

# Hottentot Venus: A Novel

by Barbara Chase-Riboud

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## About the Book

It is Paris, 1815. An extraordinarily shaped South African girl known as the Hottentot Venus, dressed only in feathers and beads, swings from a crystal chandelier in the duchess of Berry's ballroom. Below her, the audience shouts insults and pornographic obscenities. Among these spectators is Napoleon's physician and the most famous naturalist in Europe, the Baron George Cuvier, whose encounter with her will inspire a theory of race that will change European science forever.

Evoking the grand tradition of such "monster" tales as **Frankenstein** and **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, Barbara Chase Riboud, prize-winning author of the classic **Sally Hemings**, again gives voice to an "invisible" of history. In this powerful saga, Sarah Baartman, for more than 200 years known only as the mysterious lady in the glass cage, comes vividly and unforgettably to life.

## Discussion Guide

1. What was the role of missionaries during this period in African history? How does Reverend Freehouse's influence on Sarah actually contribute to her remaining a slave, even though he legally "freed" her from slavery?
2. What role does faith play in Sarah's life? How does religion shape her and the actions of those who exploit her?
3. During her time in London, Sarah forms a strong friendship with Princess Caroline, a dwarf who is also on display at the 225 Piccadilly freak show. How does Caroline's death foreshadow Sarah's? How else is Sarah's posthumous fate foreshadowed in the course of the story?

4. Was Sarah right to be suspicious of Robert Wedderburn and his efforts to free her? How would Sarah's story have been different if she had rebelled against Dunlop and Caesar and cooperated with Wedderburn?
5. In the first chapter Sarah describes the reactions of some of the people who come to see her on display in Paris. Why do women torment her more than men? Why is pity more painful for Sarah to endure than jeers and laughter?
6. How do the working class people of England react to the Hottentot Venus? How does their reaction differ from that of the French intelligentsia?
7. What kind of relationship does Sarah have with Alice Unicorn? In what ways were their early lives similar? What are the paradoxes in their relationship?
8. Discuss the plight of women during this period in history. How does Sarah's marriage to Alexander Dunlop change her life? How does her position in society compare to that of Alice's?
9. How does Dunlop manipulate Sarah throughout the story? What power does he have over her?
10. How do the various characters (Dunlop, Caesar, Réaux, Cuvier, etc.) justify to themselves and the public their horrific treatment of Sarah? Do they all see her as less than human?
11. How does the changing of Sarah's name?from Ssehura to Saartjie to Hottentot Venus?rob her of her identity and contribute to the mythology surrounding her?
12. Sarah did not receive a proper burial until 2002 when the French government agreed to return her to South Africa. Why did it take 150 years for this to happen?

## Author Bio

Barbara Chase-Riboud won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best novel by an American woman for **Sally Hemings**. A widely-exhibited and acclaimed sculptor as well as a writer, her novels include **Echo of Lions** and **The President's Daughter**. She divides her time between Paris and the United States.

## Critical Praise

"Disturbing and heartbreaking. . . . Illustrates how racial cruelty can be tightly wrapped in a shroud of scientific reason."

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