



## Hottentot Venus: A Novel

*Barbara Chase-Riboud*

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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.

## **Hottentot Venus: A Novel Details**

Date : Published November 9th 2004 by Anchor (first published 2003)

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Author : Barbara Chase-Riboud

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## From Reader Review Hottentot Venus: A Novel for online ebook

### Shala Howell says

I picked this book up a very long time ago at a bookstore that is now defunct. Chase-Riboud's novel tells the story of Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in London and Paris in the early 1800s. I knew going in that this book was not going to be a fun read, and my expectations were fulfilled.

Sarah's story is every bit as painful, horrifying, and gut wrenching as I feared it would be. But it also comes with a surprisingly hefty side dish of dull. I found myself skipping entire passages not because they were too gruesome to read, but because they were simply boring.

Other reviewers have commented that it was difficult to follow the dialogue in this book. Much of my boredom can be traced to the dialogue. It was the weakest aspect of the narrative.

First, instead of using quotation marks around her dialogue, Chase-Riboud starts off the dialogue paragraphs with a long dash. Turns out, punctuation matters. I got used to the substitution, but it still made the appearance of the story seem a little dull. Oh, look, it's another paragraph, that looks just like all the other paragraphs that came before it. Next time you open a book, notice how the quotation marks around the dialogue make the appearance of the text on the page just a little bit more interesting, and you'll see what I mean.

That's a relatively trivial complaint, though. What was more difficult was the fact that Chase-Riboud only occasionally identified the speakers somewhere in the middle of that long-dashed paragraph of dialogue. More often, she didn't. I found myself pausing more than once to try to figure who was saying what.

She also flouted the convention of having the next set of dialogue be from a different speaker. Often the next paragraph was more from the same speaker, but because she almost never told us that, I had to stop reading several times just to figure out who was talking. Not a huge break, not a large interruption, but still, it took me out of the story and anything that takes me out of the story gives me a chance to put the book down. Which I did. A lot. And each time, it was touch and go whether I'd pick it up again.

Perhaps the most important issue, however, is the fact that Chase-Riboud frequently uses verbatim quotes from scientific writers of the time as if they were dialogue (most notably in Chapter 18, where the entire scientific debate during Baron Culvier's lecture on Sarah Baartman consists of verbatim quotes from Jefferson, Lincoln, Hegel, Darwin and other 19th C writers. I suspect she does the same during the trial in the London section of the book.)

The quotes do present a wide range of horrifying thoughts on race prevalent in society at the time, which was likely Chase-Riboud's intent, but they don't work as dialogue. By burying the arguments of what was supposed to be an impassioned debate on the nature of race and humanity in the tangled English of Victorian academic writing, Chase-Riboud limits the power of her narrative.

Her story would have been better served if she had taken the same quotes and edited them slightly to make them more believable when used as dialogue in a heated debate.

All told, this was a good book, and it told the story of a woman whom I would otherwise likely never have

heard of. The first and final chapters were extremely well-written. If only the middle had kept up.

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### **Lisa Reads & Reviews says**

I have nothing but praise for this work. It is poetic, brutal, and empathetic--a reflection of the arrogance of the time, ghosts of which are active among us today. I picked the novel up in hope of understanding what it means to be a minority, mistreated, and enslaved--despite declarations of enlightenment and a prohibition of slavery. I can see why sensitivity to prejudices needs to be maintained, lest we forget how calloused, cruel, greedy, and dreadful people can be towards one another. Kind souls shine brighter, but are not without their flaws. I highly recommend this novel, important, and tragic because the Hottentot Venus endured such a life.

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### **Krysia says**

During a conversation with my mom today about Perry and the Eskimos, I recalled this book and wanted to list it so my friends on here would read it.

This book illuminates the dehumanization of foreign people by scientists and pseudo-scientists who used them as curiosities. A wonderful historical novel.

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### **Jennifer Mutters says**

This was an eye opener on one's woman life. As the reader, it made me feel pain for her and anger. It made me want to review how we were treated in the past and how we treat each other then and now. No matter the color of your skin you are apart of the human race and should be treated with respect. This might be a hard read for some but I do recommend it.

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### **Jeff says**

Moving historical, biographical fiction novel about race, ethics, and humanity. Although the ending is a little long-winded, it is a compelling character-driven book.

