

The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana

Maryse Condé

Richard Philcox, Translator

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Maryse Condé's *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana* is a gripping story in which a twin brother and sister grow up in the turbulent atmosphere of Guadeloupe. Exploring extremism, corruption, desire, immigration, poverty, and exploitation through the twins' stories, which are more and more divergent from one another's, the book reveals that pain affects each person in a different way.

The twins' parents are Simone, a sugarcane worker, and Lansana, a musician. After their brief affair, Lansana leaves to chase a musical career, and Simone cares for Ivan and Ivana alone. Ivan is strong-willed with little interest in school, and Ivana has a beautiful voice and loves learning. As Ivan grows, he experiences humiliations and arrests; he is influenced by criminal adventures and the teachings of Islam. The intense bond and desire between Ivan and Ivana is too difficult for either of them to break, even as they move from Guadeloupe to Mali to Paris in search of economic opportunities and education.

Rich atmospheres are established in each locale. Gritty, dank surroundings are contrasted with the clothes, neighborhoods, and homes of the well-off. This contrast proves to be a catalyst in Ivan's us-versus-them mindset; for Ivana, it becomes motivation to provide for her mother. The narrator sometimes interjects themselves into the story to warn against accepting things at face value.

The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana is a searing literary portrait of the exploitation of immigrants, the corruption of governments, and the powerful emergence of radicalism, with astute commentary on how these elements breed trauma, generation after generation.

MONICA CARTER (May / June 2020)

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