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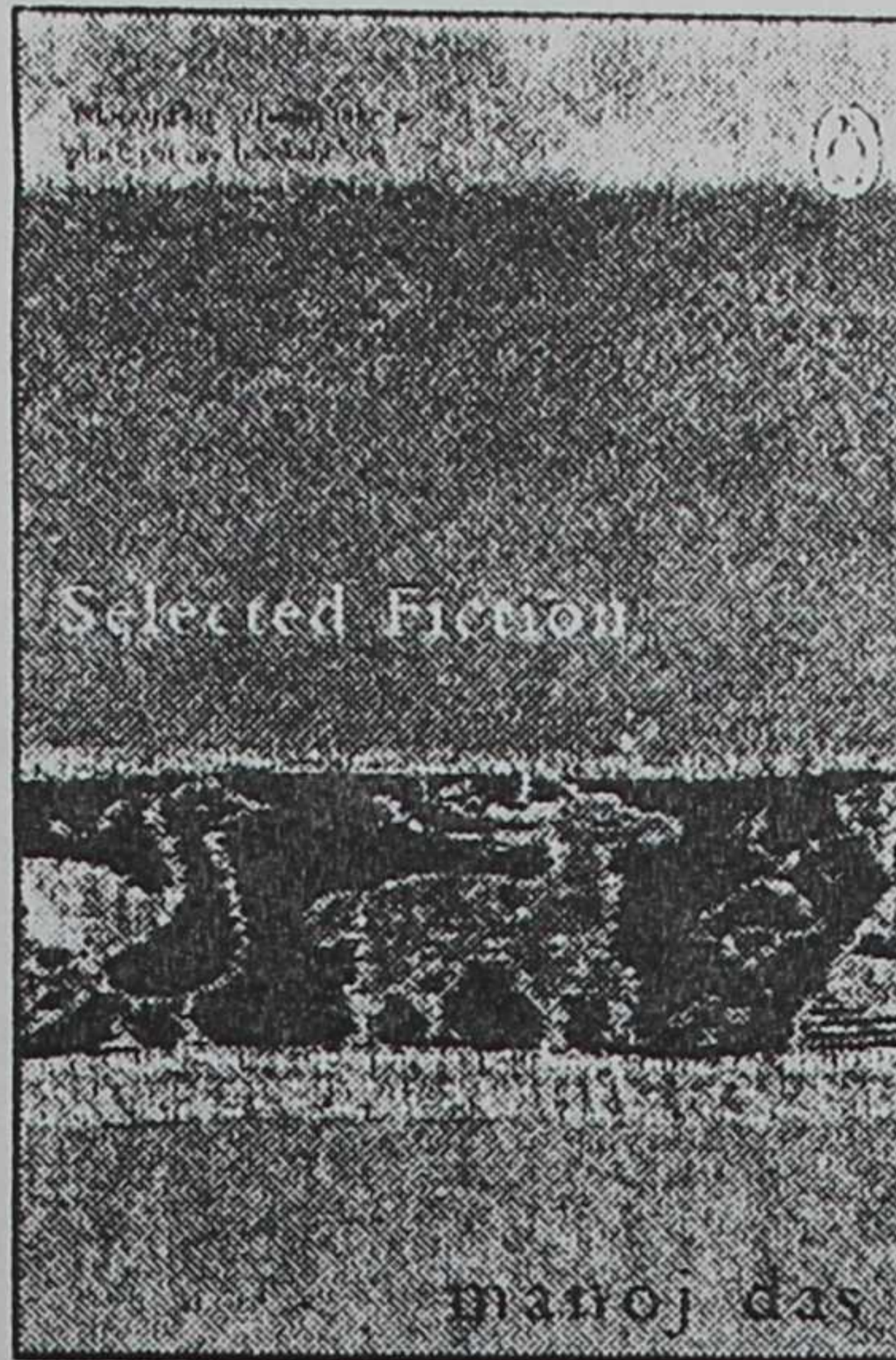
# The good old days

**R**eading *Selected Fiction* is an unusual experience. This collection of short stories (and a novella) written by Manoj Das bears the whiff of unripe mangoes, hard guavas and succulent *jamuns*. It brings to you the atmosphere and aura of times gone by, of childhoods and old ages, politics, tigers, ghost lovers, unrequited loves, and wise concubines. Two samples.

*Miss Moberly's Targets* is about a single Anglo-Indian woman who leads a twilight existence in a home for the affluent aged. Dolly Moberly finds willing company in three dogs, "Robinson", "Mac" and "Badal" who visit her from the nearby slum.

Each day, Dolly throws pieces of bread into the air and the dogs jump to snatch them mid-flight. Dolly is proud of her skill in targeting the mouth of the dogs and improves her performance assiduously, watched by her supercilious cat. The cat irritates Dolly each morning, mewling "How are you" rather rudely to her and jumping on her table, ignoring Dolly's cold but polite rebuff, "I'm quite well, thank you." When she perfects hitting the dogs' mouth, she demonstrates her skill to her cohorts, who deride her with the gentle cruelty of peers, young and old. Dolly realises that the dogs, like the men she named them after, have fooled her and decides to shoot them.

As she clutches her stolen weapon to her breast, nervously waiting for the dogs to arrive, her neighbour the brigadier wakes



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up, finds his gun in her hand and assumes she is trying to commit suicide! Dolly is put to bed with comforting words and gentle caresses. She lies in bed, fuming...

*Farewell to a Ghost* is about vanishing small town loves. The

moonlit villa, floats resplendent in shimmering waves of grass. The boys in the village would sight the ghost, melancholy, serene, in the balcony and whisper to each other the next morning. She was born in the era of indigo farming, of the love of a tribal woman and a White man, kidnapped and kept against her will. She tried to poison her captors but was stabbed by her accomplice, after which she took residence in the villa. Once, a besotted youth tried to kiss her in her ghostly sleep and he died a bloody death. Still the town loved and respected her as an honoured guest and their ethics forbade exorcism.

The *pandit* would speak to her through rites and the boys would sigh in anguish about her predicament. Came the time to demolish the villa for some new government building, and the town panicked. How do they ask the guest to move? They call a new priest who performs a brutal puja and ties her to a coconut tree forever. Years later, when the narrator returns, he sees with horror that the tree has been struck down by lightning.

The writer is an extremely skilled exponent of the short story, weaving the medium with magic and whimsy. Each story touches a hidden facet and polishes it to brilliance. This is a book worth keeping on the shelf.

*Selected Fiction, Manoj Das, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001). Paperback, 349 pp; Rs 250 Courtesy: Bookpoint*