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Of black Martinican provenance, Patrick Chamoiseau gives us *Texaco* (winner of the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize), an international literary achievement, tracing one hundred and fifty years of post-slavery Caribbean history: a novel that is as much about self-affirmation engendered by memory as it is about a quest for the adequacy of its own form.

In a narrative composed of short sequences, each recounting episodes or developments of moment, and interspersed with extracts from fictive notebooks and from statements by an urban planner, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the saucy, aging daughter of a slave enfranchised by his master, tells the story of the tormented foundation of her people's identity. The shantytown established by Marie-Sophie is menaced from without by hostile landowners and from within by the volatility of its own provisional state. Hers is a brilliant polyphonic rendering of individual stories informed by rhythmic orality and subversive humor that shape a collective experience.

A joyous affirmation of literature that brings to mind Boccaccio, La Fontaine, Lewis Carroll, Montaigne, Rabelais, and Joyce, *Texaco* is a work of rare power and ambition, a masterpiece.

Texaco Details

Date : Published February 24th 1998 by Vintage (first published 1992)

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Author : Patrick Chamoiseau

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From Reader Review Texaco for online ebook

Julia says

I had the fortunate experience of reading this sur place: I first opened the cover in Saint-Pierre, Martinique. In Texaco, Chamoiseau recounts episodes of construction and demolition that shaped modern, betonized Martinique. This book might be an essential to understanding the development of Creolism, or at least to the recent history of Madinina. It's unwieldy and long, but deserving of a second read and close attention.

Gala says

Un pur délice...poétique et mélancolique au cœur de Fort de France, un voyage intense...j'adore ce livre.

Regard poétique absolu sur l'histoire de la Martinique à travers de l'histoire du quartier Texaco...

Marc Kozak says

It would be so easy to compare this to Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude. So I will.

This book is very similar to One Hundred Years of Solitude, in that it is a story of the creation of a small Martinican town as it struggles against the craziness of the world around it, and the craziness of the people in it. The story is bookended by an urban planner arriving in the small village, essentially deciding whether it should be razed for a shopping complex, or allowed to survive. The founder of Texaco (and narrator of the book) presents her case to the planner in the form of the entire history of her family, how the town came to be, and why it is essential that it should survive.

It was interesting to learn about the history of Martinique, and how it progressed from the early 1800s. The bulk of the story is extremely linear, and it is done in such a manner that you feel like you are watching a time lapse video of the island, going from straw huts, to wood shacks, from abestos to concrete, culminating in running water and electricity. And that is the point of presenting the story in such a manner - the town's founder, Marie-Sophie, stresses to the planner that in this village lies the history of island, a memory too important to remove. It builds to a very moving finish, made even more so by the dispersion of actual history, people, and events.

Chamoiseau's prose is what he seems to describe as "vulgar", which in this case means frequent use of interjections, occasional references to body parts, and sometimes even poop jokes. He seems almost painfully self-aware of this fact, often apologizing in a very meta way about the ugliness of his writing, particularly compared to greats such as Faulkner and Proust. Which was really unnecessary, because it read as a very genuine account from a woman such as his narrator, charming, relatable, sympathetic.

If you're a fan of the quasi-historic novel, this is a pretty good one, and one that deserves more attention than it's received. It drags a bit in the middle, but it's great work by Chamoiseau, full of pathos and purpose.

Urenna Sander says

Madame Marie-Sophie Laborieux, born in the early 1900s, late in life to former slaves, Esternome Laborieux and Idoménee Carmélite Lapidaille. Long after her parents' deaths, she founded the quarter known as Texaco in 1950, outside the city of Fort-de-France, Martinique. Texaco, owned by Texas Oil Company, had subsidiaries in South America and in the Caribbean. On Martinique, Texaco housed large tankers on land near a mangrove swamp.

Prior to Madame Laborieux deciding to build on Texaco's property, like other poor Martinicians, she inhabited a hutch on the steep slopes, known as the morne, with dirt floors. As a young woman, she lived and worked for families, as a nanny or housekeeper in the city of Fort-de-France.

Middle aged, childless, and alone, Madame Laborieux no longer wanted to live on the hills feeling the fiery heat from the sun. She found land near the sea with a gentle slope, temperate winds, and the scent of herbs. This was Texaco; she thought it magical.

The watchman was not enchanted with her appearance on Texaco's grounds, nor was the owner. Madame Laborieux faced numerous expulsions from the property, but continuously returned. More families arrived and dotted the region. Like Madame Laborieux, they erected crude dwellings on stilts, made of tin, crate wood and asbestos, planted vegetables and fruit trees. Eventually the homes, although still crude, were built with bricks and cement.

