



Girl of the Southern Sea

Michelle Kadarusman

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In Michelle Kadarusman's hopeful *Girl of the Southern Sea*, an impoverished girl living in Indonesia dreams of a better life.

Nia longs to go to high school. Her mother died giving birth to her brother, Rudi. Her father drinks, leaving Nia to take care of Rudi in their one-room shack in the slums of Jakarta. The family makes money selling banana fritters out of a cart, and Nia comforts and entertains Rudi with stories she makes up about her favorite heroine, Dewi Kadita.

After Nia walks away from a minibus accident as the only person who was not seriously injured, she tries to parlay the unexpected attention into a way to earn money for school. She doubles the price of her fritters, suggesting that those who buy them will also have a piece of her good fortune. But the accident and her actions have unexpected consequences. Drawing inspiration from her stories, Nia summons every bit of Dewi's imagined courage and determination to hold onto her dreams.

A stark setting combines with striking characters as they struggle to survive, often engaging in dangerous or unethical activities to earn enough money to live. The choices that the characters make are reflections upon questions of right and wrong in an environment where basic needs are never guaranteed to be met. Nia's life may not seem like it is in her own hands, but she proves to be a strong young woman, even if the challenges she faces are overwhelming. The novel does not offer simple solutions but instead wraps up Nia's story in a way that demonstrates her willingness and ability to stand up for herself.

Girl of the Southern Sea is an uplifting novel about hope and the power of storytelling.

CATHERINE THURESON (May/June 2019)

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