It had some very unique stories of slavery times. The language is a bit difficult to read at times, and there were actually some words that I was unable to figure out from the lingustical accent of slaves. I would recommend this book, if you like reading a bit about our history with a bit of slavery folktale, you might like it.

Renee says

What a gem of a book. I wasn't sure what to expect, other than that I have great respect for Mr. Chestnutt, so I knew it would be worth reading. This story is actually a series of tales woven into a book. The story follows white northern settlers that have purchased a plantation in the south. Rather than really following their lives in the current sense, each chapter is broken down into a tale told to them by a former slave that has stayed on their plantation for many years. The stories are fantastical, mostly unbelievable, as they relate to conjuring (voodoo, etc), etc -- but, the element of folklore and history is amazing. These are the best kinds of stories. They tell of the desperation, superstition, perseverance, and humanity of the slaves. None of the stories are horrific. The atrocities of slavery are rather to the point, without excessive emotional manipulation.

A very good way to kick of my 2014 reading!

Wendy says

This should be required reading in high school. The author manages to share the emotions (including both hope and joy, as well as powerlessness and sadness) around slavery in the American South in an all-ages appropriate way. This edition has versions of the short stories that have been "translated" into modern English. All spelling has been standardized in the "translated" versions and offensive terms have been replaced with more specific terms. The originals are in appendixes.

Gina says

Ok, I really hate this newfangled cover. These are post-slavery tales of the south that aren't part of the American literary canon, but really should be. It is very funny, ironic and subversive. Love the narrative structure.

Shelley says

This book was a wonderful surprise. I loved Julius stories. A good light read to break up my usual books

Sarah says

Told from the perspective of a white northern who has settled in the south on a former plantation, the real gem of the stories comes from the unique voice of Uncle Julius McAdoo, who, taking over the narrative, relates various "conjure" stories of slave-life on the plantation. Dressed-up as fable, John finds the conjure stories quaint and somewhat self-serving (for Uncle Julius uses them to (sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully) persuade or dissuade some endeavor on the part of John. His wife, on the other hand, declares, "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did." She decides that the conjure-embellishments (boys turning into birds to fly back to their mothers, men turning into trees to avoid being sold or lent out) are "mere ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war."

Floyd Larck says

I suppose some hypersensitive people would rate this book as a bit racist in nature. If you read it with the past in mind being that the main character in the story (Julius) is an emancipated slave it will not seem racist at all. Without giving away too much, Julius may be just a freed slave but he's wily as any fox.

Pei Halpern says

I had a difficult time understanding what Julius was saying.

Jon says

An underread classic. Dialect is a bit of a challenge, but worth it.

Lydia says

This may have been a forerunner for that discredited movement called Ebonics. The difference here is that African-Americans born into slavery and subjected to the Jim Crow system were not allowed to read, write, attend school, etc. "The Conjure Woman" is one of those books that may take two readings to make sure that you understand the words in the broken English that rural, plantation blacks spoke. This is nice book of tall tales of working roots and goopeh mixtures in order to get love, revenge, etc among slaves. Uncle Julius is the storyteller as relays to "fixes" conjured up by freedwoman "Aunt Sally."

Spells cast by her mixture and few other free blacks who had healing powers, the power of revenge, etc are told by Uncle Julius and listened to incredulously by the author, his wife and sister-law in rural North Carolina.

Book Riot Community says

This is probably my favorite “forgotten” classic of the year. It’s a collection of antebellum slave folk tales first published in 1899. The writing style is super clever and smart—Chesnutt definitely had a way with words—and the stories in the book offer a completely unromanticized portrait of a world terrible and strange, where anything can happen. That might make it seem far removed from the modern era, but the way Chesnutt frames the folk tales allows him to comment on contemporary (for his own time, at least) race relations in the South, and to show how they’re informed by the past. I listened to the Librivox audiobook production of *The Conjure Woman* and the reader, James K. White, was absolutely pitch perfect. Definitely recommend this one! — Tasha Brandstatter

from The Best Books We Read In December: <http://bookriot.com/2015/12/23/riot-r...>

Melodie E. Estes says

Fascinating and enchanting.

So interesting to read some of the varieties of the lives of slaves. So many had sad lives filled with hard work, the anger of their masters. Others were able to adapt or had good masters. But all lacked their freedom and all had amazing stories to tell. This book shared several of these tales in such an intriguing way, that I totally enjoyed this book.

William Clemens says

Inspired by the feeling of a lack of knowledge while I was reading 'Nigger Heaven' I thought I would try out some Chesnutt as he was a favorite of the female lead in the other book. This ended up being one of those books that I am surprised has not been more widely acknowledged or read.

The book is a collection of short stories, told by an ex-slave to the two white northerners who buy the plantation he used to belong to. Hired as their chauffeur he relates tales of the plantation, usually with some sort of moral, and usually to his own benefit. Told in deep dialect this book covers many southern folk-tales and beliefs of the slaves.

Once again, like with 'Nigger Heaven', I still feel like I don't know enough about the literature of the time or the history to really judge this book but I personally enjoyed it. The dialect can be a bit rough at times, and I never did quite figure out how some of the words should sound, but it didn't detract from the stories at all and really did help them feel authentic.

With the clever depiction of the ex-slave leading his employers to make choices benefitting him in the end, even though they were aware of his motives, and the attention to preserving the dialects I don't really know why this book isn't more well known and read along side of Twain and other southern writers. Highly recommended by me

George says

Picked this up from <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11666> on recommendation of Polly Shulman's The Poe Estate.

I find my review of one story from this at <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> applies to the collection as a whole.

Vasha7 says

What an amazing surprise! Kept me puzzling over the layers of ambiguity found in these tales, apparently comic dialect stories framed in the condescending voice of a white narrator (apparently the white readers of the original didn't always notice how Chesnutt was satirizing this narrator, and nodded right along with him); Uncle Julius, in the stories, has a variety of purposes for his storytelling: the one the narrator notices is a self-interested one (but he is maybe not always right about the self-interested motive he attributes); then there is the appeal to the sympathies of the narrator's wife; then there are subcurrents of connection to the land and the community-building role of magical beliefs and so on... The stories seem to be subversive on so many levels, although Chesnutt's own commentaries on writing them denies much of this subversiveness.
