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THE LIFE

## Here There Be Monsters

From Tibet to Congo, Kira Salak travels on the edge. Her first novel goes beyond it. BY MICHAEL FINKEL

■ YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T want to take a trip with Kira Salak. And more to the point, she probably wouldn't want you along anyway. Her expeditions are usually solo affairs, often dangerous, almost always uncomfortable, and frequently a hairbreadth from disaster. She's been caught in a coup attempt in Bangladesh, chased by rebel soldiers in Mozambique, held at gunpoint in Congo, and hunted by a Tuareg gang in Mali. She's survived malaria, dysentery, and cholera—and that's the short list.

It's far better to follow Salak vicariously, through her books

and articles (including many for this publication). Her prose is luminous, often deeply personal, and transporting in the pan-sensory way that only the best travel writing can be. At 36, Salak has been anthologized in *Best American Travel Writing* five times. Her 2001 memoir, *Four Corners: A Journey Into the Heart of Papua New Guinea*, was the *New York Times* Notable Travel Book of the Year.

Now she has written her debut novel, *The White Mary* (available in August). It's safe to say that you wouldn't want to travel with Salak's main character either. And vice versa. This 32-year-old journalist named Marika Vecera ventures, almost always alone, into the world's most dangerous places. A war correspondent, Marika is the type of woman who casually cauterizes a machete wound to her neck with a tent pole she's heated in her campfire.

The plot of *The White Mary* revolves around Marika's quest to find her mentor,

renowned journalist Robert Lewis, rumored to have faked his suicide and hidden himself deep in the pestilential jungle of Papua New Guinea. Led by a witch doctor named Tobo, she embarks on an epic journey across the island—searching for Lewis and unearthing her own painful secrets in the process.



Kira Salak, *The White Mary* (Henry Holt, \$25)

Marika's trip is harrowing, minutely observed, and utterly mesmerizing, all rendered in Salak's artfully unadorned, fast-paced prose—a style reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy, with an ample supply of his bleakness and violence. There are also shades of *Heart of Darkness* drifting through *The White Mary* (*wait meri* is local pidgin for

“white woman”)—both books are obsessive searches through inhospitable lands for a lost soul.

On a recent rainy evening near her home in southwestern Montana, Salak spoke with *ADVENTURE* about the pitfalls of life, spiritual journeys, and the joys of fried chicken.

**ADVENTURE:** *Papua New Guinea has been*

*the setting for two of your books, including this novel. What is it about the country that captures your imagination?*

**KIRA SALAK:** It's the most untouched place I've ever been. No roads. No way to access large parts of the country except by bushwhacking or dugout canoe. That's really appealing to me. And the tribal culture is so rich; there are more than 700 separate groups. The jungle is spectacular. It's very remote, very exotic, and very unfamiliar.

**A:** *I take it you're not a city person.*

**KS:** I like visiting them. Briefly.

**A:** *The last four letters of your protagonist's name, Marika, is an anagram of Kira.*

**KS:** That wasn't intentional. But for me, fiction is more autobiographical than non-fiction. I can hide more in fiction, but it also gives me liberty to go deeper into myself.

**A:** *In your memoir, Four Corners, you write that you were raised as a "strict Ayn Randian atheist." But you've recently studied with shamans in Peru. And The White Mary is full of jungle spells, village rituals, and missionaries. Is this novel covertly spiritual?*

**KS:** I'd say it's overtly spiritual. My intention was to explore an idea: how a

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person responds when something awful happens. We can let it defeat us—or not. My goal was to connect with people who are suffering, to acknowledge and validate their struggle.

**A:** *Your only sibling, Marc, drowned in a river on the Namibia-Angola border in 2005. You went to Africa and brought his ashes home. The White Mary is dedicated to him. Both of your main characters are dealing with loss—Marika of her father, Robert Lewis of his son. Was this book a response to your own grief?*

**KS:** I wrote the entire book not long after my brother died. It was like an obsession. I lived then in a tiny basement apartment in Columbia, Missouri, unemployed for a year. I didn't tell anyone what I was doing. It was a very private experience. I almost feel that the book wasn't so much written by me, but rather channeled through me.

**A:** *Did the novel emerge fully polished, or did it go through a few drafts?*

**KS:** I did some pretty intense revisions. I've never worked harder on anything in my life.

**A:** *What motivated you, at 19, to start traveling to far-flung places by yourself?*

**KS:** Growing up, I always had low self-esteem, and travel was empowering for me. By going to unfamiliar or even hostile areas, I discovered parts of myself I didn't know were there. It was a way for me to be reborn, in a sense, to discover who I was and what I was capable of.

**A:** *It's also more fun than therapy.*

**KS:** Frankly, I wouldn't wish my trips on anyone. Lots of them have been really unpleasant.

**A:** *Your open, emotional style is unusual in adventure writing, where the prevailing ethos is machismo, or at least a stiff upper lip.*

**KS:** What interests me is the inner journey. I find the more open you are about your own vulnerabilities and failures—the more authentically human you are—the better you can relate to other people.

**A:** *What are you most afraid of? It's certainly not dangerous places, not war zones.*

**KS:** I can get scared of opening my heart to people, scared of love.

**A:** *Was Robert Lewis, the emotionally scarred but heroic journalist, based on someone in particular?*

**KS:** His character spontaneously

popped into my head about a dozen years ago, after I spent time in a refugee camp in Papua New Guinea listening to people tell me they'd been tortured, that their loved ones had been killed. It was agonizing. The Lewis character was a response to my own feeling of helplessness.

**A:** *Overall, do you consider The White Mary a dark novel?*

**KS:** There is darkness there. But Marika's journey is similar to one that many people have to take in life. They have to hit rock bottom, go to the deepest parts of their own souls to realize there's a way out.

**A:** *One of the themes in the book is the tug between the footloose, adventurous life and the ties of love.*

**KS:** Yeah, I've definitely had to deal with that. I do have a pretty unconventional life, compared to many women.

**A:** *You seem unconventional in the extreme. C'mon, confess a conformity.*

**KS:** Well, I like to eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken. How's that for mainstream? ▲

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