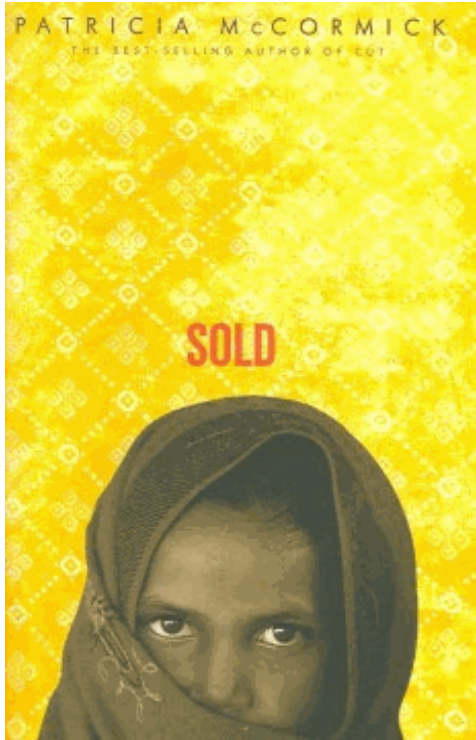


SOLD



Young Adult

By Patricia McCormick

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Book Summary:

A young girl is sold into the sex slave trade to pay off her family's debt.

Summary of Concerns:

This contains explicit aberrant sexual activities including rape of a minor; prostitution; and explicit violence.

CONTENT WARNING

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Aberrant Content
BookLooks Review Rating

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102	"Are you ready to work?" she says in my language. I nod and say yes, then nod again, although I do not understand how these city people do their chores in such fine clothes and uncomfortable shoes. I follow Mumtaz down the hallway lined with tiny rooms. We pass by girls sitting cross-legged on the floor. Girls drawing on tiger eyes. Girls spraying themselves with flower water. Some of them stare at me. Some take no notice. We go up some stairs, down another hallway, then into a room where an old man is lying on a bed. His skin is yellow and he has tufts of hair poking out from his ears. Mumtaz speaks kindly to him and I wonder if he is sick. Across the hall, in another room, where a red cloth is hung across the doorway, I hear the sound of grunting. It is a strange, animal sound that makes me shudder. Mumtaz points to me and says something to the old man. He licks his palm and smooths down his hair. They do not seem to notice the grunting. Then it stops. The red cloth is pulled back. And a man stands in the hallway zipping his pants. I look down at my red-painted nails and my new shoes. Something is not right here. I don't know what is going on, but it is not right, not right at all. Mumtaz pats the edge of the bed and tells me to come closer. The old man makes a clucking sound. "Don't be afraid," she says. "Come her, now." I don't move. Her voice turns hard. "Get over here, you ignorant girl." She says. Still, I don't move. Then Mumtaz flies at me. She grabs me by the hair and drags me across the room. She flings me onto the bed next to the old man. And then he is on top of me, holding me down with the strength of ten men. He kisses me with lips that are slack and wet and taste of onions. He teeth dig into my lower lip. Underneath the weight of him, I cannot see or move or breathe. He fumbles with his pants, forces my legs apart, and I can feel him pushing himself between my thighs. I gasp for air and kick and squirm. He thrusts his tongue into my mouth. And I bite down with all my might. He cries out "Aghh!" and I am running. Running down the hall, past the other girls, losing my fancy city shoes along the way, until I am back in the room where I started, pulling my old clothes out of my bundle.
106	I wrap my arms around myself and grip with all my might. But the trembling will not stop. "Well, then." Mumtaz says, pulling her record book out from her waistcloth. "Let me explain it to you." "You belong to me," she says. "And I paid a pretty sum for you, too." She opens to page in her book and points to the notation for 10,000 rupees. "You will take men to your room," she says. "And do whatever they ask of you. You will work here, like the other girls, until your debt is paid off."
107	This Shahanna leans close and whispers to me, "It will go easier on you if you hold still." There is a slicing sound, and a clump of my hair falls to the floor. I cry out and try to break free, but Shahanna has hold of me.

