

ZARA: A NOVEL

by Melvin Sterne

(Ink Brush Press, 2012. 235 pages. \$17.95. ISBN 978-0-9835968-4-4)

A review by Courtney Goff

The dark world of human trafficking and the international sex trade form the framework for a thrilling story of suspense and mystery in *Zara*, Melvin Sterne's true-to-life novel derived from interviews with an Indian prostitute.

Zara, the title character of Sterne's novel, was sold into slavery as a child in India and continues to endure the horrifying world of prostitution in her home country. This young woman becomes partnered with a police officer named Sharmilla Oberoi to solve the murder of a police commissioner, which leads to her deliverance from her miserable circumstances.

Zara starts quite slowly as Sterne weaves together the backstories of Zara and two other characters, backstories that become somewhat tedious as the reader waits for conflict to develop. The reader is first introduced to Paul, or "English," an American businessman who travels to India on a post-divorce sabbatical, ultimately embarking on an affair with Zara. Inspector Godbodde, a corrupt commissioner in the Mumbai police department, also appears early in the novel. Sterne makes clear that this man is no upholder of the law: he has alliances with criminals and makes a hobby of visiting brothels himself, even retaining a mistress "which his wife knew about" (9).

After the first few chapters, Sterne quickly ramps up the action by delving into the life of an Indian brothel and uncovering the harsh reality of a young woman in the sex industry. Zara's brothel is populated by prostitutes and pimps who maintain a tough exterior but are frequent victims of police brutality. In fact, the story pivots on the eighth chapter when police officers storm the brothel. The officers violently interrogate the women for information about Paul. From here, the Mumbai police force, with the exception of Sharmilla, becomes almost another character in the novel, a brutal animal more concerned with exerting authority than conducting an investigation. Policemen torture and rape prostitutes as

though they own them.

The relationship between Zara and Sharmilla forms the heart of this novel, eclipsing even the romance between Zara and Paul. In contrast to the male police officers, Sharmilla is tough and serious but committed to performing her job with integrity. The unlikely companions team up when Inspector Godbodde, who possesses a cell phone filled with incriminating photos of prostitutes and their clients, is murdered and the cell phone stolen from his corpse. In order to solve the murder, Sharmilla seeks out Zara, although Zara is initially distrusting and unwilling to cooperate. As they work together, Sharmilla is drawn into the sex-trade underworld with Zara as her guide and ultimately her savior, when the men responsible for the police commissioner's death corner the women in Zara's brothel.

Zara would be of particular interest to those seeking realistic accounts of the sex trade. Sterne's gripping description of Zara's world functions to draw the reader in without tempering the horrors of the setting, for example:

She arrived on a train, hopeful and frightened, with three other girls and the agent who had arranged her employment. By the time she reached the little alley, she knew something was wrong, but what could she do? There were four men waiting. They dragged her upstairs where she was beaten, stripped, tied to the bed, raped, sodomized, and made to do things so vile she would never tell another soul. (14)

This passage illustrates particularly well the barrage of emotions a girl in Zara's position must experience; she is leaving one difficult situation in the hopes of improving her life. Instead, she is thrust into an even more miserable situation. Sterne's portrayal shows the immediate switch from hope to horror, followed eventually by a concession to her lot in life.

The story of Zara's life—having been sold into slavery as a child and working as a prostitute—is based on a real person's experiences, which lends this novel authenticity and support for the incredible events surrounding the main plot. Sterne does an exceptional job of crafting a crime narrative around the truly heartbreaking problem of sex slavery,

without being overly preachy, a quality most welcome in such a book. However, the numerous scenes of torture and rape committed against the novel's female characters can be a bit overbearing, and I found myself having to take a break from the book after reading these passages. Due to the content, this novel is more appropriate for mature readers with strong stomachs.

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