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A Million Shades of Grey

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

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In deceptively simple prose Kadohata tells the story of Y?Tin, a boy in a South Vietnamese village during the Vietnam war and his dream of being an elephant boy. This dream comes to an abrupt halt when after the departure of the Americans in 1973 and a period of near normality, the Vietcong capture most of the villagers, including Y?Tin. He manages to escape and find his two friends and the elephants they have been looking after but also finds that, as his father has told him, 'the jungle changes people' and the two friends unite against him. Meanwhile his heavily pregnant elephant Lady finds a wild herd to bond with, and after she gives birth he has to make the difficult decision to let her go rather than have her killed for food. Y?Tin also decides to leave Vietnam and the villagers who have become guerrillas, for a better future in Thailand.

There is considerable depth in Y?Tin?s story, about the choices he has to make at a young age, the fact that people change in different situations and that young men can kill at will. He sees one of his close friends shot for apparently no reason by the Vietcong. The complicated history of US involvement in Vietnam is clearly explained as is the consequence for his family and the village of the fact that some of the men of the village worked for the Americans.

There is an interesting note at the end of the book explaining what happened to the tribe called Dega who are almost extinct now in their native land, except for those who were lucky enough to emigrate to the USA. Vietnam is a war that has passed into history now and is studied as such and this measured, almost grey story like the colour of the elephants, will help a new generation understand a little more the consequences of the involvement of a great power in the lives of ordinary people. There is also the plus of Lady the elephant, a real character in her own right, with whom Y?Tin has a real bond. One small point is that on the back cover the copy talks of Tin not Y?Tin.

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