



A Promise

Antonio Roy

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Love transcends even the horrors of war in this culturally attuned new novel.

War creates victims on all sides, but love can serve as a grounding force even in the midst of intense hatred. Antonio Roy's *A Promise* tells the story of a Muslim man trying to fulfill the promises he made to his Christian lover during a religious war. His triumphs and failures create an intense tale that is both disturbing and gripping.

Rami is a young Muslim man living in Lebanon during the 1970s. He falls in love with Dalal, a Maronite Christian, but their plans for marriage get derailed when the Lebanese Civil War breaks out, violently dividing the two religious groups and splitting Beirut in half. Rami joins the Palestine Liberation Organization as a matter of survival, but flees with his mother to Syria upon losing hope of ever seeing Dalal again.

For a relatively short novel, a lot happens in the pages of *A Promise*. The narrative spans more than a decade and covers several large changes in Rami's life. Numerous twists and turns keep the plot lively and engaging, making the book hard to put down. Some of the novel's earliest mysteries are connected with plot points at the end of the book, with clues scattered along the way, which provides an overall sense of cohesion. Occasional Arabic terms and historical contextualization make the setting come alive, as well.

The details of war within the book are gruesome, covering a wide range of atrocities including murder, mass killings, torture, rape, and human trafficking. Rami becomes a complex character before such activities. He seems to lack the hatred felt by many of his PLO compatriots, if largely due to his love for a Christian woman. His love for Dalal, though she's from the "enemy camp," makes it easier for him to acknowledge that innocence exists on both sides.

Still, Rami is a flawed protagonist. Even though he possesses a greater sense of morality than many other characters, he participates in violence. He is motivated by fear and survival, not hatred, which renders him somewhat more sympathetic. But he also avoids self-reflection, so engaging his character becomes a complex task.

A Promise is a project both literary and violent, with turmoil and despair permeating the war stories of its pages. It is fast-paced and culturally referential, and successfully illustrates the idea that love can survive amid terrible circumstances.

CAITLYNN LOWE (January 12, 2016)

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