'The Zigzag Way': Come the Revolución

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

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IN her long career, Anita Desai, always something of a world traveler, has been fascinated by searchers and refugees, by people looking for homes and identities in faraway places, whether they're Indian immigrants in unwelcoming England ("Bye-Bye, Blackbird"), European truth-seekers in an Indian ashram ("Journey to Ithaca") or German Jewish refugees stranded in modern-day urban India ("Baumgartner's Bombay").

In her latest work of fiction, set in the desolate mining country of central Mexico, the half-Bengali, half-German Desai may seem to be exploring new territory, but her familiar thematic baggage is impeccably packed. Less a novel (or, at 160 pages, a novella) than an unabashedly old-fashioned tale, "The Zigzag Way" is filled with ghosts and chance meetings, with eerie atmospherics and people trying to fit in where they don't quite belong.

Desai's central character is Eric, an American graduate student

THE ZIGZAG WAY
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who grows bored with his thesis on the immigration patterns of early-20th-century Boston and impulsively joins his medical-student girlfriend on a research trip to Mexico. Wandering aimlessly in Mexico City one afternoon, he kills time by attending a lecture at a cultural center on the significance of peyote in Huichol Indian culture.

The lecturer is an imperious, aristocratic old woman "with a Teutonic name" who addresses the mostly foreign audience not in English but in Spanish, to Eric an incomprehensible torrent. But as a few words leap out -- Sierra Madre Oriental, Sierra de los Catorce, La Asuncion, Valenciana -- he is seized by the memory of a rare visit to his grandfather in Cornwall when he was only 4 or 5 years old, a visit filled with the old man's stories of his days working in the vast mines of central Mexico. Suddenly, a novel that started out sounding dispiritingly like yet another chronicle of postadolescent confusion becomes not just a condensed course in 20th-century Mexican history but a meditation on the futility of our efforts to outrun the past.

Soon Eric is off on his own, traveling to the Sierra in hopes of learning more about his Cornish grandmother, who followed her future husband to Mexico and died in childbirth during the first days of the revolution. He takes shelter at a mountain estate that Doña Vera, the lecturer whose words so inspired him, has turned into a center for the study of Huichol culture. Her ostensible motive is to do penance for the depredations caused by members of her husband's family when they ran the silver mines; the center also, however, serves as a hiding place from her own past in wartime Vienna.

Known (not without snickering irony) as the Queen of the Sierra, Doña Vera combines the mysticism of a character from D. H. Lawrence with the drama-queen dash of Norma Desmond and the politically suspect primitivism of Leni Riefenstahl. By day, she's seen either in a vividly colored kimono or in full riding gear, flashing her whip and pontificating about the corruptions of civilization. By night, she's haunted by dreams of the doomed Indian youth she once loved.

It's all potentially corny stuff, but Desai pulls it together with economy and grace. And yet, despite this, the novel has the feel of being worked up from a tidbit stumbled upon in an archive or a guidebook, then trained along a trellis of neatly diagrammed meaning rather than allowed to grow wild in a thicket of character and situation.

Desai's odd title refers to the zigzagging path the miners followed when coming to the surface, a route that makes it easier for them to breathe as they ascend. Eric comes across the reference in Doña Vera's library and, in a move that's typical of the novel's heavy-handedness, seizes on it as a description of his lurching efforts to penetrate his past, "as if it were a mine that no light pierced."

If only Desai had left more of it in darkness.

Jennifer Schuessler is the editor of the Ideas section of The Boston Globe.

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