In 1980, the Urban Planner, known as the "Christ," arrived to Texaco. Without electricity and plumbing, the city judged the property unhealthy and had decided to raze the area.

In her own words, Madame Laborieux, provides the Urban Planner her inspiring family history, beginning with her father, Esternome Laborieux, a carpenter by trade, born a slave and freed years prior to Martinique's abolishment of slavery in 1848. Convincingly, she changed the minds of those in authority, obtaining proper housing and utilities.

The author, Martinician, Patrick Chamoiseau, taped the late Madame Laborieux to write this book. Texaco, first written in French, won the 1992 French Prix Goncourt for Texaco.

Chamoiseau captured Madame Laborieux's history replete with her father's voice; a fascinating man. She revealed the quality of transparency and purity in her father and mother, Idoménee. And in Madame Laborieux's own story, you felt the sensitivity, suffering, sadness, passion, loss, lovers, longing, humor, and courage. Madame Laborieux was an indomitable spirit, a woman of profound substance. No doubt, she left an indelible impression on Martinicians.

I thought the run-on sentences, although at times poetic and beautifully written were sometimes annoying. This might have been due to Madame Laborieux speaking on tape, in Creole and French. I felt emotionally spent after reading the account of Madame Laborieux's history. I gave this book three stars.

Jim says

This book is a rare tropical flower that somehow landed in my musty library. It speaks to us in many voices, as the original was written in a *mélange* of mulatto French and Martinican Creole. It communicates to us not only in two languages, but in four narrative voices, the main one being excerpted from the notebooks of one Marie-Sophie Labourieux, recording her own words and the thoughts of her father, Esternome. Three other

voices are those of "Word Scratcher," alias Oiseau de Cham (a pun on Chamoiseau) speaking to "Christ," an urban planner; the same Word Scratcher's letters to his "Source," Marie-Sophie; and finally "Christ's" notes to the Word Scratcher.

What looks like a recipe for chaos develops with a logic and beauty all its own. At times, I was stunned by Texaco's poetry, which wells up from that strange slum named after an American oil company:

My head became a place of disorder. I had to hold it with my two hands until it all went away like fever shivers. My heart would jump over nothing. I had to stay in one place to hear it flailing and look for a remedy. I had the feeling I was shrinking, that I was less tall, less straight, less slender. Fatigue accompanied me on all my visits around Texaco or through City [Fort de France]. I ate twice-nothing (no longer finding any appetite in my still blood), and drank by habit or mechanically. I was getting old.

Just a page earlier, we have this threnody on the passing of time:

My memory was no longer so good as to remember yesterday. On the other hand, she did spend her time snooping around the attic of my life, scraping up charred bits of lost memories, scraps that would catch the eye of hungry rats. I began to *remember*, to live within recollections brought back by smells ... fleeting moments in the company of my Idomenée ... the air of City streets ... sounds from the Quarter of the Wretched ... sugar-apple smells ... a collier-chou ... hot coffee ... burnt wood ... a new shoe ... faces ... people ... gestures ... drops of water from an eye ... my life was but the bag of a syrian, a bag which was being shaken out onto the sidewalk. I wandered through its contents, choked by the dust of years. I would pull out of it (during a weak lull) such or such dead, dull, moldy object. which brought me nothing but inexpressible melancholy -- and that lightness which seeps into your bones to get them used to leaving this world. I stroked memories I suspected of being painful; I touched them with the incredulity with which one would pet a domesticated wild possum. My nails were yellow (not transparent) and I didn't feel like cutting them. I just used them to claw my way through books I could no longer read (but I had read them so much that just going over the torn pages with my nails stirred up a myriad of feelings which, in my poor twilight, raised a sun of pleasure beneath my eyes).

The translation by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov is responsible for much of this, but most of the credit goes to author Patrick Chamoiseau, himself a Martinican.

Texaco is easily one of the best books I have read this year. It is a phenomenal tour-de-force of recreating a woman's world, her thoughts and feelings, from the pen of a male. Never have I seen a comparable *geste*, as Chamoiseau would call it in his book.

Laurianne says

Très beau texte même si j'ai eu du mal à suivre après quelques chapitres. Il manque, à mon goût, quelques pieds de page pour expliquer les références créôles ou martiniquaises pour le lecteur non initié à cette culture.

Andy Gagnon says

Unreadable.

