



By the Light of My Father's Smile

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BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE engenders passionate, often conflicting, opinions. Some praise it as a long-overdue celebration of female sexuality; others are vehemently opposed to its basic tenants. Even some readers predisposed toward Alice Walker's views acknowledge that the explicit sexual detail in the novel may undermine its own message.

Literary merit, too, sparks debate. Lauded by many as brilliant, original writing, BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE has also been criticized for flat characterization and confusing jumps in perspective. Certainly, the throbbing talents of its Pulitzer Prize-winning author are not being called seriously into question. Yet, the threads of this work, in some ways more a parable than a traditional novel, may not weave together for everyone.

Celebrating the absolute usefulness of sexuality "in the accessing of one's mature spirituality," Walker focuses on the father's role "in assuring joy or sorrow in this arena for his female children." The story begins with an African American family from the United States living in a remote area of Mexico. The father catches one of this two teenage daughters with a local Mundo boy and beats her; his other daughter witnesses the beating. The rest of the novel investigates the repercussions. It is told mostly from the point-of-view of the deceased father, as he watches his daughters reap the consequences throughout their lives.

Ultimately, it is the Mundo way of life—considered "primitive" by Eurocentric standards—that holds out the possibility for reconciliation. BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE seeks to open doors—between parents and children; between lovers; between cultures; even, perhaps, from one millennium to the next. The subject matter is controversial, but few would probably disagree with Walker's underlying belief that "it is the triumphant heart, not the conquered heart, that forgives."

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