

We Meant Well

Erum Shazia Hasan

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Unsparring and compassionate, Erum Shazia Hasan's novel *We Meant Well* follows foreign aid workers and the communities they attempt to serve.

For over a decade, Maya worked for a global charitable organization, managing an orphanage in Likanni, a fictional African village that struggles with regional conflicts, poverty, and the exploitation of its labor and natural resources. She planned a gradual exit to spend more time with her family. But back in Los Angeles, Maya feels displaced amid wealth and everyday comforts. She finds herself yearning for Likanni's deprivation and chaos. When Maya learns that Lele, the twenty-year-old daughter of Likanni's tribal chief, has accused a French aid worker (and one of Maya's colleagues) of rape, she agrees to revisit Likanni to help diffuse the local outrage over the crime.

While the situation in Likanni is volatile, Maya feels a resurgence of purpose upon her return. Born in Bangladesh, she was adopted by a traveling American couple. Though she grew up as a "Brown woman in a white world," she has a distinct relationship with Likanni's native residents. They call her "Big Boss" with general affection, and they consent to her investigation of Lele's sexual assault charges.

The book details the varying motivations of aid workers with a keen eye and a sense of complexity. Some outsiders crave adventure, while others feel a "first-worlder's" desire to "craft the future into something better." Beyond them are bureaucracies fixated on organizational "brands" and the need for major donors. Intense, intricate tensions develop as Maya conducts her inquiry into Lele's accusations. Her objectivity is challenged as she tries to uphold the reputation of the orphanage and preserve the already tenuous trust between Likanni's villagers and her colleagues.

A novel of harrowing eloquence, *We Meant Well* explores compelling cultural contrasts and the ambiguity of charitable outreach.

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