

Wake Me When I'm Gone by Odafe Atogun

5 stars

A beautifully written story about traditions and life in a small Nigerian village.

Ese is a young widow living in a tiny Nigerian village bringing up her young son, Noah, alone. Her only income is a market stall but through hard work she is making a success of her life despite her sorrow. Her main joy is her son who she is bringing up to be a caring and considerate man.

Her whole life is shattered when the chief of the village determines to make her one of his many wives. Ese married for love and cannot bring herself to become the chief's wife especially as many of the other wives' children mysteriously die as soon as they marry.

This act is the one on which the whole story revolves. Traditions state that if a widow does not re-marry within a certain time their children are taken away and looked after by a male relative. Ese's uncle is a cruel man who treats his children as slave labourers and she will do anything to avoid giving Noah to this man.

The book is full of traditions and stories which determine the life of the village. A particularly cruel one is that orphans are deemed accountable for their parents' death and are therefore left homeless and destitute. Noah shows his mother's spirit by befriending some orphans and tells his mother that he dreams of building an orphanage to house these poor children.

Eventually Ese has no option but to flee her village and find refuge elsewhere. She has to leave her son behind who becomes ill and dies and is buried. However Ese refuses to believe that her son is really dead. She is taken in by an elderly lady in a faraway village who says she has been waiting for Ese to come and not long afterwards a child comes to Ese who is the exact replica of her son apart from a missing birthmark. She rebuilds her life and begins to look after orphans as Noah had always wanted.

This book has a dreamlike quality, it is full of stories and traditions and it makes you empathise with Ese, a strong woman, trying to fight against years of rules that have been ingrained into her village. I particularly liked the introduction near the end of Professor Andu Abibe, a man who has risen in the world and comes back to encourage the villagers to rise up against the priests who have held sway for so long. It is even more amazing that he was an orphan but has overcome this to become a professor.

I read this book in one day, the writing simply flows and you become immersed in the story of Ese and her struggles. It shows how things can be changed if a person is determined to stand up against inbred ideas that are there simply because they have always been that way. A very uplifting book, I will look out for any further books by this author.

Dexter

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review