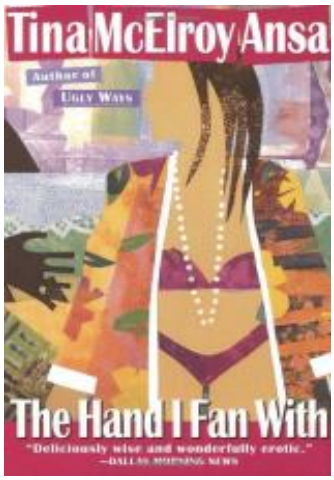
The Hand I Fan With

by Tina McElroy Ansa



About the Book

"Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things

--Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Dear Reader:

On my way to the airport while promoting my second novel, *Ugly Ways*, I said to my husband, Jonée, that I knew my next novel would be a passionate, erotic love story, something I had wanted to write since reading my mother's adult contemporary novels as a child. I knew the main character would be Lena McPherson, the eponymous main character from my first novel, *Baby of the Family*. But, I told him, I di dn't know whom she was going to fall in love with. Jonée gave me this incredulous look and said, "Now, who else would Lena fall in love with but a ghost?"

I had to laugh. *Of course*, that's who would be Lena's love: a ghost.

(In fact, for a while before I settled on *The Hand I Fan With* as the title, I called the novel "Lena's Love" for reference purposes.) How perfect, I thought, how appropriate for an American love story at the end of the twentieth century to be as tenuous, as ephemeral, as insubstantial as trying to love a ghost.

Herman--what a perfect name!--began materializing right then for me, almost as he came to Lena. For Lena, Herman was perfect--a ghost, a spirit, a vapor of a man who could do anything earthly and unearthly, become any substance, hone himself into any shape and not even break a sweat. As a ghost, he could be any age, have any experience, have lived as a man and a spirit, and learned a few things in the process.

Herman is indeed a prodigious presence in the novel. But Herman has already been around--alive and dead--some 139 years. He's got his stuff together. It is Lena who is still a pupil, still growing, still learning, still living.

But despite Herman's presence, *The Hand I Fan With* is and always was Lena's story.

In *The Hand I Fan With* it was important for me to explore the issue of how one lives as well as how one loves. Not what clothes we wear or what car we drive, but how we live a full life on this planet. How we live a spiritual life in the midst of plenty or in the midst of deprivation. How we reach the balance of duty to others and self-fulfillment. How attachment to things and fixing and doing saps us of the joy of living. How it is possible to be a mother without giving birth or without formal adoption.

For this is a woman's story of giving too much to others without thought for self. It is the story of how many of us women live our lives in a rush of accumulating and sacrificing.

For me, writing a novel is an organic thing. It is a natural process. I wanted the eroticism of Lena and Herman's relationship to grow out of their everyday lives, from the succulence of the vegetables they eat from their garden to the joy of putting their bare feet to the earth. I wanted Lena to rediscover her roots, her culture, her land, her self, her past. And Herman, who was a part of Lena's cultural past, is her loving guide on this journey.

Much of the novel evolved that way: One image, one thought, one revelation grew out of another. I felt at so many times in writing *The Hand* that I, too, was on a journey of self-realization. I could not write about Lena's inability to say "No" and not catch myself having the same problem. After writing the berry-picking scene in the book, I could not let blackberry season come and go without also marking the occasion.

A mighty flood did indeed sweep through the center of Georgia in the spring of 1994, leaving confusion, destruction and change in its wake. And I knew that Mulberry would have had to be affected by the deluge, too.

In dealing with the traditionally erotic, the sexual element of Lena's new life, I discovered I had to face my own issues of sexuality if I was going to spread Lena's "stuff" all over the page. This was my "stuff," too. *My pussy*was being put out there for discussion as well, and I figured my voice had better be clear and strong.

One reader said to me after finishing *The Hand*, "I know this sounds strange, but I missed Lena and Herman so much, wondering what they were up to now, out by the river, that I went back and reread parts of the book just to spend some time with them again." I love ripping and running with Lena and Herman myself. They're good people to spend time with.

Some folks tell me they read the novel in one night! I tell them, "Hey, slow down!" If Lena doesn't teach us anything else, she ought to teach us that. Slow down, let it get dark sometime, let's use up some of what we've got first before heading to the store. Slow down and see how you can share some love. Slow down! Or as Herman would say, "Time, baby."

Love and Peace,

Tina McElroy Ansa

Discussion Guide

1.Lena McPherson seems to have it all--the latest car, a thriving business, beautiful clothes, community stature--and so many people who depend on her call her "the hand I fan with." Yet Lena's life is strangely empty. What clues to this emptiness does the author give?

2.Although Herman doesn't "appear" to Lena until Chapter 12, he makes his presence felt much earlier in the book. What did you think of some of Lena's unusual experiences in the earlier chapters? Did they prepare you for Herman's arrival?

3.Ansa's novel is filled with vivid writing about nature--the Cleer Flo' of the Ocawatchee River, Lena's extensive property, her horses, etc. How does Lena relate to the beauty around her in the beginning of the novel and by the novel's end?

4.Certain images abound in the novel, those of food, mules, and water (Cleer Flo', Lena's swimming pool, her shower, the goddess Oshun, the storm, etc.). What did the use of these images symbolize for you?

5. The novel also includes many references to music--from old standards to the blues, to pop music of the sixties and seventies, to Salt 'n' Pepa. Did the use of music in the book help you to feel the mood of the action? What else did the music convey?

6. What lessons does Herman teach Lena--as a lover, friend, guide? Do you think Lena would have "gotten it" without Herman?

7. Like many women her age, Lena has made her life's work "doing for others": the young people in downtown Mulberry, elderly women needing a ride to the store. When Lena has Herman in her life, all that changes. How does the author treat Lena's transformation and the townsfolk's reaction? Discuss the place of duty and service in a woman's life, a black woman's life, in everyone's life. Does Lena's service make her a "saint"?

8. The novel is highly erotic and also deeply spiritual. Discuss examples of each of these aspects. What do you think the author was trying to say by juxtaposing and blending the two in the novel?

9. The residents of Mulberry--Cliona from Yamacraw, Chiquita, Gloria, James Petersen--are a colorful group of characters as well as important people in Lena's life. Do they remind you of people in your own life? Does Lena's relationship with them echo familiar experiences?

10. The author uses some very erotic imagery in the novel--Li'l Sis, Lena's honeypot, Lena and Herman making love on tabletops or in a coinfield. What point do you think Ansa is making in these scenes? How did you react as a reader? Do you think Lena's pussy really sings? -

11. Were you surprised when Herman leaves Lena? Had the author left any clues in the book to forewam you? How did you feel when it actually happened? What experiences and revelations does it uncover for you?

12. The novel ends with Lena making a discovery that will change her life. What do you think the author has in mind for Lena?

Author Bio

Tina McElroy Ansa is the author of the novels **Baby of the Family, Ugly Ways, The Hand I Fan With,** and **You Know Better**. She has contributed the essays "Postcards From Georgia" to CBS News Sunday Morning. An avid gardener, birder, and amateur naturalist, she is married to Jonée Ansa, a filmmaker. They reside on St. Simon's Island, Georgia. She and her husband are currently producing the film adaptation of her first novel **Baby of the Family**.

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