

Novel challenges stereotypes

GREENSBORO -- The stereotypical images of black women have not died in American society, says author Linda Brown Bragg.

Pictured as the traditional mammy, the black woman often is seen as stong, spiritual, the source of all things -- a virtual Rock of Gibraltar.

For the soft-spoken but firm Dr. Bragg, this stereotype does not do justice to the humanity of black women. Many people forget that black women -- as strong as they are -- have fears and conflicts, that their hearts get broken, too.

As one in an emerging group of black women writers to break the stereotypes, Dr. Bragg, a member of the UNC-G faculty, recently has published her first novel, one that offers what she believes is a more complete picture of a black woman.

The novel, "Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder," tells of the odyssey of a black woman, Rebecca Florice Letenielle, in the early 1900s as she discovers in herself a power and becomes a healer. The 135-page book was published in early November by Carolina Wren Press of Chapel Hill.

"I wanted to tell the story of a black woman who was in the traditional image, who was strong, spiritual, but I wanted to tell it when the woman was not a saint," said Dr. Bragg, who teaches creative writing and Afro-American literature at the university.

"Racism and a history of oppression have given black women their strength," she continued. "Black women are strong, but when you recognize only that, you deny them the rights to being a whole person. We (black women) do tap traditional sources of strength, but we are also human beings who do bad things."

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, black women writers, Dr. Bragg noted, began writing about themselves as full human beings. A forerunner was Toni Morrison's book, "Sula," in 1973, followed by other such works as Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf" and Alice Walker's "The Color Purple."

"They (these women writers) break down the stereotype, but they also have a story to tell," Dr. Bragg said. "After all, that is what literature is about."

In her novel, Dr. Bragg focuses her story on Rebecca Florice, a character she modeled after a real woman healer in Greensboro.

"This friend of mine grew up around the real Miss Florice (a fictional name), and she told me stories about her," she said. "I got really fascinated. A lot of the book is fiction, but a lot is fact. When Florice makes the white man move on the bus in the novel, that's true. I became really

fascinated with this woman of great strength. I wanted my character to be a healer."

The novel opens in 1915 in New Orleans, where a young, married Rebecca Florice gradually learns she has healing powers. Even though Florice is from the Bayou country of Louisiana, where strains of Haitian voodoo rituals exist, she chooses to channel her special gift in the Christian church.

"I think we all can be healers -- we just might not channel the force," Dr. Bragg said. "That is also one of the other messages in my book, that we all can be healers. I use healing as a large metaphor when I say that most people can do it. What I wanted to show was an extraordinary person's humanity."

Florice makes her way to North Carolina, where she has relatives, eventually winding up in Greensboro to work at a black college. Going with her to Greensboro is Florice's new and lasting friend, Alice Wine.

"In some ways, my novel is a very feminist book," Dr. Bragg said. "The heroine is strong, determined, undefeated, self-aware. She also knows she needs friendship. It's in the tradition of women taking care of women. Even though she longs for a normal kind of marriage and family, she doesn't turn her back on her mission."

Though her life is dedicated to God, Florice also shows her faults -- why she isn't a "saint." Intertwined with this woman's goodness is her affair with a married minister, followed by her own attempted suicide.

When Dr. Bragg first considered writing about someone modeled after the real Florice, she thought the subject could be done as a play. But when driving to class at UNC-G one day, she said she realized it would work better as a novel: Doing extensive research into healing, Dr. Bragg spent five years writing the book.

In 1983, the manuscript for "Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder" won the N.C. Cultural Arts Coalition/Carolina Wren Press contest as the best book by a North Carolina minority writer. As the winner, Dr. Bragg received a \$500 cash prize and book publication of her manuscript.

One of the contest's judges, Dr. Jerry W. Ward Jr., chairman of the English Department at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, called Dr. Bragg's novel "a valuable contribution to contemporary Afro-American fiction."

He added that the novel "links the ineluctable power of lyric prose with sustained exploration of woman's consciousness in the 20th century, yielding rich, sometimes surprising, insights about 'drylongso' folk in the Black South."

"Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder" was Dr. Bragg's first serious attempt at writing fiction. Since the age of 14, she has writ-

ten poetry. Her first poems were published in 1960 in "Beyond the Blues," an anthology of black poetry edited by Rosey Poole.

In 1974, Dr. Bragg published her first book of poems with Broadside Press, "A Love Song to Black Men." She subsequently has been published in various periodicals, including "Black Scholar," "Encore," "Guilford." Please see page A9



Dr. Linda Bragg

THANK YOU

for your support and vote of confidence, in my bid to become Forsyth County Commissioner.

Mose' Belton Brown

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Beauty Talk

by Jean Ford

HOLIDAY BEAUTY THAT DAZZLES

Holiday nights are the most glittery, glamorous nights of the year. As the season rapidly approaches, it's time to start planning a look that lets us sparkle the night away... beautifully.

To offset that "little black dress," or to stand up to the glitter of sequins and the sheen of luscious silks and satin, our makeup will need its own gem-like brilliance to be in balance. Sophisticated colors, like the alluring ones found in Avon's "Firebird Silks" shade palette, will work well with colorful evening

finery for a dramatic, sensuous look.

And we're lucky! Our beautiful dark skin can have the most fun with colors that only we can get away with... luxurious colors that are stronger, richer and brighter.

A dazzling combination of the new jewel-tones will help make the eyes the most important feature, creating an effect of glamorous contrasts. Vibrant cheek color will balance the color intensity elsewhere on the face. And matching lips and nails in an exciting burst of color are an indispensable part of any glamorous look.

Experiment with your makeup, until you find the right combination for you. All shades should coordinate completely, and the final effect will add beautiful harmony to your holiday look. "Firebird Silks" are only available from an Avon Representative. If you don't have one, call 1-800-858-8000.

Ms. Ford is Manager of Black and Hispanic Markets for Avon Products, Inc.

