ForeWord Reviews

The Black Ancestor
Albert Russo
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Leodine, a young girl growing up in the posh suburb of Elisabethville in 1950s occupied Africa, is shocked when she learns of her African lineage. Unable to reconcile her white identity with the existence of a black ancestor, she descends into obsessive self-analysis, struggling to understand her place in a world rife with racial tension. Set in the last decade of Belgian occupation of the Congo, this novel combines the intensely personal journey of self-discovery with the electricity of political discord, openly challenging popular perceptions of occupied Africa.

Though Leodine is content with the rhythm and regularity of her family life, she is plagued by the knowledge of her mixed blood. Suddenly, new friendships seem dangerous and blossoming womanhood becomes a threat—anything could divulge her secret. A driving tour through the province of Kivu brings Leodine face-to-face with the dichotomy of a lush African wilderness set against the glossy opulence of Belgian-built city centers. Amidst the complexities this world of opposition brings, Leodine must face the drama and discord of forbidden love and the thrilling fear of new political awakenings.

In Leodine, Russo creates a captivating and complex narrator whose voice is characterized by a tone that is methodical, almost scientific. This serves Leodine's matter-of-fact, self-obsessive nature well; her constant need to analyze past events and behaviors is best expressed through this withdrawn tone. However, Russo's forays into historical and political analysis—though thought-provoking—stray from this unique voice and instead, characters can become mouthpieces for historical soliloquies rather than full-bodied, well-developed characters with believable opinions.

The author of several previous books of poetry and fiction, Russo is a master with language. Russo's prose is vibrant and pulses with an energy that transports the reader into a riveting new world. Describing the African savanna he writes, "It was a strange symphony of hues in faded greens, sapped ochres, and pale yellows, as if some divine hand had dropped an acid drizzle every night while we humans and most of the animal world slept, washing away all of the original colours." By the same token, Russo's love of language at times gives way to an overuse of description, where emotions verge on the melodramatic. Although the ending is dealt

with rather swiftly, the vibrancy and fluidity of Russo's prose successfully carries the story to its end.

At its heart, *The Black Ancestor* is a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of an incredible period of colonial history. This book will appeal to any reader eager for an intimate and moving read.