Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Rising from My Knees: Learning I Can Be Anything and More
Sandrah Hlatshwayo
AuthorHouse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

An HIV-positive woman rises above war and other hardships to write an ambitious and heartfelt memoir.

Born in Angola and now living in South Africa, new author Sandrah Hlatshwayo offers a determined young woman's view on overcoming adversity in her memoir, *Rising from My Knees* . Determined to show others that "dreams do come true," Hlatshwayo has persevered in writing and publishing a book that she hopes will appeal to other young women facing seemingly insurmountable personal difficulties.

Still in her twenties, Hlatshwayo has a young daughter conceived during her teens. She lost the child's father to murder, is HIV positive, and lives at home with her mother and siblings. She is not where she thought she would be at this stage of her life, but she is not about to give up. "If I don't achieve a part of the goals I have set for myself, I'd rather stop dreaming," she declares with infectious determination.

Hlatshwayo writes in the first person, usually addressing her readers but speaking sometimes to her daughter or to the child's late father. Her language and tone are casual and usually upbeat but occasionally more contemplative. She assumes a camaraderie and confidentiality with her audience, using numerous asides such as, "Shhh; I won't tell," "between you and me," "believe me," "I promise you," and "Am I the only one who …?"

Yet, Hlatshwayo does contradict herself often. A statement like "I'm addicted to visualizing myself doing extraordinary things" offers a very different perspective from "This is my life, and the truth is, I sometimes wish it wasn't mine at all." The inconsistencies are very human and understandable, yet following the various trains of thought often feels like reading a teenager's diary. Youthful poems, written in free verse and interspersed among the chapters,

reinforce that sentiment.

The author questions, answers, and often simply wonders, her youth and naïveté always evident, but her exuberance is generally refreshing. She mentions some difficult subjects but rarely provides more than superficial information about them. Living through a war, for instance, is covered in less than two pages, including brief references to death and destruction, years of severe shortages, and a parent's alcoholism. Tantalizing comments like, "Unless you have lived under the bullets and you have heard the sound of bombs, you don't know how it feels," fall flat when she does not follow through with the details. Elaboration here and elsewhere, such as in later, also brief chapters about HIV and depression, would make for a much stronger book.

Often disjointed and plagued by grammatical errors, particularly with verb tense, *Rising from My Knees* is nonetheless a heartfelt, ambitious attempt. Hlatshwayo has achieved her dream of publishing a book, and for that she is to be commended. If she maintains the passion displayed in this initial effort, she is certain to accomplish great things.

Cheryl Hibbard