

Perfect interlude

His stories don't lend themselves to introspection, but the style is direct and refreshing

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TWO WEEKS after it landed on my desk, my copy of Manoj Das' *Selected Fiction* is already dog-eared in that peculiar way common to books that have been read, found moderately enjoyable, argued over, and re-read.

This would not, perhaps, have been the case if one had been forced to plough through the entire Das oeuvre. With over 80 books under his belt, Das is dismayingly prolific, though he still has some way to go before he catches up with Lope de Vega (credited with over 2,200 books) or Edgar Wallace, who once wrote an 80,000-word book over a weekend! Clearly, the editors at Penguin had their work cut out for them; to their credit, there are very few duds among the 28-odd short stories selected for this volume.

Das' forte is his conversational style, married to a knack for reworking the classic ghost story. His favourite setting is the village and the small town; this is his natural element, and unlike many 'Indo-Anglian' authors, he is perfectly free from the temptation to present his characters or their setting as either quaint or exotic. He is also one of the few fluidly bilingual authors writing today: asked by one interviewer which language, English or Oriya, he usually worked in, he responded, "The language of silence, if that's not too portentous."

Das's ghosts are people one might like to meet. There's the ghost threatened by government laws that do not recognise the needs of *bhoots*; the good-natured crocodile ghost; the shadow that runs away from its owner; and a few, more conventional, ones. His politicians, too, are less venal if

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just as bumbling as the present crop: grappling with such crucial issues as missing caps and provocative and beautiful opponents. The quotidian rules — the proposed visit of a bunch of nudists causes protocol problems as the villagers realise that to greet them clothed might be seen as rude; a crooked walking stick takes over its new owner.

While he transports us into a space at once simpler and more entertaining than the world in which we live, it's a moot point whether these stories will linger in the mind once you're done with the book. Nowhere are his strengths and weaknesses laid out for inspection more clearly as in the novella, *The Tiger at Twilight*. The chief protagonists include a man-eating tiger and a raja fading into insignificance. It has a touch of the gothic about it, a hint of the stories passed down by our grandmothers, and it has charm: but unlike a writer of the calibre of Shirley Jackson, Das is unable to create more than a pleasantly spine-tingling narrative out of these elements.

His writings offer the perfect interlude; a park bench halfway up a steep trail where a reader can rest and reflect, only to eventually move on. The worlds he conjures up are more than welcome in an age of excessive striving after complexity, the direct and chatty writing style refreshing in an era of increased experimentation with language. But for all their charm, his stories don't lend themselves to deeper exploration; there are no layers of meaning to be excavated with each new reading.

That's forgivable. In the world of Das's imagination, there is only one unforgivable sin, which is also a sin he's incapable of committing. You can't imagine Manoj Das being portentous.