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BOOK REVIEW

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"Waiting to Exhale" Terry McMillan. Viking Penguin, \$22

`Waiting' for a love connection

McMillan's witty, gritty heroines mired in a single-minded manhunt By **Valerie Boyd** STAFF WRITER

Manhunters. That's what Terry McMillan's vivid, finely drawn heroines are in "Waiting to Exhale." Desperados on the man quest.

They're also four intelligent, educated, attractive, thirtysomething black women with too much going for them to spend as much time as they do weeping and moaning about the men - or lack thereof - in their lives.

Successful, sensitive Savannah knows what she wants - a man who offers her "respect, honesty, sincerity, a sense of humor, a sense of self, sensuality, intelligence" - yet she has a heartbreaking time finding him.

Bernadine is struggling to adjust to being suddenly single - with two children - and wrestling with her anger over the fact that she lost her husband of 11 years to a younger woman. A white woman. She'll never marry again, she vows, never take a man seriously again. Her philosophy? Kiss 'em, diss 'em and dismiss 'em.

Robin is a fake-fingernail-flaunting, cleavage-showing coquette who uses astrology, numerology and whatever else she can fathom in her desperate bid to get a man who knows how to dress, how to treat her and "how to do the nasty." She also wants a man who's not afraid of commitment and parenthood - before she's 36 and over the hill.

Gloria is the hard-working owner of Oasis, the hottest black hair salon in Phoenix. The only man Gloria worries about is her 16-year-old son. She uses him, her beauty shop, her civic work and her passion for food to build a wall of protective fat around herself so she doesn't have to deal with her feelings.

Ms. McMillan does an excellent job of juggling narrators in the novel, moving easily from third-person narration to first-person accounts from Robin and Savannah. Through her compelling, gritty language, Ms. McMillan gives the four friends distinct voices, never losing track of individual nuances, prejudices and attitudes.

But, let's face it: Terry McMillan is no **Toni Morrison**. Unlike Ms. **Morrison**, Ms. McMillan is not a master wordsmith, but she has her strengths: She focuses on contemporary African-American women struggling to make it in trying times, and she tells their stories in fierce, accessible language that'll sometimes make you laugh out loud.

The salty, profanity-laced language of "Exhale" achieves what Zora Neale Hurston - the acknowledged foremother of all contemporary black women writers - achieved with her 1930s masterpiece, "Their Eyes Were Watching God." In it, Ms. Hurston told the story of Janie Crawford's love quest in language that superbly captured black Southern dialect of the time. Similarly, Ms. McMillan does a wonderful job of capturing the audacious language of black women of the '90s.

Like the women of "Exhale," Ms. Hurston's Janie was searching for her identity through relationships with men. And she found herself in a beautiful love affair with a sweet man called Tea Cake. Unfortunately, Ms. McMillan's characters are still looking for Tea Cake.

And their quest gets a bit tiresome because a good man is hard to find in Ms. McMillan's fictional world. Is Ms. McMillan guilty of male-bashing? Only men who are guilty of the trifling behavior of many of the book's male characters will take offense. Or, as my father says, "A hit dog will holler." Wise men will be flattered that women spend so much time thinking about them. Wiser ones will view the novel, Ms. McMillan's third, as instructive.

A stronger case could be made that the novel is guilty of female-bashing - because it places such an inordinate value on men. Only Savannah's epiphany ("I can survive . . . I can feel good being Savannah Jackson, without a man") rescues it.

What about black women who are happily involved with men who consistently treat them with kindness and respect? Women who truly love their life's work? Women who love other women? Women who are passionate about a cause? Such women don't exist in "Waiting to Exhale." Sure, these kinds of women - like most human beings - are looking for a love connection, too. But, damn (as Ms. McMillan's characters would say). They don't spend every waking moment thinking about getting some. Love, that is.

To be fair, Ms. McMillan's characters have other concerns and interests, but the one they spend the most time talking about is men. C'mon, sisters, it's the '90s. Or, as Gloria's teenage son tells her: "Get a life."
Photo: Terry McMillan / Viking Penguin

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