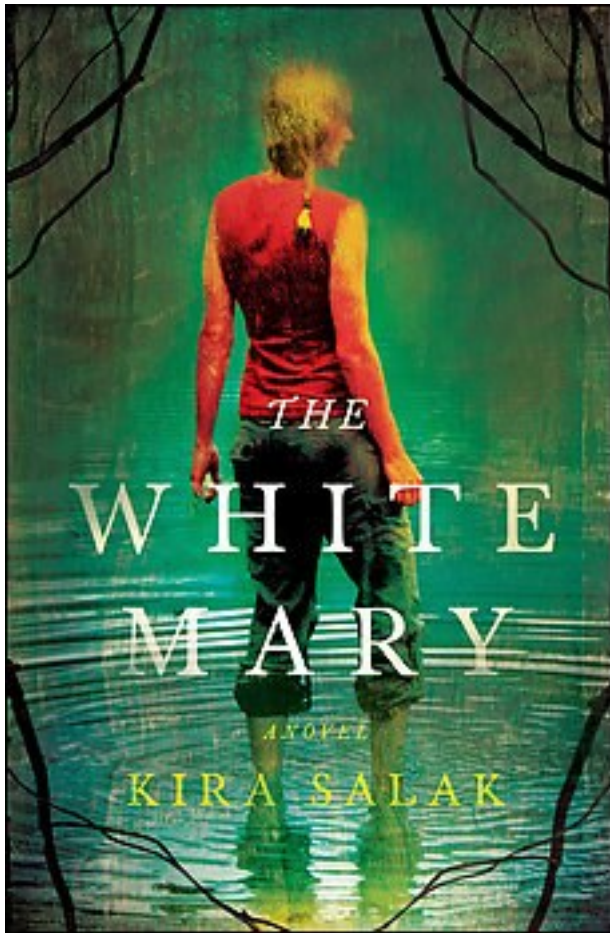


The White Mary



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著者:Kira Salak

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"Traveling is the ruin of all happiness!" wrote the 18th-century novelist Fanny Burney. It's a conclusion we might draw from Kira Salak's harrowing first novel, *The White Mary*, an account of a young woman's plunge into her own heart of darkness during a

journey across Papua New Guinea.

Returning to the United States after a nightmarish encounter while reporting on war in the Congo, Salak's protagonist, Marika Vecera, is withdrawn and unable to reconnect with her supernaturally patient psychologist boyfriend, Seb. She's obviously suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, which happens to be the subject of Seb's dissertation. But Marika's dissociative state dissolves when she learns of the suicide of her idol, Robert Lewis. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and bestselling author, Lewis was "probably the most famous writer and foreign correspondent of his generation," a man who "had devoted his life to relating the plights of those suffering most in the world." Marika worshipped Lewis, a man she never met but who served as a kind of absent mentor and father figure. What could possibly drive such a person to drown himself off the coast of Malaysia?

Marika begins researching Lewis's life, determined to write his biography. A visit to his sister turns up a disturbing letter from a missionary recently returned from Papua New Guinea. "Approximately five months ago, while engaged in evangelical work in remoter regions of the country, I came across an unlikely occurrence: a white man with a beard and glasses, who bore an exact resemblance to Robert Lewis, the writer and journalist. . . . As far as I am concerned, the man I saw in PNG was undoubtedly him."

Marika's research becomes an obsession that takes her to PNG. There she engages Tobo, a sorcerer who reluctantly agrees to lead this "white meri" -- the Pidgin term for "white woman" -- into the interior to search for Lewis, first by river and then on foot.

With its hellish journey through a spectacularly inhospitable landscape, *The White Mary* necessarily evokes *Heart of Darkness* and features more leeches than John Huston's film "The African Queen." Salak's descriptions of the jungle passage are compelling and dreamlike. Even stronger are flashbacks of Marika in Bodo and a wrenching, horrific account of Lewis's capture and torture in East Timor. Salak's own journalistic experiences -- she covered the Rwandan genocide and the 2003 war in the Congo, among other conflicts -- have armed her with heartfelt, if indelibly grim, insights into man's capacity for "an endless stream of the worst, most inconceivable acts of inhumanity."

The White Mary contains extremely graphic scenes, but they are never gratuitous, and Marika has the courage to ask the hard questions about such "diabolical expressions of the human soul." "Was it possible to see such things and be the same afterward? To live that 'normal' life? She didn't know. . . . 'Insanity' had struck her as the sanest possible response to such a place. The specter of not going insane was enough to haunt her."

But the novel's momentum is thrown off by Salak's often clumsy interweaving of these various narrative threads. Marika's romantic relationship with Seb is unconvincing and somewhat ludicrous, rife with platitudes gleaned from 12-step programs. Yet Marika's friendship with the sorcerer Tobo is depicted with remarkable delicacy and, in its final pages, helps her achieve something close to rapture. "It is always advisable to take darkness out of a person," Tobo observes, "but not to put it in." In *The White Mary*, Salak shows the courage of facing down that darkness and the inescapable price it exacts upon one's soul. •

Elizabeth Hand's most recent novel is "Generation Loss."

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