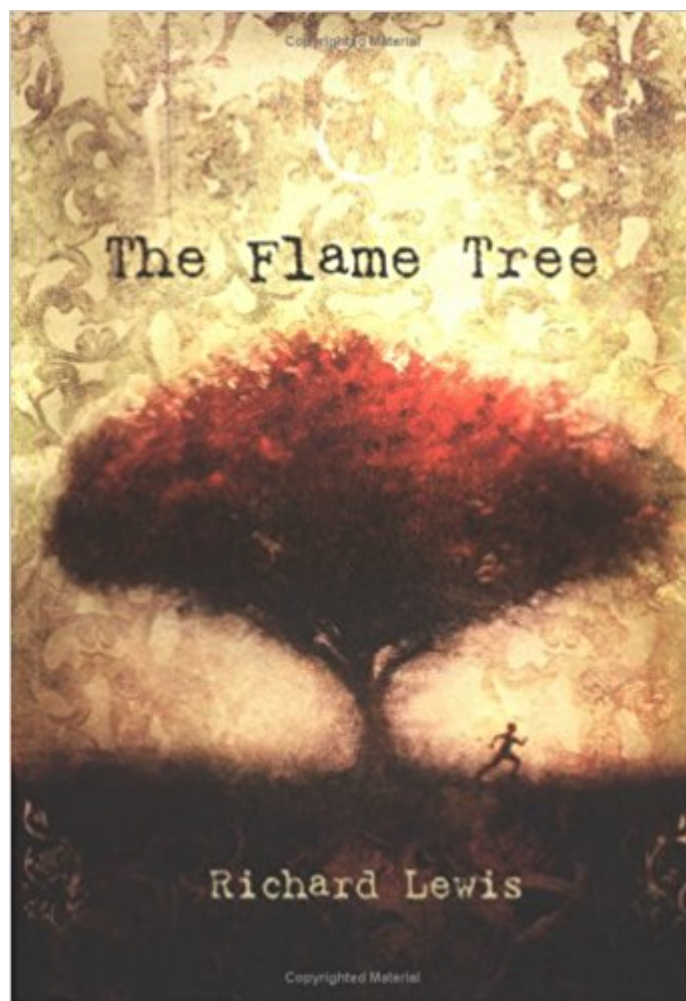


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# The Flame Tree



## Synopsis

Isacc is the son of American missionary doctors in Java, Indonesia. He loves his surroundings and feels secure that his friendship with Ismail, who is Muslim, is as solid as the majestic flame tree in the mission school's yard. However, when an Islamic fundamentalist group threatens the hospital where Isaac's parents work, the tightly knit community unravels. Amid terrorist bombings, Isaac is taken hostage. While in captivity, he must confront the conflicts between his Christian upbringing and the teaching of Islam... --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The graphic depiction of terrorist acts (such as beheadings) may be too intense for some readers, but Lewis poses some provocative questions about faith and fervor in this gritty first novel set in Indonesia around the time of September 11. The author explores the issues, at least initially, through the friendship of main character Isaac, who is living with his missionary physician parents, and his Muslim friend Ismail. Despite the friends' obvious biblical names, the way they relate to each other unfolds subtly and authentically. But as anti-American (and anti-infidel) sentiments rise in the days leading up to the bombing of the World Trade Center, Ismail turns against Isaac. At first, the author depicts the growing tension between them realistically, and readers can almost feel Isaac's pain and confusion at his friend's cold shoulder. But soon the narrative paints the issues in broad strokes and the characters' relationship gets lost in the larger themes. When Isaac's parents decide their son should leave Indonesia for the U.S., he is kidnapped by Islamic fanatics bent on converting

