



by Mirrianne Mahn
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Fiction

Issa */Issa*

review

Already nominated for a major debut novel prize (Lit.COLOGNE) in 2024, 'Issa' tells a compelling story of a journey of self-discovery intertwined with the stories of four generations of women and the legacies of colonialism.

It is 2006 and Issa is a reluctant passenger on a plane to her birth country of Cameroon, which she left aged five when her mother moved to the German provinces. Now in her twenties, she is pregnant, and her mother is convinced she will die in childbirth if she does not undertake protective rituals in her homeland.

In Cameroon, she stays with her great-grandmother Marijoh and her grandmother Namondo. Although it is a decade since she last visited them, she feels immediately at home. At the same time, she is aware of the gulf between her two lives. She worries that she will never really fit in anywhere or find her own path through life.

Issa's story alternates with chapters about the mothers and daughters in previous generations of her family. In 1903 her great-great grandmother, Enanga, is raped by a German colonial landowner. She gives birth to Marijoh and is banished by her father, but gets a job and then finds a husband to protect herself. When Marijoh is of age, Enanga's husband settles a debt by arranging for her to become the third wife of a chief who has aligned himself with the German colonists.

The First World War spreads to Cameroon, and Marijoh starts working as a nurse. She has a daughter, Namondo, who becomes the eighteenth wife of a powerful chief. Namondo walks out on him, but their daughter Ayudele (Issa's mother) later chooses to live in his household. Issa is raised by Namondo and Marijoh until she is five.

Ultimately, Issa completes the pregnancy rituals, Marijoh dies, and Issa and Ayudele are brought closer together. Issa embraces her two cultural identities and names her daughter Marijoh.

The visit to Cameroon allows Issa to engage with her family history and confront the certainty that although trauma can be inherited, so can unconditional love and strength in adversity. Mahn skilfully interweaves the fates of five women whose lives are separated by more than a century and yet are linked by colonial exploitation and the struggle for self-determination. 'Issa' is an empowering, urgent debut by a writer whom FOCUS Magazine named one of their 100 Women of the Year in 2021 for her political work.

Find out more here:

<https://www.rowohlt.de/verlag/rights/book/mirrienne-mahn-issa-9783498003906>

about the author



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Mirrienne Mahn was born in 1989 in Buea, Cameroon, and grew up in a small village in the Hunsrück region. She now resides in Frankfurt, where she is an activist and makes theatre in the fight against discrimination and racism. She works as a diversity development and anti-discrimination consultant and has been a member of the Frankfurt am Main city council since 2021. Her political commitment led to her being named one of FOCUS Magazine's 100 Women of the Year 2021.

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