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	Mumtaz draws back, the jaw of the scissors poised at my neck. “Hold still,” she says, her teeth clinched. “Or I’ll slice your throat.”
109	Each morning and evening Mumtaz comes, beats me with a leather strap, and locks the door behind her.
110	Tonight when Mumtaz comes to my room, she sees that her strap has left raw sores on my back and neck, my arms and legs. So she hits me on the soles of my feet.
111	Tonight when Mumtaz comes and unlocks the door, she sees there is no part of me unmarked by her strap. “Now will you agree to be with men?” I shake my head. And she says that she will starve me until I submit.
115	“No,” I hear myself say in a ragged voice. “I will not do this disgraceful thing.” Shahanna sighs. “She will only sell you to another place just like this.”
116	You are safe here only if you do not show how frightened you are.
120	A man with lips like a fish comes into my room and says, “You’re lucky to be with Habib.” He is squeezing my breast with his hand, like someone shopping for a melon. I try to push him away, but my arm, stone-heavy from the lassi, doesn’t move. “You’re lucky,” he says, “that Habib is your first one.” I close my eyes. The room pitches this way and that. “You can tell the others that it was Habib,” he says. I open my eyes, watch him squeeze my other breast, and wonder: Who is this Habib he keeps talking about? “If this is really your first time,” he says. “Old Mumtaz is a tricky one.” He unbuckles his belt. “Once before, she sold Habib used goods.” The fish-lips man removes my dress. I wait for myself to protest. But nothing happens. “Habib,” he says. “Habib is good with the ladies.” Then he is on top of me, and something hot and insistent is between my legs. He grunts and struggles, trying to fit himself inside me. With a sudden thrust I am torn in two. “Oh, yes,” he says, panting. “Habib is good in bed.” I hear, coming from a distance, a steady thud, thud, thud, and register that this is the sound of a headboard hitting a wall. After a while, I don’t know how long, Another sound interrupts the rhythmic thud of the headboard. I know this noise from somewhere. I work very hard to make it out. Finally. I identify it. It is the muffled sound of sobbing.

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	Habib rolls off me. Then I understand: I was the person crying.
123	In between, men come. They crush my bones with their weight. They split me open. Then they disappear. I cannot tell which of the things the do to me are real, and which are nightmares. I decide to think that it is all a nightmare. Because if what is happening is real, it is unbearable.
125	I hurt. I am torn and bleeding where the men have been. I pray to the gods to make the hurting go away. To make the burning and the aching and the bleeding stop.
127	Before it starts, you hear a zipper baring its teeth, perhaps the sound of a shoe being kicked aside in haste, the wincing of the mattress. Once it starts, you may hear the sound of horns bleating in the street below, the peanut vendor hawking his treats, or the pock of a rubber ball as the children shout and play in the school yard nearby. But if you are lucky, or if you work hard at it, you hear nothing. Nothing, perhaps, but the clicking of the fan overhead, that steady ticking away of seconds until it is over. Until it starts again.
128	One day Shahanna comes to my room, bearing a cup of tea and a leftover heel of bread. She slips a small plastic package into my hand. “Don’t let Mumtaz see this,” she whispers. “What is it?” I ask. She checks to make sure no one can hear. “A condom.” I don’t understand what this condom is and why it must be kept so secret. Shahanna explains. “Ask the men to use ti, sot that you don’t get a disease,” she says. “Most of them will say no; they will threaten to go somewhere else if you insist.”
129	There is a bucket of water next to my bed. But no matter how often I wash and scrub and wash and scrub, I cannot seem to rinse the men from my body.

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132	One afternoon, Mumtaz comes to the door and tells me to gather up my things. "Now that you are no longer a virgin," she says, "I cannot fetch a good price for you."
133	I haven't cried, not one tear, since that first night with the fish-lips man. But now tears surge up in my eyes. I blink them back and lift my chin. "But what?" she says. She pulls the leather strap out from under her skirt and slaps it against her open palm. I bow my head. "From now on," Mumtaz says, "you will join the other girls downstairs each night. You will share a bedroom and be free to walk the house." I stare straight ahead. Mumtaz comes close and takes my chin in her hand. "But if you try to run away," she says, "I will grind hot chilies and put them in your private parts."
135	A fat, toothless woman stirs a vat of greasy stew while a naked child crawls at her feet, and the air is thick with the smell of spices and cooking oil, perfume and cigarette smoke. It is all, suddenly, too much. I sink to the floor, wincing at the tenderness between my thighs.
141	Before, when you were in the locked room, Shahanna says, Mumtaz sent the customers to you. Now, if you want to pay off your debt, you must do what it takes to make them choose you. Tell the customers that you are twelve, she says. Or Mumtaz will beat you senseless. Do whatever the customer asks of you, Shahanna says. Otherwise he will beat you senseless. Then he will do whatever he likes and leave without paying. Always wash yourself with a wet rag after the man is finished, Pushpa says. This will keep you from getting a disease.
142	There are special things you need to know about how to use your shawl, she says. Flick the ends of your shawl in a come-closer gesture and you will bring the shy men to your bed, the ones who will slip an extra coin into your hand before they go. Draw your shawl to your chin, bend your neck like a peacock. This will bring the older men to your bed, the ones who will leave a sweet on your pillow. Press your shawl to your nose with the back of your hand, Pushpa says, when you must bring a dirty man to your bed. He will leave nothing but his smell, the stink of sweat, and hair oil and liquor and man. But you can use your shawl to block the worst of it. Anita turns away from the mirror, transformed from a crook-faced country girl into a tiger-eyed city woman. There is another way to use a shawl, she says. I cannot tell from her always-frowning face if she is being kind or cruel. That new girl, the one in your old room, she says. Yesterday morning Mumtaz found her hanging from the rafters.

