

Mindy Uhrlaub: Publisher's Weekly Review



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Therese, the 11-year-old heroine of Uhrlaub's searing debut, lives quietly with her family in a lakeshore village near an urban center identified only as the City, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. One day, armed men arrive in her community, and shoot her father and cut him to pieces before her eyes. The soldiers take her mother and Felix, her nine-year-old brother and best friend, and burn the village to the ground. Therese herself is sexually assaulted by a man wearing a necklace made of human teeth. She manages to reach a United Nations unit and get medical treatment. At the UN hospital, Therese meets Robert, a rescued child soldier, who hands over a cryptic, blood-stained note from Felix reading simply, "I am here. Felix." Therese dedicates herself to pursuing the slim lead the message provides and reuniting with Felix. Uhrlaub's harrowing novel doesn't spare readers the grim reality of children harmed by sadists. Readers who like their fiction with a conscience will want to take a look. (Oct.)

Mindy Uhrlaub: Library Journal Review



In action-based prose, Uhrlaub's debut about squandered Congolese resources unfolds cinematically. Therese spends her childhood in a bountiful village, surrounded by ripening bananas and silver fish from the lake. When it turns out that the bubbles in the lake come from methane gas rather than fish, big business encroaches. Rather than using the gas to power the Congo for generations, white men hire militia to enslave the locals, extract the resources from the land, and send the money into orbit. Therese's stolid character blends the fears and aspirations of childhood with the maturity of a girl whose world has been swept away. Hemmed into a mothering role as she cares for her lost brother's friend, 11-year-old Therese's moving search for her family leads the way through a brilliant landscape of dangerous beauty amid displays of uncommon ability.

This straightforward account of the trail of pillage, rape, and murder left by multinational companies dramatizes a recurrent archetype in literature about Africa, as well as an economic failing too rarely addressed. Therese's shame in her dirty dress and her dignity as she treks across the land in search of her people make this novel a worthy contribution to the growing pool of migrant literature.