

Ransom (Book Three, The Healing Crystal) by Michele Poague

One of the more interesting adventures of the 19th century was Charles Darwin's exploration of the Galapagos Islands. Because of their isolation from other land masses, the Galapagos developed species that were different from those anywhere on earth. The theory developed that given enough time, and different conditions, creatures evolved over the centuries; the creatures that adapted survived; the ones that did not, died out, and the new adaptations were carried into the following generations. Creatures changed radically from their original forms, creating completely new species. People have debated about evolution for generations. But what does happen when isolation is complete and goes on for generation after generation? Is it nature or nurture, genes or the culture they are born to?

Michele Poague's "The Healing Crystal" series (Heir to Power, Fall of Eden, and Ransom) provides a thought provoking look at how humans would adapt when that kind of isolation occurs. Her main character, Kairma, is young, but will become the leader of her people, the people of Survin, hidden in the western mountains for hundreds of years, distrustful of strangers, leading their lives by ancient tribal rites, worshipping their god Nor, and guarding the Crystal, handed down from generation to generation and given to the Miral (soon to be Kairma) to protect. They are just humans, doing very human things, dealing with the daily life issues of jealousy, sloth, infidelity, that every community sees. Life is consistent, rules are clear, traditions are important, change is rare. They have no idea of what's on the other side of the plains. Their lives work pretty well, but there are disturbing signs that their numbers are no longer growing, and they are continually haunted by another nearby race that is always watching, mysterious and dangerous, strange, not-quite human, "White Ones" -- the boogey-men they use to keep the children from exploring too far.

Far from their view, Peiersons Landing has its own, very different environment. Much like the early American pioneers, they started out using barter to get what they needed to live, and when folks started specializing in certain areas, eventually set up a system of exchange. Their culture is river-based, (trading with a few distant smaller population areas, with a certain amount of enterprising flair, but they are very well aware that things were once much different, and a whole lot better, in a past that they know nothing about. All they know of the Ancient Ones are the artifacts, things found by accident, made of unusual materials, things they no longer know how to make, and legends of a time of greatness that they yearn to recapture. The tall, bronze-skinned Survinees with their tribal ways are barbarians to them.

Books One and Two (sorry, there are some necessary spoilers here) follow the Survinees and the folks of Peiersons Landing as an accidental meeting of the two sets off a series of events that bring them into one another's sights, and into a conflict that will change both cultures forever. The Madics (as the Survinees call them) are outsiders, usually killed to prevent them from ever letting others know of Survin and the powerful Crystal guarded by the Healers. All of their traditions in Survin insist that they and the Crystal stay hidden at all costs. They have, however,

from time to time, kept an outsider or two, to get "new blood" for the thinning population, but they had to promise never to leave Survin. Why? What is so important that generation after generation of Survinees would kill to keep it hidden? None of them have any idea just how important this Crystal truly is, but when a treasure trove of artifacts is found buried in their mountain, the questions are unavoidable: What is it, who did it belong to, and what does it have to do with their past, and their future?

Book Three (Ransom) has the answers, but I really can't give away the spoilers. All I can say is that in Book Three we realize that the author is exploring the characters we know (and many new ones we don't) to see what it is that humans do to solve the basic issues of living, and they don't all do it in the same way. How do you ensure that people are kept safe? What's the best way to get food? How can the various foibles of humans (those emotion-based things like fear, anger, jealousy, etc.) get dealt with successfully? What's an acceptable sacrifice to ensure that the community endures? How do you know when you've crossed the line (and who gets to make the line)? When communities come into contact and they don't agree on basic values, how can they co-exist without violence? Questions about the Crystal, including the original owners, are answered, although many new questions are raised along the way.

The Healing Crystal series has very real characters, people you get to know, to trust, to care about, and the books take you along on their journey to understand who they are, watching as they struggle to find their lost past, and make new inroads into a future they barely hoped they could ever have. There are a lot of characters, because of the wide scope of this book, which sweeps from mountains to plains, to the cities, and there is a lot of time devoted to showing how they live their lives, what they consider important, how they act under stress, and what they will sacrifice for the truth. It is a cross-section of humanity, learning to cope with itself.

This is not an action-thriller although it does have action; it is not a romance, although there are love stories; it is not exactly history or science fiction, though it's a bit of both. It is a thought-provoking book series about humans, past, present, and future, with some twists you definitely won't see coming.

You will remember the characters, and you'll find yourself thinking about what it means to be human.

I highly recommend it.

Eva Kosinski