

SOME SIGNIFICANT PUBLICATIONS

Farewell to a Ghost, Manoj Das,
Penguin, Rs 100.00

Manoj Das' new collection of stories harks back to an age of socio-cultural incorruptibility. Located in the backwaters where telephone lines are rare and cable television non-existent, the stories seek out the unassuming creature who lurks behind the facade of human ambitiousness. A large number of inconclusive, slim and unsubstantial ghost stories are fragments of comment on the question of human conviction. Das' characters do not deny the existence of the supernatural. In his stories characters accept what they perceive to be inevitable and cope with it with unostentatious fatality.

In *The Different Man* the protagonist Singh sees the world spinning around and away from his orbit of comprehension. "Why is everybody so eager to be sarcastic, so ready with retorts?" Singh seems to voice the author's own impatience with the literature of scepticism.

Although clouds of corruptibility gather menacingly around the characters they are magically dispersed, if not by goodwill then by death which intervenes just in time to equalize the damage done to the basic benevolence of human spirit. In *The Concubine* a scoop-starved scribe tries to bring down an election candidate by publicly derogating the elegant woman who canvasses for him. The unexpected turn of events and the resolution to

convert the mudslinging daily newspaper into a monthly magazine (named *The Monthly Jasmine* if you please!) are indications of an authorial vision which won't accept malevolence and the basic component of human nature.

In one of the more amusing vignettes *The Irrational*, successful politician Subrato returns to the village of his youth to confront *Chowdhurani* by putting his hands on her. . . eyes! Subrato had fled the scene of the unpardonable crime vowing to never return again, confident in the belief that the woman was none the wiser about the culprit's identity. Now when the grey-haired *Chowdhurani* reveals she knew of Subrato's prank all along he is jolted into a new awakening about the scope of the human conscience.

If the stories create humour out of a moral and spiritual dilemma they also bring to light the frightful collapse of a moral order by drawing attention to the essential ingenuousness of human nature. In *The Rain* a property baron finds himself trapped in the rain with some villagers whom he intends to render homeless. When they expose themselves to be vulnerable hospitable souls, Jaipal is filled with an unutterable compassion that nips his industrial ambitions in the bud: "No, he would not allow a bazar to crop up here. Long live the banyan tree; long live the tribe of the two he met; long live their wretched umbrella!"

The stories claw at the collars of cliches to emerge unspoilt, if not entirely surehanded. Cultural and moral conflicts in real life do not come to as auspicious conclusions as they do in *The Rain*. Manoj Das' stories make you wish they did. In *The Brothers* the excessively idealistic freedom fighter Bhuvan grows old to be a source of constant embarrassment to his family. The uncalculated benevolence of Bhuvan's nature is restorative.

In *The Strategy* a desolate old woman announces her impending death to all and sundry in order to glean sympathy. In *The Bridge in the Moonlit Night* old Sudhir confesses to his senile friend about how he had foiled his friend's romantic attachment in their youth. In the finest story of the collection *The Dying Horizon* the aged nar-

rator recalls the terrible misadventure which took away the life of a childhood friend, the sweet Lily. In this, the most elaborately laid out fiction of the collection, Das makes eloquent use of time and space to create a climate of compassionate longings.

"If only I could weep like you!" the childhood friend of the narrator blurts out in *The Dying Horizon*. In their shared guilt about the death of Lily the two friends represent a fountainhead of guilt and absolution. In Das' stories right and wrong are more than relative values. One heals the damage done by the other to the extent that human foibles begin to seem indispensable prerequisites to moral rectitude.

Courtesy: **Subhash K Jha**
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Yatra 4: Writings from the Indian Sub-Continent, Alok Bhalla (Editor),
Indus/Harper Collins, Rs 95.00

The literary journal is a genre which falls between the transience of journalism and the permanence of the paperback. For an aspiring writer who gets printed in a literary journal, the next step is getting his manuscript into hardcover. For an established writer, the literary magazine helps him reach out to an audience shielded from the lofty world of books. For the readers it opens new worlds of writing.

Yatra published by Rupa under the Indus imprint is also meant to serve this purpose. The fourth in the series is a special on travelogues and is dedicated to the renowned painter, J Swaminathan, who died last year. It presents a range of writers from Daniel Weissbort to Intizar Husain. *Yatra* is not a magazine since it has no periodicity but a 'journal'. In that sense, it is unfortunate since it might not succeed in creating a core readership nor in maintaining the momentum.

Breaking the monotony of print are five sketches of Varanasi and five paintings of Ladakh by Ram Kumar. Perhaps to make it look like a magazine some of the pieces are embellished by colour pictures including tribal paintings to go with Swaminathan's article. Considering the bad quality of colour separation, registration and printing, *Yatra* would have

