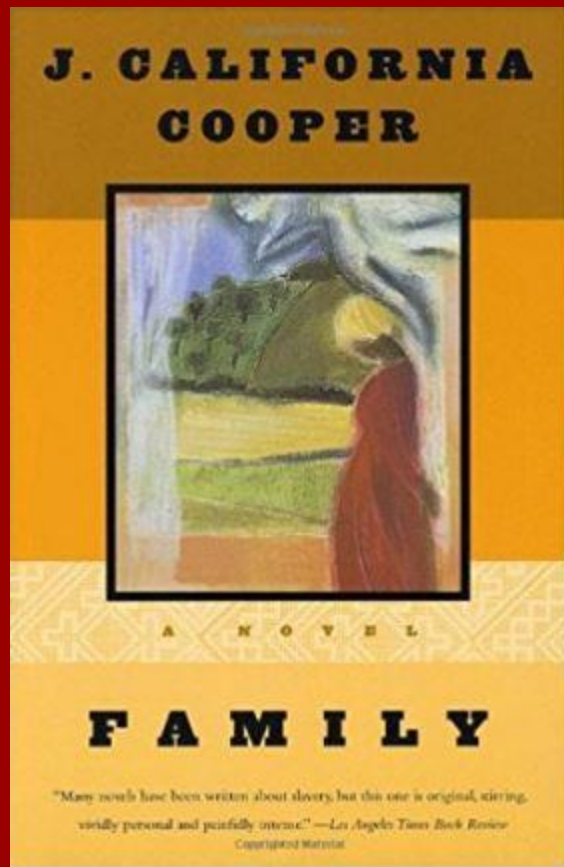


In this beautifully textured first novel by the author of the acclaimed short story collection *Homemade Love*, the history of



one slave family becomes symbolic for all slaves and slaveholders. Clora, the granddaughter of a slave and a slaveholder, refuses to accept her life as chattel and, as did her mother, escapes slavery by committing suicide. She had tried to poison her children first, but they survive and Clora's spirit narrates their story, beginning with her daughter Always. Although her siblings pass for white to escape, dark Always endures the misery of slavery including frequent rape by the slave owner. Stealing his gold to save for anticipated freedom,

she risks her life to learn how to read. When she and his wife give birth to sons at the same time, Always switches the babies, of like complexion. Her son grows up in freedom, while she raises the other as a slave--a masterful metaphor for the psychological bondage that slavery imposed on slave masters. Both young men survive the Civil War, and Always lives to see them prosper after emancipation. However, as Clora narrates, racism replaces slavery and humankind continues to suffer from its divisions. With power and grace, Cooper weaves the dialect, style and myths of the South into a portrait of the hell that was slavery.