William2 says

A glorious work of world literature. This multi-generational novel is set in and around Saint-Pierre and Fort-de-France, Martinique. In the end it's the story about the shakedown of one impoverished "slum" or "shantytown"—Texaco—near modern-day Fort-de-France. The lives of the black people of Martinique are marked by trauma. At least half a dozen characters go mad during during the course of the novel. These are harrowing and riveting pages which are paradoxically rendered in a light and supple language, dense with description. The book never flags, which is astonishing, for 400 pages. It's maddening to witness the poor people of Texaco defending their sad hutches against a paramilitary SWAT team of eviction. The racial conflict between white industrial owners, ancestors of the original slave holding elite known as the *békés*, who are beating back black people, whose own ancestors were brought to the island long ago in chains by the *békés*, serves as the book's core irony. But the reader must first traverse 200 years of multigenerational epic before reaching that stunning conclusion. Written in French with Creole trimmings, *Texaco* was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1992 and published in English translation in 1997. I've begun to think of Patrick Chamoiseau as Martinique's Laurence Stern. Moreover, as a chronicle of a people dispossessed by Empire, the book reminds me of the best work of Louise Erdrich and V.S. Naipaul. The novel is literary fiction of a high order, rendered in a demotic that the translators have somehow miraculously caught in English. A miracle on so many levels, it's not to be missed.

Jesse says

This book was recommended to me by Junot Diaz, who I met at Changing Hands. So far, so good. Thanks, Junot!

Stephanie says

What a mash-up of a story! By the time I got to the end, I'd completely forgotten that the book had started with the arrival of the city planner, and thus the ending came full circle. In order to tell the story of Texaco, the main narrator goes back to tell her father's story, which also tells the story of Martinique from that point forward. The book is a pleasure for anyone who: has read other Francophone Caribbean novels, doesn't need a purely linear plot line, and likes word play and creativity with language. While it is a complicated narrative, interspersing excerpts from Marie-Sophie's notebooks and commentary from the urban planner and the "word scratcher," it is an excellent story that attempts to reproduce the storytelling rhythms of a hybrid culture.

Janet says

The life of a slum in Port au Prince, Haiti--you come to see it the way the residents see it, not as a hellhole, but as home, a place of dream and possibility. Chamoiseau's main thrust is in the tension of language and its implications, between the spoken Creole of the people and written, official, colonial French. This guy will win the Nobel someday. You heard it here first.

Jonfaith says

This jewel was found in an Oxfam in Reading during the winter of 2004. Fuzzy strands of reviews past crackled in my dozy brain as I hefted it. The hunch proved correct and I was overwhelmed.

I have since bought another of his texts but have yet to take the plunge. Perhaps a reread of Texaco is due?

Lisa says

A wonderfully rich and all consuming read. Chamoiseau's language is unique and unforgettable and though at times I couldn't follow his imagery, it didn't matter because the words, the prose was so lovely that I just enjoyed how he strung it all together. A great overview of the history of Martinique too - especially the plight of the black people who were struggling to maintain a grip on their land and their culture as changes in France so greatly affected their lives. Loved the main character, Marie Sophie Laborieux and her father, she so lovingly called My Esternome.

Here is an excerpt: "We whispered outside the door and together breathed the peace of the falling day. The winds which slipped out of City when the sun shone would return with dusk; they would pour in, loaded with sea smells, fold against the high hills which clutched Fort-de-France and meander between the houses, shaking the shutters; their salutary arrival after the asphyxiation had inspired these flowered balconies where one sat - out of the dust's reach - to gather one's dreams and breathe in the night..."

Tanya says

memory and ecological degradation in the caribbean

Yvonne says

I was recommended this book after I communicated -- to the umpteenth person -- my then-fascination with Aime Cesaire. Having then just read of his passing, I realized that I had never read him closely when required to in college. I promptly purchased and reread "Discourse on Colonialism" which I interpreted as a surrealist manifesto constructing a 'black identity' in resistance to Western European colonialism and hegemony.

This novel takes place in Martinique, Cesaire's birthplace and home. It supposedly mentions Cesaire, I haven't gotten to that point yet. What I have been enjoying is its fictional biography of the founders of a village by poor people who seized land abandoned by the oil company, Texaco.

After having read this book, I can't say I was that impressed. The evidence: it took me six months to finish. I was held captivated by the unusual for me language, the descriptions of fruit and food unfamiliar to me, and the conversations written in the Caribbean idiom. But, other than that, the narrative is hard to follow. The story meanders all over the place, it's not always clear, sometimes I don't follow the action even though I'm

enjoying the read.

The end wasn't worth the process. It was rather flat. I enjoyed so much more, for example, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. I finished that within a week.
