

Interview with O. Ajamu Jumal Author of *Spiritual Shackles*

Reader Views welcomes O. Ajamu Jumal, author of the fascinating historical fiction novel, “Spiritual Shackles.” Ajamu is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Ajamu. Would you please tell us the storyline of your new book “Spiritual Shackles.”

Ajamu: There are several storylines that weave themselves throughout the entire length of the novel. First, *Spiritual Shackles* is a historical novel webbed in the cultural, social and political atmosphere of the mid-20th century African-American community, a community of less than first-class citizens impatiently standing at the threshold of the second emancipation. “Shackles” moves to capture the earthy frustrations and raising tension that routinely stock the community and finds a voice in the colorful storytelling manifesting in bars, clubs, beauty parlors and barbershops.

There is an intertwining love story as ancient as papyrus scrolls and the stuff of fine literature, yet so common and everyday that it can be found in a short column on page nine of the daily newspaper.

There is the history storyline that moves the characters through the lives of some of the main players and most colorful characters of the times, Jackie Robinson, Dr. M.L.King Jr. Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Alex Haley, John G. Jackson, Miles Davis, John Coltrane et al, Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, Joe Lewis with more music from Nina Simone, Billie Holiday and on and on.

Then there is the plot line that through the lives of five *foster* children, children who by coincidence or destiny, are brought together in the home of a reclusive, beautifully mysterious woman, Mama Vye, who happens to cherish African traditional beliefs. With these beliefs imparted to her “divine children”, they move on to become courageous avant-garde players, challenging everything—including bedrock religion.

Written in vivid detail, *this book* is brutally honest yet *pridefully* uplifting. *Shackles* strips naked soul of a people like never before.

Juanita: What inspired you to write “Spiritual Shackles”?

Ajamu: The desire to take history off the shelf and bring it to life! To make history so exciting that people, especially young people, will snatch it off the shelves. As a high history teacher, it’s easy to

see how time fleets and how soon we forget. In passing, I asked the class if they were familiar with the music of John Coltrane? John who? Nina Simone? *Who?* Jackie Robinson Jack Johnson? *Jack who?* My inspiration for writing *Shackles* was to write a history full of these wonderful personalities, but with the feel of hip-hop cool. To accomplish this goal, I knew that the book had to be real, telling the stories through Black eyes, from the paradigm of a Black focus. The honesty of this approach is powerful, there's no backing off, *Shackles* keeps coming and coming and coming.

Juanita: Your novel is an in-depth piece of historical fiction. Would you please describe the setting, the time, and the atmosphere "Spiritual Shackles" takes place?

Ajamu: Without question, there are two major benchmarks in African American history, the first being the Thirteenth Amendment that emancipated Black from the ultimate crime of slavery, yet left them as second or third class citizens. This inferior citizenship was institutionalized in deed and practice long before being canonized in the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court's separate but equal decision of 1896. The second benchmark in African American history was the civil rights /Black empowerment movements of the 1950's and 1960's that got in the streets and pushed for full citizenship rights. *Shackles* is set in this time frame, when the building rage and anger over 90 years of status quo conditions was like magna filling the throat of a volcano. This then is the time and atmosphere. The setting for most of the story is in Pasadena and Oakland CA., I was born and raised in Pasadena and lived in Oakland while attending U.C. Berkeley. Taking my understanding from Alex Haley, it is most important that the griot/historian keep and oral or written history of events in his community first.

Still, *Spiritual Shackles* is a multi-layered, cross generation, episodic story that digresses into history and tales of the past so as to help bring the present into better focus.

Exploding out of dramatic images of unexplained church fires, Shackles stalks beauty parlors, barbershops and nightclubs; yet can abruptly disappear into rugged mountains and tropical rain forests while continuously blending music, dance and foods with suspenseful storytelling. The story is told through the eyes and energy of extraordinary families residing in both Pasadena and Oakland, California. The plot moves through the lives of the children as they grow into adulthood.

Juanita: Who are the main characters, and what are their contributions to the story?

Ajamu: First, the storytellers that introduce *Shackles*, CJ and Tulsa Jim, their characters set up the book with that earthy, down-home honest vibe that is a foundation stone for what's to come. And setting a trend for the other characters, these storytellers appear, disappear and appear again.

Next, the stories move through CJ and new wife Roxie and then to Roxie son and CJ's stepson, Stoney. They set-up an aware, get involved Black family. There's side characters like Lookie, who has his own special way of dealing with adultery. Then there's Mother Gentry, whose character sheds light on church and a color-struck hierarchy of a second-class society. The story then moves through Gentry granddaughter, Rachel and husband to be Stoney as they get up-front in the rights

movement. The character of Robert X let's the reader peer inside the Nation of Islam, while the Jon Turner character is a devoted Black Panther.

Part two, the story moves through the five, now grown children of Mama Vye.

Juanita: : Would you tell us more about Mama Vye, and her significance to the story?

Ajamu: Mama Vye's character is written as an enigma and she signifies the goodness of people, regardless religious beliefs. There are wonderful people on the planet and Mama Vye is one of them. She is the veiled Isis that is her beauty. We can't peak under a veil! Curiosity will make you shamelessly disrespectful.

Juanita: Did you derive any of your characters, or their experiences, from your own life?

Ajamu: The short answer, Yes! I guest at some juncture in my life, I could see a part of me being Robert X, CJ, Tulsa Jim, Rukia, Stoney, Ayisha and even the loud mouth at the jazz festival.

