

Beyond a Thousand Words: A Novel

Michael Rose

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Three generations of restless, ambitious women mull big questions in the musing novel Beyond a Thousand Words.

In Michael Rose's novel *Beyond a Thousand Words*, three generations of women balance ambition and love.

Coty is a photographer in the postwar period. Ambitious and independent, she travels and dreams about putting together a compendium of photographs that feature her family members, among other subjects. While working in Vietnam, she falls in love with a priest; he dies before learning that she's pregnant with his twins. With a single photograph of the girls' father, Coty returns to California to raise Jette and Noemie and to take on her family's charity.

Time passes; Jette becomes a traveling doctor. She performs a lifesaving surgery on an African orphan, Matheo, on the night her husband and sister die. Later, in his twenties, Matheo, who has become a priest, questions his calling; he takes a sabbatical at Coty's house. Jette's daughter, Evelyn, who has taken over the charity, feels pulled toward him.

Across the book's generations, relationships are centered. Jette and Evelyn joke and tease each other, but even when they seem on the verge of fighting, they evade direct confrontations. The women's conversations with men are even more evasive: Coty and the twins' father, and Evelyn and Matheo, talk around faith and doubt, with the men proving coy and frustrating in response to the women's requests for answers.

The book's tone is also somewhat nebulous when it comes to addressing charity work and church services. The story makes better use of its two recurring images—a hummingbird and a ticking clock. These are used to hint at restlessness and forward motion, complemented by the story's multiple settings and wide time span. Indeed, the plot toggles between quiet moments on planes and in homes and instances of surgeries and emergencies. Within this mix are shocking instances of death; they are not dwelled upon, though, and people continue to travel and work without grieving.

Told in five parts, the book seems most concerned with legacies. Jette is as ambitious as her mother; she chooses work over family. Evelyn and Matheo, guided by the formidable examples of these women, are pushed to decide what direction their lives will take and to consider how their choices will align with Coty's and Jette's choices. The three generations of women are surrounded by secondary characters from Vietnam, Latin America, Africa, and France—a hodgepodge community whose members nurture their positive decisions.

In the multigenerational novel *Beyond a Thousand Words*, women's personal and artistic pursuits are complicated by society's expectations.

MARI CARLSON (July 15, 2023)

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