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Literary

A Land Without Sin
Paula Huston
Slant Publishing
978-1-62032-658-9
(August 1, 2013)

Narrator Eva tells her story with bold determination and a brashly cynical voice that juxtaposes luminously the compassionate message of the novel.

Paula Huston's lush language, flowing dialogue, and the protagonist's fresh narrative voice all weave together to form this Conradesque story of our faith in each other. While at first a dark and dangerous story of a hardened traveler, *A Land Without Sin* is ultimately a novel about the beauty of the human soul—essentially a counterargument to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

Under the guise of a job as an assistant to an anthropologist studying the Maya, photojournalist Eva Kovic enters Guatemala in search of her brother, Stefan, who has disappeared from a church, having become a priest following a family tragedy twenty years previous. In 1993, the country is on the brink of a revolution, and Eva can trust no one with the details of her secret mission, especially her boss, Jan, who has an ulterior motive of his own: to remove his family from the danger of the impending civil war.

Eva narrates her story with bold determination and an outlook so brash and cynical "you could chill a six-pack if you put it next to [her] heart." Eva's skepticism perfectly juxtaposes Stefan's unwavering faith. That they understand each other's beliefs and are united by their childhood experiences makes them a strikingly human pair. Driven by the need to save the other and to solve the mystery of their grandfather's death two decades earlier, the siblings' journey reveals that "things are never what you'd planned on. Instead, they startle you into tears or knock you sideways with how beautiful they are, showing you you've never got it straight, no matter how many facts you string together."

The mystery of their history and Stefan's disappearance drives the plot forward, but it is ultimately the relationships that form through Eva's journey that makes for the meat of the story:

Jan’s dying wife helps Eva to comprehend her brother’s motives; Jan provides Eva with a silent understanding of familial love; and a guide named Jet restores her faith in the human capacity for compassion. Each character is unique and whole, and each contributes to the world of the book.

And this world—that of the Lacandon jungles of Central America and the Mayan pyramids Jan and Eva attempt to decipher—is both gorgeous and terrible, illustrated beautifully by Huston’s elegant prose.

Aimee Jodoin