Juanita: Your story takes readers out of America and into other countries. Where do you transport the story and why?

Ajamu: This is an African American History. The history dictates where to take the characters and the storytelling glues it all together. The history of the cross Atlantic African Diaspora has many powerful stories so I tried in my way to bring them to light.

It is important that history connects people with their past. Two slave ships leaving the West Coast of Africa carrying members of the same family head west into the Atlantic Ocean, one turns north the U.S. and Caribbean and the other turns south to Brazil and the rest of South America. They carry the blood and culture of the same people, but kidnapped to different lands.

Shackles is a history book disguised as a novel, so its purpose is to document history. *Shackles* sheds the light of day on the Africans that crossed the Atlantic before the slave trade, a history that as been buried or ignored for eons. *Shackles* documents on the post-Civil War Confederates that migrated to Brazil so they could continue their tradition of life with slaves serving mint juleps. *Shackles* moves through Suriname, the former Dutch colony to make record one of the harshest forms of slavery ever to exist in the Americas.

Juanita: Would you tell us about the journey your story takes, through African American political, social and cultural life, plus the introduction of important historical figures?

Ajamu: Again, when teaching high school history, I at times throw out names and ask the students if they'd ever heard the name or who is, Miles Davis, Alex Haley, John Coltrane, or even Malcolm X or Dr. King. You would be shocked to how soon we forget and how little our young people know about these giants. So I put these guys and more giants in a history and added in enough spice to make the young people want to read. And "on" accident, they will learn their history, and love it!

Juanita: Ajamu, you have taught elementary, middle school, and high school history. Would you comment on your deep desire to teach history, and in particular African American history –? Why is it so important to you?

Ajamu: As early as I can remember, history was not only my favorite school subject, it was a very enjoyable hobby. My friends knew I was crazy, but I could sit and history with a passion most associate with a then \$1.99 ‘skin book’. I took to history like heat to flame. After reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X, my thirst for African American history and literature was insatiable. I read everything I could get my hands on from the Harlem Renaissance, next Ellison, Wright, Baldwin and David Bradley. Then, the histories of Lerone Bennett, Chancellor Williams, Cheikh A. Diop, Dr. Henry Clark and John G. Jackson...And the sociology of E. Franklin Frazier amongst others. When I started teaching history (in a public school district), it was like getting paid for doing something you enjoy, but not for free, I needed the money!

In Shackles, I purposely chose pieces of African American history to research and expose that were buried or forgotten, such as the Haitian troops that fought in the American Revolution. And as a historian, there is nothing more important than shining the spotlight on ones own history, that as you say, “*is more often than not, suppressed, altered, and tucked away in the deep recesses of history books*”.

Juanita: What are the themes you touch on in “Spiritual Shackles”?

Ajamu: A bunch, but the obvious theme is religion, its positives and negatives as portrayed in the characters such as Reverend Red, Pastor Mack and Rondell as *Shackles* Christian ambassadors, while Malcolm X, Robert X And Muhammad Ali were some of the Muslim characters. Mama Vye was steeped in traditional African beliefs based on the Yoruba religion and Stoney, CJ and John G. Jackson represented people and characters that had no particular religion or even doubted God altogether.

Juanita: What are you ultimately trying to convey with “Spiritual Shackles”?

Ajamu: Throw off the shackles find the goodness in your soul, Love wins, love save the planet from a path to destruction.

Juanita: Ajamu, what type of research did you undergo in preparation for writing your book?

Ajamu: A lifetime of stuff. Lots of reading, library (now online) research, and oral interviews. Travel, education, observing people and doing some stupid stuff! Fortunately, I survived.

Juanita: Were you thinking of a particular reading audience when you wrote your book? Who do you envision reading it today?

Ajamu: Shackles is for everyone, but the core audience is African-Americans from year fifteen to one hundred.

Juanita: Your book is described as being “A fine blend of history, literature, and storytelling.” Would you comment on this, elaborating on the storytelling aspect?

Ajamu: Literature is the writing, good I hope. Alex Haley brought the term ‘griot’ into our lexicon. A griot is the oral historian, keeping the history of the village in an orally and passing it on in a story-form to the next generation. Storytelling is a tradition in much of the African American community, it’s just not recognized as such. But sitting around in the living room drinking and talking “shit” is storytelling to some degree, it just needs to be refined and touched-up a bit. Every year, I go to the elementary schools in the District and tell stories with my own spin, like the Three Pigs, Three Bears, Red Ridding hood etc. and the one the kids most love is Bare Rabbit, *Tar Baby*. I simply change the tar baby to the glue baby and it works just fine. It’s a funny story with most of the kids identifying with the clever rabbit.

Juanita: Ajamu, how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Ajamu: spiritualshackles.com

Juanita: Thank you for talking the time to talk with us today Ajamu. “Spiritual Shackles” is riveting and gritty story that will certainly touch the hearts of all readers. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers today?

Ajamu: Since I didn’t know them, I broke all the three “no-no” rules of what today’s major publishers want. The cover isn’t right, too risqué or strange or both. It’s too big, thick and scary size for the casual reader to finish in a night! And it cost too much, \$28.00.

This is a history book disguised as a novel, the cover art is illustrations of the story, the size is because you can’t get enough, which makes the price at \$28.00, the most exciting, fun-filled mesmerizing laugh and cry you’ll ever get so cheap!