

Children's Book Review

McCormick, Patricia (2006). *Sold*. Brooklyn, NY: Hyperion. 264 pp., ISBN: 0-7868-5171-6 (hc). \$15.99. (Young Adult).

Reviewed by Greta Nelson, Teachers College, U. S. A.

In her note at the end of the story *Sold*, Patricia McCormick tells us "[e]ach year, nearly 12,000 Nepali girls are sold by their families—intentionally or unwittingly—to a life of sexual slavery in the brothels of India. Worldwide, the U.S. State Department estimates that nearly half a million children are trafficked into the sex trade each year" (p. 265). It is against this horrifying backdrop that *Sold* presents us with the first-person narrative of Lakshmi, a 13-year-old Nepalese girl who is forced into sexual slavery in India by her family's extreme poverty.

The opening sequence of poems describes Lakshmi's childhood life in a rural Nepalese community where she and her family inhabit a tiny, tin-roofed hut. The family earns a living from the crops that they farm on their small piece of land; however, all of the work is done by the women while Lakshmi's stepfather spends his days drinking and gambling. In between the terrible struggle of her daily chores and many deprivations, Lakshmi's spare verse colors this illustration of her life with the splashes of joy and love (her happiness over raising her pet goat, for example, or her intimate relationship with her mother) that make it not only bearable but, often, even beautiful.

Nevertheless, the tense equilibrium of this painful but manageable existence is destroyed. When the monsoon season's torrents decimate the family's farm, Lakshmi's stepfather insists that the girl must gain employment to help support them. He sells her to Indian strangers who promise her work in the faraway city, and Lakshmi is eager to help her family recover from the devastation that has struck them; however, instead of being employed as a housemaid, she finds herself trapped in a house of a different sort: "Happiness House," the brothel of the vicious old Mumtaz, where she learns that she must stay until she has earned enough money to bring her family out of debt. This itself turns out to be a futile pursuit as Mumtaz greedily withholds the money that Lakshmi earns in her traumatizing trade. As in her Nepalese world, Lakshmi fiercely holds on to the few beautiful elements that sparkle in the landscape of her new life, particularly to the relationships she develops with the other young women in "Happiness House," and to her dreams of escaping from it. Eventually, the opportunity for flight presents itself to the heroine who, through profound bravery and determination, decides to seize it.

In telling Lakshmi's story, McCormick explores the nightmarish reality of so many women in Nepal and India. By exposing this evil through the words of an innocent female protagonist (whose name is tellingly, the same as the Hindu

goddess and Mother of All Life), the author implicitly argues that the practice of sexual slavery is symptomatic of the backward state of women's rights (particularly those of poor women) in both India and Nepal. She informs the reader in her author's note that Lakshmi's story was inspired by her own travels in this part of the world and her conversations with young women very like her central character.

McCormick's poetry celebrates a certain notion of beauty (passive, receptive, decorative) that, if handled less skillfully, would have accommodated a habit of thought that reduces women to dependence and perennial victimization. However, in McCormick's artful hands, it serves to establish a powerful contrast with her narrative as an alternative, multicultural model demonstrating the inviolability of human rights.

This is a lovely, haunting, victorious and urgently important book that can serve as a powerful tool in the multicultural classroom and beyond.