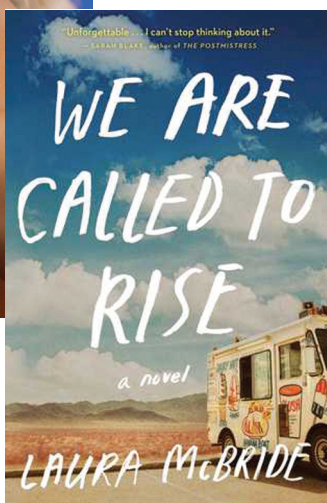


# Literary Speaking

## We Are Called To Rise

By Laura McBride

Reviewed by Joyce Moore, Yankton Community Library



I'll admit it. I often do judge a book by its cover or in this case, its title. The title of Laura McBride's intriguing debut novel, *We Are Called to Rise*, comes from poet Emily Dickinson.

"We never know how high we are  
Till we are called to rise;  
And then, if we are true to plan,  
Our statures touch the skies—"

Through struggle and adversity, we find the inner strength to endure, persevere, and succeed. I was expecting a very uplifting, triumph-of-the-human-spirit type novel. That is not the case. What this story does is examine the seemingly unrelated lives of four people in Las Vegas and the tragic event that causes their individual courses of life to intersect.

*We Are Called to Rise* is told from the point of view of each of the characters. McBride does a masterful job of creating four distinct voices and personalities. Each chapter title is simply the name of the character

sharing that part of the story.

Avis is a fifty-something wife and mother who just found out her husband Jim is leaving her for a much younger woman from his office. She is sent reeling by this revelation. While their life together was not always easy, compared to Avis's own childhood, it was almost perfect. But after losing her daughter and realizing her war-weary son is not quite right following three tours of duty in Iraq, Avis is now without her husband to help her deal with the family issues.

Roberta is a Vegas local and an astute observer of Vegas culture. "...fighting a war, going to college, working at Caesars Palace, these are choices for children who grow up. In my line of work, I worry most about the ones who might not." Roberta is a social worker and a good one.

My favorite character, the one who really touched my heart, is little Bashkim. He lives with his little sister and his Albanian refugee parents. His father was a political prisoner before escaping to the U.S. and they can never go back. The family scrapes together a meager existence running an ice cream truck. The little sister is too young to know what is happening; the father is angry and distrusting of any government or authority; the mother is homesick and physically abused by her husband; and eight-year-old Bashkim is wise beyond his years. He sees; he understands; he hopes.

It's through an assignment in Bashkim's third grade classroom that we meet Luis. Bashkim sends him a pen pal letter while he is serving in Afghanistan. The reply Bashkim receives from Luis is not what the teacher had hoped for and it confuses Bashkim and sets off a string of events at the school. When Luis wakes up in Walter Reed Hospital, he doesn't remember writing the letter or what happened to him to put him in the hospital. He does remember explosions and watching his best friend die.

What starts out as a routine traffic stop becomes an unthinkable catastrophe that pulls these characters together. And while the ending has its uplifting moments and triumph of the human spirit, it is bitter-sweet and leaves one wondering... How connected are we? How do our actions affect strangers around us? Does adversity make us stronger?

I finished this book in a matter of days. I cared about these four people and others in their lives and found myself thinking about them long after I finished reading. Laura McBride provided a close look at cultures and family circumstances I know little about. It was gut-wrenching at times, but also heartwarming at times. I am looking forward to McBride's next novel.



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