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### **Amanda says**

I believe the author set out to give Sarah Baartman back her voice and humanity since she was denied those things for hundreds of years. However, I found the writing style really lacking. The characters all had the same voice, which made following conversations difficult. I often didn't quite know who was saying what. Had the different pov characters distinct voices, I think the format of this book would have been excellent. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Great, important message executed poorly.

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**Ernest Sneed says**

ebook review : A historical fiction account of the life of one of the most important women of African descent of the early 19th century. Her life symbolized much more than the exploitation of the African woman's physical features for public entertainment. The book shows the impact of race, sex, and class on the life options for African women in the Western world. Other topics explored : genocide, slavery, legal status in society, poverty of women, and the humanity of the "least important " persons of society.

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**Eileen says**

Disturbing true tale of a time in history where it was perfectly acceptable to exploit a person publicly for money. Very well written, sympathetic and eye opening.

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**Dragonfly0628 says**

Sarah Bartman is a strong, intelligent woman who is put through the unthinkable for absurd and obscure ends. She is an inspiration.

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**Leena says**

Amazing story that exposes objectification.

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**Valerie says**

In 1800s Europe, a young African girl is put on display as the Hottentot Venus.

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**Lori says**

Well-written and incredibly thought-provoking. Throughout my reading of the book, I couldn't help but think about the exploitation of the scantily dressed women you see dancing in so many of today's music videos.

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**Lisa James says**

A fascinating book by the author of the Sally Hemings books... This was the novelized biography of The Hottentot Venus, a real "oddity" brought from her native South Africa to the UK in the late 1800's. Her life

was short, & what happened to her after her death was shocking to say the least. I'm thankful she was eventually returned to her native country & laid to rest.

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### **Kathy says**

Such a sad, sad story, with that overwhelming feeling of impending tragedy. This author is great but she picks such sad and tragic figures about which to write. I have read her previous book on Sally Hemmings.

In this book, she really inhabits her character. Though this was an historical novel, it felt very modern, but was not anachronistic at all. Despite its simplicity, this is not an easy read. First, there is the overwhelming sense of dread - you just know that no good is going to come of this. Secondly, there is the moral ambiguity that pervades every character, including the title character.

One of the more interesting aspects is the deadly passivity of the main character; she clearly has opportunities to escape her situation but refuses to do so. Why?

The author answers that question by highlighting the character's childhood, which was nomadic and free of Western concepts of ownership and/or territory allegiance, both of which would come back to haunt her.

This is also an excellent fable of the imperialistic takeover of the "dark continent" through the offices of a man and a woman.

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### **Mocha Girl says**

Hottentot Venus is a wonderful work of historical fiction by Barbara Chase-Riboud surrounding the exploitation and short life of Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman. Saartjie was a South African herdswoman who was brought to England in 1810 and exhibited in a freak show for seven years as the "Hottentot Venus." She was exhibited in a cage partially covered in "native attire" where thousands came to view her protruding buttocks and elongated labia ("apron") - a symbol of beauty and desire by her tribesmen. A distortion on the image of Venus as the goddess of love and beauty, Saartjie was heralded as the missing link between man and apes - thus propelling her as an atrocity to be gawked upon, repulsed and pitied by Victorian England and France.

Saartjie's experience in England lands her in a famous legal case in which abolitionists took her "partners" to court insisting that Saartjie was enslaved and working against her will. She, being an illiterate person, testified that she had signed a written contract with her "partners" and was being fairly compensated; however considering she died in poverty, the contract (if it truly existed) is highly questionable.

Immediately upon death at age 27 from complications caused by alcoholism, syphilis, and tuberculosis, Saartjie's body was sold and dissected to prove the theory that she was indeed the missing link and not human. Her remains (death caste, full skeleton, and prized "apron") were callously displayed and stored in a Paris museum for nearly 200 years and were only recently returned to her native South Africa for burial in 2002.

Chase-Riboud's in depth research and careful reconstruction of Saartjie's world is superb! The novel is lengthy, detailed and descriptive. It has a Victorian flair to it - especially in the passages where in depth

dialogue is used to convey the Englishmen's misguided, racists thoughts of the time. The author's imagination fills in the gaps and gives Saartjie a resonant voice that transcends time. A true work of historical fiction as it references the French Revolution, American Civil War, and historical figures like Jane Austen, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Charles Darwin. The reader empathizes with Saartjie, all the while pulling for justice to be served for her. This is a touching novel - one that will stay with the reader well after the last page is turned.

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