

Leopard at the Door by Jennifer McVeigh

4 stars

An atmospheric and thought-provoking coming-of-age story set in colonial Kenya

In 1952, 18-year old Rachel returns from England to live with her father on his farm in Kenya, having not seen him or the country she grew up in for the six years since the death of her mother. She is expecting everything to be as it was when she was a child but, instead, finds that her father is now living with an intolerant, imperialistic woman named Sara who seems to rule the household. As Rachel tries to settle in, the political climate in the country she considers her home becomes more tense and news spreads of the vicious Mau Mau, a secret society intent on violently overthrowing the British settlers and killing all native Kenyans who refuse to take their oath and join them. With the British striking back at those who rebel against their rule in equally ruthless ways, Rachel finds herself struggling to fully support their methods. When she befriends Michael, a Kenyan man who works on their farm, she begins to see more of the other side of the story and must decide where her loyalties lie and how she fits in to this place she used to call her home.

I'm a big fan of books set in different countries and time periods, and this story did not disappoint with its accurate and fascinating portrayal of colonial Kenya at a time when the British still believed in their Empire and their superiority over native Kenyan people. The attitudes of English people at the time towards Africans are shocking but the author manages to portray them in a convincing way – some of the assumptions that the characters make about the differences between the two groups are appalling and would never be considered now, but they are unfortunately accurate in the time period and resulted in a horrific and violent conflict that claimed many lives. Quite a lot of the characters that Rachel encounters are well-constructed but extremely unlikeable and I found myself almost rooting for them to get comeuppance for their behaviour as I read through the story.

I particularly enjoyed the parts of *Leopard at the Door* that described the natural wildlife of Kenya, as the author writes in a very expressive way about a land with which she is clearly familiar. The descriptions of the animals and the landscape are vivid and atmospheric but also set a tense and menacing tone for the novel, with regular references to the literal threat of actual leopard attacks mirroring the threat from the Mau Mau that the characters on Rachel's isolated farm experience.

However, despite a strong start and engaging storyline, the ending of this book felt a little rushed for me and as such was a little unsatisfactory, with some elements of the plot left unresolved. Whilst her innocence was convincing and appropriate for her age, I also found Rachel to be a little too naïve at times and lost some of my sympathy for her as a result. Additionally, some parts of the book were quite graphic and described violent events in excessive detail, which some readers may find difficult to get through.

Overall, I did enjoy reading this book despite its few flaws, and would be keen to explore more stories set in this era or written by this author.

Daenerys

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