

New York Times July 1998

Taming It Down

By Kim McLarin

320 pp. Morrow

In Kim McLarin's absorbing and spirited debut novel, journalist Hope Robinson can't secure a toehold in a life where the ground is shifting. What she needs most to get a handle on is her anger. The daughter of a black Memphis domestic, educated on scholarship at prestigious schools, Hope, 28, keeps getting pinched where her many worlds collide. Her black friends frown on her Billy Joel tapes, her white colleagues want her to disavow the affirmative action push at the Philadelphia newspaper she's just joined, her black boyfriend wants to intensify her racial consciousness, and the white editor she has a fling with is sure to leave her for the perky blonde who personifies the focus of Hope's rage: those for whom "life has been a dance." Seeking identity "in a world that isn't just but just is," armed with wit and grit, Hope pursues stories and adventure from north Philly to Africa, searching for certainties while being stripped of illusions. Ms. McLarin renders Hope's tribulations with compelling vibrancy and a wry voice, giving a contemporary face to a theme that stretches from DuBois to Giovanni: "being black in America... [is] a full-time job." As with many first novels, Ms. McLarin chews more than one book can digest, and some topics--especially affirmative action and the dispiriting reality of present-day Africa--receive too few bites. Still, her narrator's passion and the vivid felt life details which render it authentic mark hers as a talent of significant promise.