COATES DEALS WITH LOVE, SLAVERY, MAGIC IN ‘THE WATER DANCER’

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REVIEW

‘The Water Dancer’ by Ta-Nehisi Coates. One World. 403 pages. $28.

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SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

At the outset of “The Water Dancer,” the first novel by Ta-Nehisi Coates (whose non-fiction books include “Between the World and Me” and “We Were Eight Years in Power”), Hiram Walker walks off Master Howell’s plantation in Virginia for the first time and feels like a man.

“Which was not to say I wasn’t one before, but I had never truly felt it. My whole life depended on me not feeling it.”

When he crashes a carriage into the Goose River, and somehow survives, landing a mile away, Hiram begins to realize that he has a mysterious power, a power of “Conduction,” that
is activated by memory, and can carry people across water, and, perhaps, from slavery to freedom.

As he watches his friends and family disappear, “carried off Natchez-way,” Hiram dreams of people who can “wash, feed, and dress themselves” and of “being able to turn to a woman for whom I got a feeling, and speak that feeling, holler that feeling, with no thought beyond me and her as to what that might mean.”

‘MAGICAL REALISM’

Hiram’s journey takes him from the decaying soil-depleted plantations of Virginia to the “Underground,” a group of African-Americans and Whites conducting a war against slavery and back home to free the loved ones he has left behind.

Coates’ debut novel is not without flaws. Even if, as they should, readers suspend belief for acts of “conduction” in a work of “magical realism” influenced by Toni Morrison’s iconic novel, “Beloved,” twists and turns of Coates’ plot often strain credulity.

In giving voice to his inner thoughts, Hiram often repeats what readers already know. And, at times, modern phrases – “lost it,” “Yup,” “lotta feelings,” “forget it” – enter the dialogue.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

That said, “The Water Dancer” is a powerful, evocative examination of slavery, memory, aspiration and resistance, with more than its share of memorable moments.

Reunited with Thena, his surrogate mother, after a long absence, Hiram tells her, as he bids her goodnight, to “Holler if you need me.”

Thena’s “only answer to this new information” is to resume her humming, before saying, as she walks out the door, “Missed supper.” “Missed more than that,” Hiram replies.

HUMAN CONDITION INSIGHTS

Confronted by an agent of the Underground, who has the law on his side, a bounty-hunting slavecatcher takes his hands off the “fugitive” he planned to return to the South, and fumes, “boy, if I were home I’d have you in your proper place, and break you good.” Turning to the White man, the agent retorts, “But you are not home.”
Most impressive, of course, are Coates’ insights into the human condition.

Feminism, he reminds us, is a natural complement to abolitionism. Sophia understands that Hiram wants her to be his. “But what you must get,” she tells him, “is that for me to be yours I can never be yours... I must never be any man’s.”

THE ‘LOVELY AND MEAN’

Thinking back “to the great university of slaveries and tasks, of women in overalls and the vast conspiracy to pillage half the world” built on plantation owners’ fantasies of knights and maidens, Hiram tells a friend he has come to believe that those, like himself, “who ain’t pure” – and know it – are more blessed than those who do “a dirty thing” – enslaving their own sons and daughters.

He has decided to choose “the everything, lovely and mean, right in front of him” over his own “wrath and regard.”

And these days, it seems appropriate to be reminded that a war should have been – and should be – waged not only against the Taskmasters of Virginia, and not merely to improve world, “but to remake it.”

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