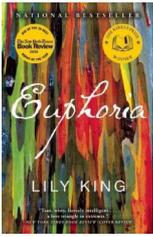


Euphoria



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This compelling novel does what few do these days?it discusses subjects and ideas with intelligence and feeling. In this case the primary subject is the new field of anthropology presented through the viewpoints of three field scientists in the 1930s. It's based upon the real lives of Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson although the novel's ending veers far from the historical record.

What a captivating novel this is--set in exotic Papua New Guinea, where hundreds of native tribes lived, speaking different languages with vastly different cultures and customs.

It hooked me right away. Was that a baby, the Mumbanyo just threw in the water? Nell, the character based upon Margaret Mead, couldn't see because her husband had broken her glasses. When she and Fen (based upon Mead's second husband, Reo Fortune) arrive back in civilization (of a sort), her eyes are malarial and she has welts over her body as well as bruises on her ankle. Two English ladies express shock at her appearance as they guzzle liquor on the boat.

So what does Nell do? She notices the pale skin of the white women, their accoutrements, the way their clothes accentuate their hips and small waists, in other words, she begins writing field notes on her own people and views them with a social scientist's more objective eyes.

At a Christmas Eve bash, Fen connects with an acquaintance, the anthropologist, Bankson. Fen holds a grudge against him because their tutor rewarded him a soccer ball while they were students together.

As the party becomes wilder and the ex-pats more inebriated, Bankson invites the scientist couple upriver and offers to share the Sepik River tribes with them. After all why should each Navajo have eighty anthropologists to him or herself, while Bankson studies this seven hundred mile river with all its people alone?

Soon a love triangle develops. Bankson who had felt himself to be a failure and had been contemplating suicide is intensely drawn to the married couple. He loves the intellectual stimulation of their talks, but also is physically drawn to Nell.

He takes them upriver in his boat and they reject the first few villages: not enough beach here, another village was expecting a raid, or the people had no art or music. But finally they found a beautiful village across a huge lake where they built their own Tea House Treehouse, and sent for their piles of luggage and furniture.

Fen takes part in the ceremonies, does the drugs and dancing and becomes immersed in the culture while Nell proceeds more scientifically. Bankson goes back to his Kiona village but counts the days until he can visit the couple again.

When he returns it's with severe malaria, and the two must care for him. After he's better, Nell receives a manuscript from a former colleague (and lover) and the three read it aloud and writer their critical suggestions on it. This manuscript inspires the three to look at their work in a new way, and they create a new theory.

Alternating between narration about the villagers and couple through Bankson's eyes, Nell's diaries and letters, and stories about what Fen is experiencing, we get a vivid view of the different personalities of the three and of their goals and dreams, both professional and personal. Bankson soon notices that not all is well between Fen and Nell, and this gives him hope. The novel builds to a thrilling climax, an event that has massive repercussions for their personal lives and the lives of the tribes that they have been studying. This book lets you travel through both space and time as it gives you a new view of what it means to be human.

Posted by Dory L. on May 2, 2016

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