

In the Company of Men

Véronique Tadjo

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In Véronique Tadjo's literary novel *In the Company of Men*, a community goes to battle against Ebola.

Two boys wander into the woods to hunt; they come home proud to prepare and eat the animals they've ensnared. But within weeks, to the bewilderment of their village, the boys have fallen ill. They deteriorate with astonishing speed. Thus begins this chilling narrative of a quick-spreading epidemic.

After the story of the boys, the narrative changes, giving voice to the first, everlasting tree, Baobab. Baobab issues a scathing critique of human greed, followed by clear warning to human beings, that they stop destroying forests and viewing nature as little more than a cache of raw materials for marketable goods. Baobab's narration follows a loose timeline, detailing how human aggression has displaced nature, including via the gold rush. This central thesis is clarified when Baobab names the animals that, deprived of their preferred habitats, have migrated into the company of men.

The narrative switches with each chapter to feature a new speaker, each with a different role in the fight against Ebola. These include a doctor, a nurse, and a volunteer who's recruited to bury the dead. Each is rendered with respect. The approach pays homage to those whose work was imperative to overcoming the epidemic.

The book's twin emphases—the notion that nature is important, and the idea that people should understand the world as a unit, its pieces together in every fight—are handled in both realistic and magical manners. *In the Company of Men* is graphic in detailing a relevant historical moment, while also devoting emotion and attention to those who dealt with Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

TANISHA RULE (January / February 2021)

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