



The Strength of Bone

Lucie Wilk

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This is a book honest in its brutality, though brightened by hopeful sparks.

The debut novel from seasoned physician Lucie Wilk is the stark tale of a doctor's search for personal redemption abroad; one which examines, in tones both sympathetic and clinical, the limitations of Western charity in troubled locales.

Dr. Henry Bryce is in Malawi attempting to escape his overwhelming guilt over his daughter's death and his failed marriage. But the doctor's bids to regain control are stunted by the harsh realities of his new home. Wilk, a physician herself, writes as realist—Bryce orders saline, modifies charts, and makes AIDS diagnoses without much outward expression. But Wilk also manages to honor the humanity of those troubled by circumstance, capturing both resignation and optimism.

Iris, a local nun serving as a nurse, becomes the knowing answer to Bryce's wild hope, and watches with frequent frustration as the doctor vacillates between his own demons and the ailments which plague the patients at hand. Said patients—including the mother of Jakob, a boy who both looks up to the doctor and reveals himself to be an older soul, and Juma, a charming young man whose ailments are numerous—provide the grounding for several side stories.

When an accident calls the medical team to Iris's home village, she'll have her own muddled family dramas to grapple with. The last half of the novel draws these colorful stories out, and their array is both troubling and vivid.

In village-centered chapters, there is a more thorough glimpse into the cultural depth of rural Africa, into the tradition-directed dynamics of family life, into sensuality drawn out of simple pleasures. Iris reconnects with the world she thought she'd left behind, and she is able to answer Bryce, in Africa's own voice, when a personal crisis leaves him wondering aloud about the nature of privilege.

Wilk aptly captures the bleakness of medical crises in Africa, including the extent to which the West remains impassive in the face of its continual deaths. While Bryce's despair is a constant, Iris's perspective, which finds and cherishes beauty in the strained surroundings, infuses the novel with needed color. Wilk's prose never entirely relinquishes its rational edge, and so many of the tensions which move the story remain necessarily unresolved.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2014)

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