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Clarion Review ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Bitter Sweet Chocolate

Sheila Sander
AuthorHouseUK (May 13, 2014)
Softcover $15.18 (128pp)
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This lifelike story captures the best and the worst of questionable matrimony.

Resiliency and courage take center stage in this personalized exploration of a strong woman's successful attempt to lift herself from the pit of despair. Inspired by specific events in Sheila Sander's life, *Bitter Sweet Chocolate* is the dramatized account of a young mother's journey out of a treacherous marriage.

Written in the third person, yet as candid as a first-person narrative, this short novel reveals more than a lifetime of diary entries would. Subjective and introspective, the book covers a realistically wide range of emotion—from accusatory and angry to loving and gentle. Supercharged with pulsing outrage and an overpowering will to survive, the protagonist in this story—referred to as Sheila—tells of a relationship gone sour. Despite the physical abuse and the anticipated financial manipulation, a powerful force emerges within this mistreated woman, enabling her to survive on her own with a dependent daughter. Feeling isolated in Switzerland, she must find a means to return to safety and stability for her child's sake.

A heartfelt purpose infuses every page, but the apparent haste with which the book was produced has brought the quality down. This promising novel is filled with multiple mistakes that a copyeditor should have caught, including awkward shifts in verb tense. The ending is unusual, depicting the heroine's nemesis—her ex-husband—in the hospital and in the afterlife, his spirit coming to terms with his cruelty and reuniting with his family. The transfer of focus from Sheila to her ex-husband seems a strange and even counterintuitive culmination, especially for a book in which a marginalized woman regains her sense of self.

At times, the domestic confrontations may seem petty and stereotypical, but in certain scenes, the severity of these disputes portrays an exhausted mother in extreme danger. In an outpouring of disenchantment, the descriptions allow a private look at what it feels like to be disoriented in a strange country with someone depending on you, even while surrounded by familiar people: "Sheila talked about her husband in a positive way and pretended to be a happy wife. When the others were playing at the beach with Emily, Sheila started to cry. She did not know why, but she jumped into the sea and swam away before anyone could see her crying."

Sander's debut novel is a quick read. The book will attract anyone who has ever felt alienated from a cultural group, especially at the hands of a controlling spouse.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (August 8, 2014)

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