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Fiction

## Seeking light

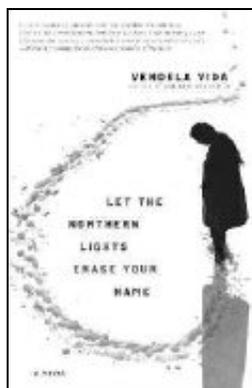
SAVITA IYER

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**Let The Northern Lights Erase Your Name**, Vendela Vida, HarperCollins, \$19.16

Clarissa, a young woman living and working in New York, has always been haunted by the memories of her mother, who disappeared one fine day at a shopping mall without leaving a trace.

While on the surface Clarissa's life proceeds along a normal course — she has a father and brother; a fiancé who loves her and stimulates her intellectually; a job doing subtitles for movies — there is something missing, a gaping hole that can only be filled if Clarissa finds her mother, Olivia, and understands why Olivia left her high and dry when she was a teenager and needed her most.

## Journey of discovery

When Clarissa's father — or the man she always thought of as her father — dies, the circumstances finally present themselves, and Clarissa embarks alone upon a journey to the other end of the world in order to find her mother. This journey will not only reveal the truth about her mother, but also the terrifying truth about Clarissa herself — where she came from, who she really is and the fact that her life as she knew it has been built upon lies and deceit.

Vendela Vida's new book, **Let The Northern Lights Erase Your Name** (a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week pick) is fascinating because it takes the reader to places that are not written about that often: The far reaches of Finland, Norway and Lapland, and into the land and customs of the Sami, the indigenous people of Scandinavia. This is the land of reindeer and Santa Claus, of hot chocolate and ice hotels — a place where reindeer blood is a panacea for all evil, where the winters are interminable but the sunlight is like nowhere else on earth.

The stark, distant style in which the book is written is a perfect reflection of the remoteness of that part of the world, and Vida — a California-based writer and author of the acclaimed 2003 novel **And Now You Can Go** — also conveys perfectly the rather vacant character of her protagonist. The economy of Vida's writing is also its greatest strength, however, and her sparing style creates a first-rate suspense story, where in a matter of a single paragraph or even just a couple of lines of dialogue, plot takes a completely unexpected twist and the reader is easily gripped.

## Easy read

**Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name** is a fast-paced mystery and it is a quick and easy read. However, it also addresses well the larger themes of identity and belonging, and, above all, the importance of a mother in the life of a young woman. Indeed, Clarissa's greatest deception lies in the fact that her mother never was and never will be who she wants her to be, and this realisation will forever determine the course of her life.

Ms. Vida is the co-editor of *Believer* magazine, a literary publication whose current issue features, among others, contributions from British writer Nick Hornby (whose hit novel *About a Boy* was made into a movie starring Hugh Grant); the comedienne Janeane Garofolo, and an interview with Mira Nair.

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