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145	The younger ones, like Jeena, are given special medicine so they can sleep under the bed while their mothers are with customers.
147	Half of what the men pay goes to Mumtaz, she says. Then you must take away 80 rupees for what Mumtaz charges for your daily rice and dal. Another 100 a week for renting you a bed and pillow. And 500 for the shot the dirty-hands doctor gives us once a month so that we won't become pregnant.
180	Once, when the dirty-hands doctor pushed himself up against me in a back hall, Monica pried him off of me and told him he would have to pay like everyone else.
182	I have been beaten here, locked away, violated a hundred times and a hundred times more. I have been starved and cheated, tricked and disgraced.
189	"Have you been washing yourself?" she says. "After the men. Do you wash yourself down there?" I try to nod, but my head is heavy, achy, a distant thing I cannot control. All I can do is close my eyes.
191	"Take these pills tonight," she says. "And you'll be back at work in no time." Then she unwinds her waistcloth and takes out her record book. She wets her pencil with the tip of her tongue and writes a number in her book. "You'll be able to work off the cost of the medicine in a few days," she says.
216	"Get to work, you lazy whores," she says.
227	Here at Happiness House, there are dirty men, old men, rough men, fat men, drunken men, sick men. I will be with them all. Any man, every man.
228	I have a regular customer now. He makes me do a nasty thing, but he gives my 10 rupees extra.
254	I learned ways to be with men. I learned how to forget what was happening to me even as it was happening. But ever since the pink-skinned man came here, with his pictures of the clean place, I cannot remember those ways. Now, while I wait for the American to return, and the men come to my bed, I clench the sheets in my hands, for fear that I will pound them to death with my fists. I grit my teeth, for fear that I will bite through their skin to their very bones. I squeeze my eyes closed tight, for fear that I will see what has actually happened to me.

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257	It is a simple kitchen sound, the grinding of spices with a wooden pestle. Sometimes it means nothing more than spicy stew for supper. But sometimes it means that the cook is readying the hot chili punishment for one of us. And then it is a sound that turns even the hardest woman here into a whimpering child. Because it means that someone has crossed Mumtaz, that Mumtaz will smear the chili on a stick and put it inside the girl, and that all of us will be awake throughout the night, listening to the girl moan.
258	She pushes the cook aside, takes her stick, rolls it in the chili powder, and wheels around to face me. I fall to the floor, kissing her feet and weeping. She gives me a kick in the ribs, and all the air flies out of me in a whoosh. Then she is gone. Soon I hear a piteous wailing coming from the next room. Anita bends over me. "It's Kumari, the new girl," she says, stroking my hair. "She accepted a bangle bracelet from a customer."
258	"You certainly act the part of the guilty one," Mumtaz says from above me. What I feel next is the gritty sole of her shoe on the side of my head, gently at first, then with steady, gathering force, relentless, building pressure until her full weight is on me. She grinds her foot, and the metal edge of my earring bites into the flesh of my ear. But I do not cry out. The seconds tick by. Then, somehow, I am outside myself, marveling at this pain, a thing so formidable it has color and shape. Fantastic red, then yellow, starbursts of agony explode in my head. Then there is a blinding whiteness, and then blackness. Somehow, without warning, the pain is gone. A new pain takes its place as Mumtaz yanks on my braid and drags me to my feet. We are eye to eye. I can smell the sour tang of her sweat. "Have you done something for which you should be punished?" she says. I don't answer. She yanks on my braid. My scalp yelps with pain. But I don't say a word. "Have you done something wrong?" she says, spit gathering in the corners of her mouth. "Tell me, you stupid little hill girl." Mumtaz has called me a little hill girl. Which is, still, what I am. I meet her gaze. "No, Mumtaz," I say. "I haven't." She lets go of my hair, and it takes all my strength to keep my knees from giving way. "Then put on you makeup," she says, "and get back to work." I stay upright until she is gone. Only then do I slump to the floor and touch the side of my head. My earring comes off in my hand, bloodied, but intact. And I know then that my earlobe has been torn clear through.