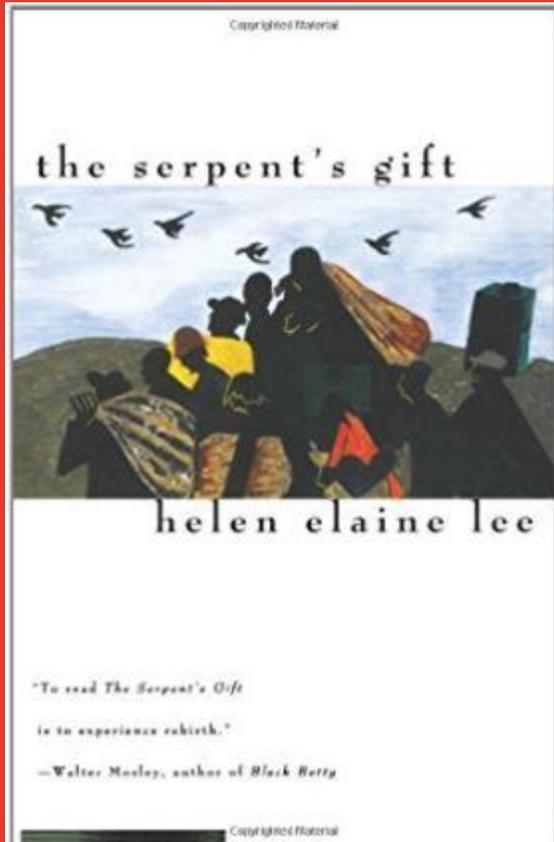


One of the most striking and heartening developments in American letters in recent years has been the flowering and attendant celebration of African-



American writers and of books that have introduced to readers everywhere people, situations, and the Serpent's events that have, hitherto, largely been ignored, denied, or unknown. Now comes Helen Elaine Lee's supremely assured *The Serpent's Gift*, a first novel that gives to us -- with the fullest emotional resonance, humor, and exultation in the novelist's art -- the intertwined stories of two families from early in this century to our own times.

Central to this haunting (and sometimes haunted) novel are the mothers, a study in contrast in strength and rigidity, Ruby Staples and Eula Smalls, and their children: LaRue Smalls, adventurer, storyteller, and chronicler of his people; his sister Vesta, intimidated by life from an early age, yet determined, valiant even, to hold her disparate family together; and Ouida Staples, a rare beauty who elects, in the face of convention, to spend her life with another woman. Each will face trials and challenges and sometimes be transformed, shedding like the serpent, an old skin, reborn by the art of invention.

From its opening pages, which recount in eerily compelling detail, the death that will bring these people together, to its almost pastoral conclusion, *The Serpent's Gift* creates a world that is

both realistic in its detail and lyrical in its presentation -- it is a superb, triumphant debut.