

Grambo: The True Adventures of an American Grandmother in Baghdad . . . and Beyond

Evelyn Dykes Chriswell

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Unknown (pp)

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Grambo is a heartfelt memoir that chronicles events in the life of Evelyn Dykes Chriswell, a woman deeply committed to her Christian faith. The writer tells her story, which she complements with personal photographs, as two parallel, skillfully interwoven narratives. One story begins in 2003, when Chriswell began her tour of duty as Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Manager for American troops in Baghdad. The other begins in 1950s Louisiana, a few years before the writer married Bobby Dykes, her first husband and the man who would inspire her to a life of adventure.

As Chriswell alternates between her two pasts, she reveals how she grows from a naïve Shreveport teenager who believed her “future was laid out . . . like a shining path” into a woman with an inner strength as powerful as Rambo’s brawn. She learns her first set of life lessons with Bobby, a restless Pentecostal minister. Together, the two travel the world, following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul from Paris to Jerusalem and the stirrings of the divine across the American continent as they set up pastorates and took part in the Pentecostal revival circuit.

At forty, the writer finds herself a widow with two young boys. She marries Bob Chriswell, who was as much a homebody as Bobby Dykes was a wanderer. They settle in Indiana, where she is finally able to put down roots—until Bob dies from prostate cancer thirteen years later. A disastrous third marriage leaves Chriswell “a poorer woman financially but a richer one for God’s wisdom.” At nearly sixty, her life comes full circle, to wander the world again, this time to the battlefields of Iraq, where she shares inspiration from her personal experiences to bring comfort to soldiers and supporting military staff.

The trajectory of the writer’s life is remarkable, and her capacity to survive so many unexpected and often difficult twists of fate is admirable. Indeed, these achievements are the most compelling elements of the story. However, this book is not for a general audience. True to her evangelical mission, Chriswell writes this autobiography to celebrate her relationship with God and to bring His word to a larger audience rather than “celebrate [herself], and sing [herself],” as Walt Whitman once wrote. Though each chapter begins with a passage from the Bible, the book as a whole is what Chriswell hopes her readers will “share with the ladies at church or in the workplace” or “study . . . with . . . family.” The writer’s target audience is Christian women; but given that so much of the book is about the three years Chriswell served alongside American troops in Baghdad, the book could also be of interest to veterans, men and women alike.

MAUDE ADJARIAN (January 25, 2011)

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