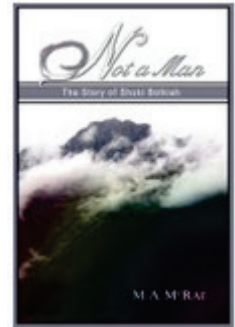


BOOK REVIEWS

NOT A MAN

by M.A. McRae



Outstanding for its originality and depth, M.A. McRae's *Not a Man* is an amazing work that will transport you to a foreign world. It will let you experience a lifestyle and culture that is most likely vastly different from any with which you are familiar.

This is not a story for the faint-hearted. If you read to escape to a fantasy world where heroes are gallant, heroines are beautiful and spoiled, and endings are always happy, you may not enjoy it. If you are reluctant to face the reality of man's inhumanity to man, or to recognize that some people enjoy sex in a way that others regard as perverted, it may shock and distress. If you struggle to recognize that those whose beliefs, moral standards and lifestyles many in our civilization abhor are, nevertheless, real people capable of kindness, compassion and love, it may enlighten you, but also disturb you.

I began reading *Not a Man* feeling more than a little uncomfortable. I expected to be repulsed by the story of Shuki, a boy taken from the slums and castrated before his tenth birthday. The idea of reading about men taking bed-boys and having anal sex didn't appeal. I knew it happened, but I preferred not to be confronted with it. But I promised the author I would read it, and I was pleasantly surprised to find the story fascinating and educational, as well as enjoyable.

I recognized immediately I began reading that M.A. McRae was no ordinary writer. She has the ability to draw the reader into the story – to bring her characters and settings to life in the readers' mind. She has a knack of portraying characters a reader may want to despise for their unpalatable behaviour in a way that compels you to understand and forgive their foibles and admire their better qualities. The people she describes are a product of their culture. We may not approve of aspects of their lifestyle, but we are drawn to understand how they came to be what they are and to appreciate and applaud their efforts to be empathetic and charitable.

I wanted to hate Hassanel: a man who could arrange the castration of a child for his sexual pleasure. I wanted to find him vile and repulsive in every way. But I got to know a man for whom this conduct was an acceptable part of the culture in which he had been raised and educated, but who had the capacity to genuinely care for Shuki and want to protect him.

Shuki found his way into my heart. The little boy from the slums who so feared a return to abject poverty that he would agree to an operation he feared, believing he could arrange his escape before it was done, used his charm and guile to secure his own future and to help his suffering family. When he was brutally raped and his best friend—who came to his aid—was killed, I confess I cried. It amazes me now to realize that I liked and admired Ben, and Elei too. These were men who used a boy for sex, so it astonishes me that I could find them anything but repulsive in the extreme. But M.A. McRae introduced me to human beings – good, kind, caring people who succumbed to temptation to perform acts, in private, that gave them pleasure and that certain cultures do not regard as abhorrent.

This book is confronting, but M.A. McRae handles sex scenes tactfully and with respect for readers. Her characters grow and learn, gradually realizing the illogical cruelty of customs such as casting women out as punishment for being victims of a man's criminal act and the dreadful long-term consequences of castration. We experience the pain and suffering of a eunuch. We share his fears. We grieve with him over his inability to experience sexual pleasure and to anticipate marriage and fatherhood. At the same time, however, we are shown the unique beauty and gentleness that results from castration before puberty. We are helped to recognize the compelling attraction some men feel to a beautiful eunuch. Their behaviour may disturb us, but we are unable to resist the urge to sympathize.

Not a Man is not light reading. It's a heavy-weight and gut-wrenching tale that will alter your perspective on sensitive issues and your view of the culture and lifestyle it describes.

This is an impressive and memorable work by an author with impressive talent, and one I recommend to readers with confidence that it may shock, but it will never disappoint.