him into a Muslim (occasioning graphic details of his forced circumcision). The author (himself the son of missionaries) reveals links between two seemingly opposed religions and explores reasons that many Islamic people resent Americans. Showing how religious ideas and ideals can breed atrocities against humanity, he creates a riveting read. Ages 12-up. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Grade 8 Up – Cracks appear in the comfortable certainties of 12-year-old Isaac Williams's life in Indonesia when a radical Muslim leader targets the American hospital where his missionary doctor parents work and his friend Ismail joins the movement. The situation deteriorates quickly after September 11, 2001, when the sight of the toppling towers in New York emboldens the Javanese militants. When the Baptist compound is evacuated, Isaac's parents insist on staying behind to continue their work. The evacuation helicopters are attacked, but Isaac miraculously escapes, only to be captured and kept hostage by members of the fundamentalist movement, including his favorite former teacher. Forced to study the Qur'an and learn about Muslim theology, the boy finds it surprisingly similar to his own fundamentalist beliefs, but providing considerably more comfort for its believers than his own distant and judgmental God. Before his release, Isaac undergoes a forced circumcision, described in excruciating detail. The scene will haunt readers and may limit the audience for this otherwise extraordinary look at one small portion of the Muslim world. The author's love for his childhood home is evident in the lush details of the Javanese natural and cultural world. Isaac is an interesting and well-developed character, resilient enough to survive serious physical and emotional challenges and compassionate enough to forgive his captors in the end. This is a remarkable reading experience for students willing to enmesh themselves in a different world. – Kathleen Isaacs, Edmund Burke School, Washington, DC Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The Flame Tree is much more than a coming of age story. By focusing on a 12 year Christian, American boy living in the world's largest Muslim nation during the upheaval of 9/11, Richard Lewis sets up a potentially explosive situation. Isaac Williams is the son of two doctors who work at a missionary hospital in Indonesia. An exceptionally bright boy, he considers Indonesia his home, and though he schools with other ex-pat children, his best friend is a local devout Muslim boy, Ismail. But things take an ominous turn in young Isaac's life when the Muslim church across the street from his home compound takes a decidedly extremist turn under a new Imam. People in the community who had previously welcomed Isaac become colder, he starts having nightmares about threatening

crows, and he finds a new, hidden gate into the compound. Just as things hit a contentious note in his community, 9/11 explodes and his previously tranquil community rages with a full-blown riot. With panic at a fever pitch, during a mandatory evacuation, complete with Marine escorts, the unthinkable happens and Isaac is taken hostage by the extremist group. To say more would divulge intricate plot details that will leave not only young readers, but also adults, breathless as they get caught in the web of this riveting page-turner. Most importantly though, beyond the action and suspense of this novel lies a thoughtful examination of culture and faith. Lewis does an admirable job here of opening up a very foreign world while also carefully exploring facets of the Muslim and Christian faiths. From the description, it would be easy to assume that this novel pits Muslims against Christians, but remember, this is an extremist group, and care is taken to highlight Islamic beliefs in their less incendiary and dangerous forms. I dare say that this book is timely, and right now, an important read. Not only for youngsters struggling to understand, but also adults.

. . . are laid out plainly in this story of a young boy caught between cultures and religions. The reader feels Isaac's bewilderment when his best friend - a Muslim - turns against him. Isaac loses his flame tree, the symbol of his sheltering childhood, and all it enfolds (including the security his parents provide, his faith, and the Javanese culture he considered his own). Underneath the fast-paced, page-turning crises lie the basic differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam and how Isaac chooses his own personal path of faith. Richard Lewis has managed to avoid any caricaturization of Isaac's kidnappers. He depicts them as both good and bad, and hasn't lip-synched any politically-correct -- liberal or conservative -- line. I recommend this book to anyone who wants not only excellent, lyrical writing, but something to mentally chew on for a long time.

Read the customer reviews [here](#) and you will get a better feel for the sophistication of this book. Yes, it is told through the eyes of a precocious twelve-year-old, but does that limit it to a YA novel? Publishing houses didn't sell *Lord of the Flies* or *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Diary of Anne Frank* this way. This novel would be a dynamite book for a High School Curriculum, but adults can learn much about the complicated relationships between Christians and Moslems as well. Our president would do well to read this book. *The Flame Tree* is a blazing adventure, filled with violence, fear, pain and courage, but also a lyrical work with deep understanding of friendship, belief, hate and forgiveness. Let the adult read it first, then discuss its relevance with the young adult. And Simon & Schuster, get behind this book and give it the blast it deserves.

When Isaac Williams, the 12-year-old son of missionary doctors in Indonesia, experiences an uprising in the small Muslim town he calls home, the divide between Muslim and Infidel becomes personal and quite literally painful. Everything he takes for granted--his family's security, his trust in the people he has lived with for so long, his concept of God, and his bantering, effortless relationship with his best friend--falls apart. As the plot moves through its frank and sometimes horrifying turns, Isaac learns that evil can wear many masks and good might lie in the most startling of places. This is a very, very timely book, and its message in these days of grave cultural divide is vital. The story is a page-turner; it's enormously thought-provoking, and Lewis doesn't let us off the hook easily. He deals with complexities broad and personal, themes of doing bad in the name of good, of humanity and religion, of allegiances, friendship, cruelty and wisdom. His prose is adept, his characters human and believable. And despite the weight of its subject--or because of it--it's a terrific read. If I were to design a curriculum for human understanding in our new century, mandatory for high-school children of all creeds, it would begin with this book and *The River Runs Salt, Runs Sweet*, by Jasmina Dervisevic-Cesic. I would encourage parents to read *The Flame Tree*, pass it to their children, and spend some very valuable time discussing it. Susan O'Neill, author, *Don't Mean Nothing: Short Stories of Viet Nam*

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