

The Bitter Side of Sweet

Tara Sullivan

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Fifteen-year-old Amadou, a child worker on a cocoa farm, only counts the things that matter. He and his little brother, Seydou, have been very far from home for two long years. His days consist of chopping down as many cacao pods as he can in the blistering sun, trying desperately to keep the bosses' beatings at bay, especially away from his brother. They boys work as slaves doing backbreaking and dangerous work under conditions that are horrifying. The bosses never tell them how much their debt is, never give them anything except little amounts of food, and never let any boy leave alive. Maybe, Amadou and Seydou could somehow return home to their Baba and Auntie. But the longer the two have stayed at the farm, the more Amadou continues to lose hope that they will ever be free again.

The boys only wanted work to help their impoverished family in Mali, but they never imagined they would be tricked into being on this plantation on the Ivory Coast. As Amadou accepts his fate, a girl is forcefully brought to the camp. Her name is Khadija and she turns out to be a big problem, full of wildness and vigor. She never stops fighting to get away, awakening the same thoughts of escape in Amadou. But the bosses finally break her, and the unthinkable happens to Seydou- Amadou's only good thing left. This time, he knows he and his brother can no longer remain at the farm. The three join as a family and try once more to run away.

The Bitter Side of Sweet gets you to wake up and face reality. It sheds light on the experience of present-day slaves in different countries less protected than the United States. It reveals the brutality involved in child labor practices in an intense and powerful way. The novel portrays the difference in classes between those in Africa. It also heavily includes themes of friendship and what it means to look out for family. At times, the book can be hard to read and caused me a lot of anxiety for the characters. Ultimately, that is what made the story so moving, engaging, and eye-opening!

This novel is a reminder of the importance of being an informed consumer and using your money wisely. The book also includes many African words, and there is a glossary in the back of the book for those not familiar with the African language. While this book isn't extremely graphic, there is some content for mature readers such as beatings, descriptions of injuries, starvation, and a vague reference of rape. I recommend this novel to those aged thirteen and up. In addition, I would encourage readers to learn more information on child labor and take action against by writing letters to unjust companies, donating to reliable charities, and educating others on the cruelty of present-day slavery after viewing this book.

Recommended Titles:

Golden Boy by Tara Sullivan

Sold by Patricia McCormick

Sister of the War: Two Remarkable True Stories of Survival and Hope in Syria by Rania Abouzeid

Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree by Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani