

Ribbons of the Sun: A novel

Harriet Hamilton

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Excited at accompanying her father to market day in Santa Maria, twelve-year-old Rosa's happiness turns to disbelief and dismay when she discovers that the only flower her father will sell that day is Rosa herself.

Hamilton, who died before the publication of *Ribbons of the Sun*, is the author of the children's book, *The Sunbeam and the Wave*, and a short story in the collection, *Stories to Live By*. She won a Peabody Award for her work as a writer, producer, and editor for K-PAL Radio in Little Rock, Arkansas. This was her first novel.

When drought dries up her father's flower fields and their major source of income, Rosa's father says he is taking her to the city with him. In spite of her grandmother's repeated warning, "no good comes to a young girl in the city," Rosa is delighted for she has dreamed of this for years.

However, the prophecy rings true, when her father sells her into service as a maid. Nevertheless, Rosa promises to work hard and make her father proud, believing she will soon return home. Then, one Sunday, the patron, as he is called, rapes her, and continues to do so, Sunday after Sunday, finally telling her, "Now you know how it feels to be used...In this life everybody uses everybody else. Nobody cares about anybody in this world."

Believing him, Rosa takes a knife and cuts off her braids, intertwined with the ribbons that marked her physical and spiritual connection to her village and the blessings of the sun. Braids and ribbons were for "people who lived with honor and family and tradition." Rosa believes she is no longer a child of the sun, and can never return home. Instead, she endures the abuse until she is thrown out onto the street when the resulting pregnancy can no longer be hidden.

After Rosa delivers her baby with only the help of a passing woman, she determines to give her infant into the care of a mission and to end her own life. But she is told that the mission will not take the baby without her mother, "If you want to die, that is your business, but this house is a place for the living. You and your baby will have to do your dying somewhere else."

Though some of the events in this book, like the mother's willingness to give up her daughter, may seem unexplainable and unbelievable, the author, who lived and traveled in Mexico for fifteen years, wrote from her personal observations of poverty and child abuse there. This undeniable reality overshadows the story even in its moments of hope—there are too many Rosas in the world. *Ribbons of the Sun* is, for Hamilton, an effective if bittersweet legacy.

PAULA SCARDAMALIA (December 8, 2006)

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