BOOK REVIEWS

By MILANA FRANK

Williams, Sherley Anne
Dessa Rose Morrow $15.95

In her first novel DESSA ROSE, Sherley Anne Williams, poet and critic, presents a tale of slavery, friendship and betrayal.

Set in Marengo County, Alabama in the summer of 1847, DESSA ROSE portrays the drama of a pregnant young slave woman whose participation in the revolt of a group of slaves being transported to their own sale earns her the name "Devil Woman." Captured shortly after the ill-starred uprising, Dessa's life is spared temporarily so that she can bear her child — a valuable commodity to her captors.

While Dessa awaits the birth and her own imminent hanging, fellow slaves engineer her escape.

Before long Dessa meets her benefactress, a lonely, down-on-her-luck white woman living on a deserted farm, turned sanctuary for runaway slaves, towards whom her feelings are deeply ambivalent.

Tensions evolve between the two women while they wage a campaign to bring in enough money to carry slaves to the free states west of the Mississippi. Partners in crime, the women begin a tentative but deepening friendship.

Chase-Riboud, Barbara
Valide (A Novel of the Harem)
Morrow $17.95

Barbara Chase-Riboud's new novel VALIDE deals with a different form of slavery. Riboud has painted the story of an American Creole, captured and sold into the harem of Topkapi during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid I (1774-1789). The young American became the Empress Queen Mother, or Valide, of the Ottoman Empire, and converted to the Islamic religion of her subjects. The book spans fifty years of opulent harem life, four Sultans, two wars, and Napoleon's disastrous Russian Campaign. It moves from Istanbul to the court of St Petersburg, from Versailles to the shores of Tripoli and the steppes of the Crimea.

Buckley, Gail Lumet
The Hornes (An American Family)
Knopf $18.95

Through the story of her own extraordinary family, Ms. Buckley gives us a fascinating, intimate look into "America's historic family secret," the black bourgeoisie: that network of families who for a century, from the Emancipation to the Civil Rights Movement, served as black America's ambassadors to white America. They established their own exclusive social organizations. They wielded influence in government, journalism, and education.

In words and pictures — photographs and memorabilia culled from scrapbooks kept by family and friends — Gail Lumet Buckley brings this world to life, enabling us to see how America's black middle class evolved, flourished, and, in time, waned in significance as a new black consciousness emerged.

Her story spans eight generations of Hornes and their ancestors. We see Lena raised in the rural South and in the Brooklyn home of her grandmother. We see her pushed into show business by her ambitious, unstable mother — from her first appearances at the Cotton Club and Cafe Society in New York to her departure (after a brief, frustrating marriage) for Hollywood, where she became the first true black movie star.

We see Gail herself, Lena's daughter, growing up in California and New York, visiting movie sets and nightclubs, spending summers in Europe, scarcely aware of her own blackness — a child of the black middle class and yet not a part of it. It is from this perspective that Gail Lumet Buckley writes about her family — about the Hornes and about the extended "family" of the black bourgeoisie.

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understand. I understand the richness, the independence, the fullness of what it means to be black. I never did quite understand what it meant to be called a nigger.

We don't call one another nigger anymore. Now when we are talking about us, we refer to "The Peoples" (not People singular, but Peoples plural). It's "Your Peoples," or "You all." "You know how you bee's sometimes," we'll say conspiratorially. Or when we are feeling that curious mixture of love and disgust, we will slowly shake our heads and say, "My People."

But I am not a nigger. Except now and then, at the most unsuspecting times, I am reminded that someone thinks that I am. The lowest common denominator in my life today continues to be the color of my skin. I am known by my race, not my face. I am defined by what I am not, rather than by what I am.

I am not colorless. I am colorful, full of the life, the suffering, the struggle to be all that I can be in spite of the oppression, depression and recession that I might have experienced. Colorful as I might be in 1986, I am yet separate and separated. I may be equal or even surpass others in character, skill, talent, intelligence, education, employment and income. Still I am known by my race, not my face. I am known as just a nigger.

THE AFRICANS

The biggest series ever produced about Africa comes to television.

This October PBS begins broadcasting "The Africans," a nine-part documentary series that explores just about every conceivable trend and issue that has impacted Africa throughout its history: nature, religion, colonialism, the slave trade, war, independence, and technology.

Program 1, the series premiere, "The Nature of a Continent," examines the powerful force of Africa's geography and climate, focusing on the effects of water, wind, and time.

Program 2, "A Legacy of Lifestyles," explores how African social organizations and lifestyles have been affected by the triple heritage of indigenous, Islamic, and Western cultures.

Program 3, "New Gods," asks how traditional African religions, Islam, and Christianity coexist and influence each other. This program explores the extent to which Christianity and Islam are becoming Africanized, examining their impact on African life.

Program 4, "Tools of Exploitation," Has Africa contributed more to the West than the West has offered to Africa? This program examines how Africa's human and natural resources have been exploited before, during, and after the colonial period.

Program 5, "New Conflicts," looks at the tensions inherent in the juxtaposition of three heritages, exploring ways in which these conflicts have contributed to the setting of boundaries, urbanization, the warrior tradition of indigenous Africa, the jihad tradition of Islam modern guerilla warfare, and nationalist movements.

Program 6, "In Search of Stability." Which forms of government have succeeded in Africa? Which have failed? Why? Examples are drawn from Ghana, Nigeria, and the Sudan. The program contrasts Islamic and Westernized military regimes and looks at examples of the one-party state.

Program 7, "A Garden of Eden in Decay." Africa has been called a continent that produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce. Topics include: how Africa spends its money; problems of inappropriate technology; communications systems; corruption.

Program 8, "A Clash of Cultures," examines how modern Africans reconcile contradictory signals from their triple heritage.

Program 9, "Global Africa," concludes the series with a look at Africa's relations with the rest of the world and at the continuing influence of the superpowers.

Next month in New Dawn — An exciting in-depth preview of this historic series by Shelly Moore.