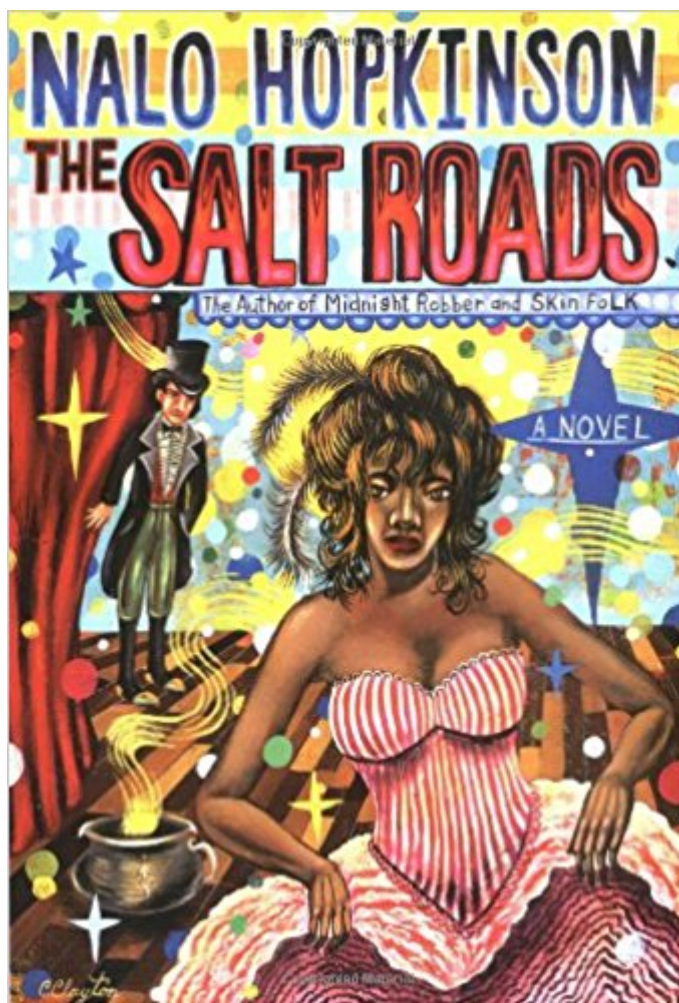


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# The Salt Roads



## Synopsis

- Hopkinson made her debut with "Brown Girl in the Ring (Aspect, 1998), receiving the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Now, with a body of work that invokes comparison to such writers as Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat, she is poised to claim her place in the mainstream spotlight.- "Skin Folk (Aspect 12/01), the author's previous book, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Collection, was named Recommended Fiction for 21102 by "Black Issues Book Review, and was named a "New York Times Best Book of the Year.- "Midnight Robber (Aspect, 2000), a "New York Times Recommended Book of Summer 2000, received Honorable Mention for the Casa de las Americas Prize, and was a finalist for the Nebula Award for Best Novel, the Hugo Award, and the Philip K Dick Award.- The author's unique style of magical realism will attract the same audiences that catapulted Toni Morrison's "Beloved and Edwidge Danticat's "Breath, Eyes, Memory (Random House, 1998) to bestsellerdom.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In beautiful prose, Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* tells how Ezili, the African goddess of love, becomes entangled in the lives of three women. Grief-powered prayers draw Ezili into the physical world, where she finds herself trapped by her lost memories and by the spiritual effects of the widespread evil of slavery. Her consciousness alternates among the bodies/minds of several women throughout time, but she resides mostly in three women: Mer, an Afro-Caribbean slave woman/midwife; Jeanne Duval, Afro-French lover of decadent Paris poet Charles Baudelaire; and Meritet, the Greek-Nubian slave/prostitute known to history as St. Mary of Egypt. Ezili becomes

entangled with Mer because the midwife's prayers helped draw her into the mortal world. The novel presents a reasonable, though undeveloped, connection between Meritet/St. Mary, the Virgin Mary, and the goddesses of Africa. However, it's not clear why Ezili becomes entangled with Jeanne Duval. This is because *The Salt Roads* is sketchy, its three storylines compressed; the novel reads more like three novellas incompletely braided. This is a shame, because each mortal character's life could have made a fine, full, fascinating novel by itself. John W. Campbell Award winner Nalo Hopkinson's first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, won the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. Her second novel, the New York Times Notable Book *Midnight Robber*, was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Philip K. Dick, and James Tiptree Jr. Awards. *The Salt Roads* is her third novel. --Cynthia Ward

Whirling with witchcraft and sensuality, this latest novel by Hopkinson (*Skin Folk*; *Midnight Robber*) is a globe-spanning, time-traveling spiritual odyssey. When three Caribbean slave women, led by dignified doctress Mer, assemble to bury a stillborn baby on the island of Saint Domingue (just before it is renamed Haiti in 1804), Ezili, the Afro-Caribbean goddess of love and sex, is called up by their prayers and lamentations. Drawing from the deceased infant's "unused vitality," Ezili inhabits the bodies of a number of women who, despite their remoteness from each other in time and space, are bound to each other by salt—be it the salt of tears or the salt that baptized slaves into an alien religion. The goddess's most frequent vehicle is Jeanne Duval, a 19th-century mulatto French entertainer who has a long-running affair with bohemian poet Charles Baudelaire. There is also fourth-century Nubian prostitute Meritet, who leaves a house of ill repute to follow a horde of sailors, but finds religion and a call to sainthood. Meanwhile, the seed of revolution is planted in Saint Domingue as the slaves hatch a plan to bring down their white masters. Ezili yearns to break free from Jeanne's body to act elsewhere, but can do so only when Jeanne, now infected with syphilis, is deep in dreams. Fearing that she will disappear when death finally calls Jeanne, Ezili is drawn into the body of Mer at a cataclysmic moment and is just as quickly tossed back into other narratives. Though occasionally overwrought, the novel has a genuine vitality and generosity. Epic and frenetic, it traces the physical and spiritual ties that bind its characters to each other and to the earth. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book struck me as well-researched, and the characters are sharp and clear and differentiated from each other. The focus is on female characters, specifically black females, but there are plenty of male characters who are also well drawn and interesting. Some of the characters are slaves,

