



A Free Man of Color

Barbara Hambly

Praise for Barbara Hambly's
A Free Man of Color

“A smashing debut novel. In lush detail Hambly recreates the world of the demimonde and the Mardi Gras balls, the plight of slaves, and the intricate social structure of a city that for generations has strictly adhered to rules unique to New Orleans. Ben is a wonderful character, strong and tempered by personal grief, smart and courageous.... A rich story with well-drawn characters, memorable action scenes, and a sense of place so strongly rendered that it surrounds the reader.”—*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*

“A vivid depiction of an exotic bygone time.”
—*The Sunday Oregonian*, Portland

“Magically rich and poignant ... In scene after scene researched in impressive depth and presented in the cool, clear colors of photography, Hambly creates an exotic but recognizable environment for January’s search for justice.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“A richly detailed, telling portrait of an intricately structured racial hierarchy, which was to leave its mark on everyone.”—*Booklist*

“A smashing debut novel. This is a rich, exciting story with both substance and spice that is sure to please any palate.”—*Star Tribune*, Minneapolis

“A fascinating look at a fascinating city in a fascinating time in our history.”—*The Purloined Letter*

“Barbara Hambly has crafted a most sparkling gem.... Readers are transported back to a distinctive time and place and introduced to a most unusual protagonist.... New Orleans vividly comes alive.... January is a fascinating hero, one who should be heard from soon again.”

—KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

“Subtly planting clues along the way, Hambly crafts a tale of intrigue set against a class-conscious Louisiana society and the many different definitions of ‘black.’ ”

—*The Detroit News*

“*A Free Man of Color*, Hambly’s first mystery, will add substantially to her acclaim.... This book is very good, indeed.”—*The Washington Times*

“An astonishing tour de force. Hambly’s re-creation of pre-Civil War New Orleans has the ring of eyewitness testimony. This tense and absorbing drama is full of clever twists, chilling dangers, and unexpected acts of redeeming grace. If you read only one historical mystery this year, let it be this one.”

—MARGARET MARON

“Hambly weds her vivid imagination with her gift for accurate and telling period detail. The result is a jewel-like novel that glitters with multiple facets. ... Unique.”—*BookPage*

“A wonderful glimpse of history with an intriguing mystery at its center ... Fascinating.”

—*The Montgomery Advertising & Alabama Journal*

Also by Barbara Hambly

Fever Season

Graveyard Dust

Sold Down the River

Die Upon a Kiss

Wet Grave

Days of the Dead

Dead Water

All available from Bantam Books

A
Free
Man
of
Color

——
Barbara
Hambly



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of the original hardcover edition.
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A FREE MAN OF COLOR
A Bantam Book

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For
Brother Ed

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In any work of fiction dealing with the American South, a writer runs into the problem of language and attitudes—specifically not only words and phrases but outlook, upbringing, and unspoken assumptions, which, though widely held and considered normal at the time, are appalling today.

The early 1830s were a time of great change in America. President Andrew Jackson's view of democracy was very different from the eighteenth-century vision of the country's founders. Civil War and Reconstruction lay a generation in the future, and the perception of blacks—by the whites and by the blacks themselves—was changing, too.

In New Orleans for most of the nineteenth century, it would have been as offensive to call a colored—that is, mixed-race—man or woman “black,” as it would be today to call a black person “colored.” Both words had connotations then that they do not have now; both words are freighted now with history, implications, and inferences unimaginable then.

I have tried to portray attitudes held by the free people of color toward the blacks—those of full or almost-full African descent, either slave or free—and toward the Creoles—at that time the word meant fully white descendants of French and Spanish colonists—as I have encountered them in my research. Even a generation ago in New Orleans, the mothers of mixed-race teenagers would caution their children not to “date anybody darker than a paper bag.” Light skin was valued and dark skin discredited, and a tremendous amount of energy went into making distinctions that seem absurdly petty today. An intricate hierarchy of terminology existed to categorize those of mixed race: *mulatto* for one white, one black parent; *griffe* or *sambo* for the child of a mulatto and full black; *quadroon* for the child of a mulatto and a full white; *octoroon* for a quadroon's child by a full white; *musterfino* or *mameloque* for an octoroon's child by a full white. (I've seen alternate meanings for *griffe*, *sambo*, and *musterfino*, so there's evidently some question about either what the records were talking about, or whether the people at that time used the same words for the same things.)

White Creoles, by the way, had an intricate hierarchy of words to categorize *each other* as to social standing and how long their families had been prominent in New Orleans society, so they evidently just liked to label