

Never a Woman

Richard Roach

iUniverse (Jan 22, 2016)

Softcover \$19.95 (328pp)

978-1-4917-8504-1

In this harrowing novel, a young woman survives incredible violence with her inner purity intact.

Richard Roach's *Never a Woman* is a story of intense violence and enduring love. Utilizing simple language to take on difficult topics, the story follows Kwamboka, an orphaned teenage girl in western Kenya, who must fight to live her life on her own terms.

The book is packed full of perilous situations set against the rural lands of Kenya, its seaside tourist resorts, and the bustling city of Nairobi. The narrator sweeps through these stories and landscapes at a near-frenzied pace.

Kwamboka's story is full of misfortune and danger. Already an outcast in her small rural village, the death of her mother forces her out into the world and puts her on a hard path to Nairobi, where she hopes to achieve her dream of a university degree. Along the way she finds herself in conflict not just with the hostile environment, but also with members of other tribes who are rivals of her own. Through small miracles Kwamboka finds her way not just into Nairobi but into a family as well. Even then, she must continue to endure hardship as she struggles against tribal conflict, academia, sex trafficking, and the cultural impact of the stigma of HIV/AIDS.

Never a Woman takes complex themes and situations and flattens them into a series of conflicts that are often resolved via deus ex machina. New struggles for Kwamboka arise suddenly, and after a certain amount of suffering, they are neatly fixed with solutions that arise just as suddenly as did the struggle. Kwamboka's kidnapping and sale into sex slavery is an unexpected plot shift that concludes shortly after her escape, when she happens to come across her kidnappers in the middle of a police sting while walking through the city. These miracle-like saves make for sometimes unsatisfying reading.

The narrative concentrates too heavily on dialogue that does not blend well with descriptive passages, and the story seems to lack depth as a result. Scenes unfold around long stretches of talking with transitional paragraphs in between, and both tragedies and joys remain insufficiently explored. This structure creates an awkward pace that is only emphasized by the surfeit of plotlines in the book. Some readers may be swept up by the excitement of the story, however.

Kwamboka herself is rendered in an over-the-top manner; she suffers trials, but always overcomes them because of her innate goodness. Throughout the book, Kwamboka is portrayed as a genius, a kind soul, a paragon of virtue, and an almost mystic healer whose plot arc takes her from abused rural teenager to doctoral candidate in the United States, though there seems to be little growth or development in her character.

The overall design and production of the book are extremely attractive, with a gorgeous cover and bright text on the front and back covers. The interior layout is nice and simple, and the text is easy to read.

Never a Woman deals with a stream of physical and emotional violence as a series of tales in which a young woman suffers greatly, but never loses her purity.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (April 11, 2016)

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