some are prostitutes, one is an exotic dancer. All are in bad situations and must make ongoing lousy decisions about their poor quality of life. I felt bad for these women, that their lives sucked so bad, and I wanted them to climb above their situations and get into better circumstances. Didn't happen, though. Even the gods who are dedicated to these women experience misery, loss, and failures. There are no winners, only various degrees of losers. This became a bit hard to take, especially in the last eighty pages or so, when the heat is on, and if anyone is going to succeed at life, it's now or never. What bothered me about these stories is that I know the book is true to the lives of literally millions of women throughout history. By the time I finished the book I felt literally angry about the poor lives of the women and the fact that their men for the most part cannot help them much. Everyone in this book is crushed by social and economic realities that are larger than they are, and no one escapes. Some of the characters die, some of them experience temporary relief but then go right back into the meat grinder, and all end up beaten and defeated by their lives. For a long time I didn't like the fact that there isn't really a plot to this book, but by the end I decided it was a character study rather than a plot. Pick half a dozen women in history and follow the trajectories of their lives and show them smashed by the poor quality of their possibilities, and give women in modern times reason to be grateful that those days are long past us. In a weird way this is a feel-good novel; we can see how bad prior generations had it, and revel in the expanded opportunities for women of color today. I am a middle-aged white guy, so this was new territory for me, and I'm glad I took the journey. I certainly HOPE women of color have it better today than these women had it back then. I am inclined to try another book by his same author, hopefully something with a different story structure and story arc. I recommend this book to other white guys; it'll be an eye-opener, unless you read a lot of this kind of thing. Thanks, Nalo, for an unforgettable journey with interesting characters.

I've read this book twice, and found it powerful on so many levels. I won't summarize the story--that has already been done in other reviews--but want to say that what particularly moved me is the worlds Hopkinson chose to represent in her story, and how vividly drawn they are. Because I'm particularly interested in Haitian history and Vodou, I was thrilled with the sections set in Haiti, and fascinated by the way this writer wove in Vodou references. In fact, Ezili is a character here, and while I had some quibbles with her as a character, I was pleased to see that clearly this writer either already was quite familiar with Vodou, or did her research well. She also clearly knew Haitian history well, and I have to assume that the other sections (one based in France with the main character of Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's mistress, and another in Egypt) were as well researched. I was

particularly moved by Mer's story (in Haiti), and at first was frustrated everytime Jeanne Duval's story interrupted, but I wasn't far in before I also became intrigued by her story, which was also compellingly written, moving, and even bawdy. The historic detail is wonderful in this book, but that would be of little interest if Hopkinson wasn't able to create compelling, sympathetic characters, but she does, and she does it so well!! I was a little less taken with the part set in Egypt, but honestly, I believe that is a structural problem rather an issue of characterization. We don't get Thais story until about halfway through the book, and it's a jolt to suddenly go back in time and get another point of view character late in the book. I think the three strands and three narrators should have been woven together from the beginning. A word on Ezili, who is not a goddess (Vodou is monotheistic), but is a lwa (similar to a saint). Another reviewer had some problems with her portrayal. I did not, and I am a student/practitioner of the faith. There was, in fact, some lwa who were "born" during the Haitian revolution, and I believe Ezili ze roug is one of these (sometimes called Ezili of the red eyes). Also, while it wasn't entirely convincing to me, the way Ezili was floating through space and time and occasionally entered the bodies of some of the characters was an interesting take on the possession state, and the way Vodouisants believe lwa can interact with this world through possession. So I didn't feel it was disrespectful at all, and in fact, it made me think even more about possession states and the way the lwa interact with the world. One thing: I don't really think of this novel as fantasy. Magical realism perhaps? I'd compare it to books by another favorite author of mine, Jeannette Winterson. Her books are not considered fantasy (though many fantastic things happen, and in *The Passion*, for example, we have a main character with webbed feet), and yet have fantastic elements and a strong sense of historical detail. I find this book to be similar, and readers who do not usually read fantasy may still enjoy it. Finally, as a woman of color and avid reader of speculative fiction, I do thirst to see more diversity in novels. So this book, with main characters who were of African descent, and many of whom were also queer, was such a breath of fresh air to me! All this and a (fairly) accurate representation of vodou too? Amazing! Thank you, Nalo Hopkinson!

Because of this book I am sad right now. This book should have never ended. The joy and life I felt reading it stay on like an echo. This is a work of art. One of the greatest books I've ever read in my life. I am glad that I found it, and I thank the author for writing it.

I'd heard the author's name bandied about and picked up "The Salt Roads" as my first foray. I loved the various POVs the story was told in, strong, interesting characters all. The writing was clean but

lush. I will be reading more.

Wonderful storytelling, almost more like story weaving since there are multiple lives intersecting. The author really gets a reader into the heads and hearts of the characters. I love the historical references and characters as well as the reimagining/reinterpretation of historical events. I had a bit of difficulty on occasion with POV shifts, but there is such depth and beautiful writing here I couldn't even dock it a star for that. I will definitely be checking out more of Hopkinson's work

I have had this book for a while, but just decided to read it. I am glad I finally did. It was amazing.

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