

A fluent writer of a quaint charm. Astonishingly prolific (80 books to his credit at the age of 66, awards galore). Discerning. And above all disciplined. Manoj Das has an admirable capacity to delineate a character or portray a situation with scintillating wit, genial humour and subtle suggestive power.

Storytelling, for Das, is a charming form of art to create a world of unity and impression. In his good short stories we experience a unity of tone or mood. They are of stark realism, dreamy fantasy or cryptic mystery. They are humorous or awesome, droll or pathetic, quiet or stormy.

This 349 page volume is thick with his shorter works with no illustration, no relief to soothe the tired eyes, no mention of the date of first publication of the stories. It is indeed, disappointing.

The motif of his stories is no other than human life with nature in the backdrop. The human predicament, the meaningful truth concealed behind the obvious, is the hall-

As a story-teller, Mr Das is in the distinguished tradition of RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, C Rajagopalachari, and strikingly different in both taste and content from our contemporary writers. This collection of 28 short stories and a novella speak eloquently his distinction as a story-teller.

In his world of his stories life has many surprises to spring on us and uncertainties to upset all our schemes. But his characters are not hollow men or helpless victims in the hand of an inscrutable Fate. They are neither fatalists nor gallant fighters but just face hazards in their own fashion manifesting their virtues and foibles, mistakes and inadequacies of their existence. He



village Vishalpur had a bird in its holy shrine. One day a young and desperate zaminder Sahib stormed to the scene to kill the feathery friend of the villagers. People alerted him of the fearful consequences. The fierce storm that cheerless cloudy night was the sign of ominous nature. The death of the wonder bird led the zamindar to an excruciatingly painful death. The story has a well-tailored message that happiness in order to be perfect, must be general and universal in character.

"The General" is a delightful story. It is a hilarious account of the life of a General called Valla who gladly accepted the proposal made by a group of young local artistes, to appear in a small and cardinal role of a commander in their play. But his nerve failed at zero hour. Here a few subtle touches have given ordinary things unexpected lustre.

"The Miracle" is a juicy story of fake monks, dud rites. Braja Vaishnav and Bulu Baba – the concealed Mahatma feel no serious qualms in hoodwinking the gullible people.

"The Bridge in the Moonlit Night" appears to be the most impressive story of this collection. No surfeit of emotion or description. The style is admirably pared down and powerful. Sudhir is in a nostalgic mood.

He recollects the moments which are not scribbled in his diary book but remain burnt into his memory. The memory of treachery haunts him like a phantom even after sixty years. Is it really pain he feels, or is it a sense of guilt? Is it a story of puzzling love or of sheer stupid jealousy? Of regrets and confessions? The tragic denouement cuts deep into our heart. Das's words match the magic of his story.

The collection ends with an outstanding novella "The Tiger at Twilight." The action is set in Nijanpur. The story records the chilling realities of a royal family. It is written in a prose that shifts smoothly from a historical record to a crystalline story. The account is gripping and achingly sad. It reveals his great warmth and wealth of feeling. Graham Greene is right when he says – "Manoj Das (will) take a place on my bookshelves beside the stories of Narayan."

– Bipradas Bhattacharjee

Studies in character

mark of each story and a pertinent reason for its inclusion.

Though no two stories in this collection are singularly alike in theme, they reveal a marked preference for problems confronting ordinary mortals in their day to day life or existence. Das writes to encompass life in its immense fun and simplicity. The darker sides of life too come into focus in his writings.

His fond characters are mostly ordinary mortals, village folks much familiar to us. They exchange their pains and pleasures, small griefs and sufferings, convey confessions and conundrums.

His stories are essentially studies in character. When he deals with his characters, he tries to make their inner life of feeling and motive real to the readers, give meaning to their actions to make them convincing and credible. Which is why one can summarily go to the very bones of his story, the very marrow of his thought.

REVIEW

Selected fiction
By Manoj Das
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feels at home describing the Indian countryside and smaller towns. His stories take root and flourish in that environment.

"The Misty Hour" tells the tale of an intriguing lady Roopwati, the major figure of the story. Much of it is familiar stuff. But the style of writing gives the account the merit of a well-shaped story. He relives the old days with a picturesque finesse.

"The Naked" is a fine story with a mediocre

end. It takes us to a time when the British Raj was on its last legs. The setting is a hamlet of fisherfolk. Rajmata of Sapanpur has asked Bhanu Singh, the scion of the hereditary *senapatis* to greet a group of august nudists. He resolved to discharge his duty. He was resolute but sadly found himself inadequate at the time of execution. He grew nervous. He flinched. He was lost in a moral dilemma. The wild storm mirrors the inner turmoil that raged in the mind of Bhanu Singh. The scary atmosphere, the conflict have heightened the dramatic intensity that is at the heart of the story.

Ingeniously conceived and strikingly structured, "The Crocodile Lady" can persuade a reader to suspend temporarily his disbelief. This breezy story is a flight to beauty, beyond reality. It is a unique mix of the real and unreal. It gives the reader a sense of completeness.

"The Owl" has an uncanny tale to tell. The