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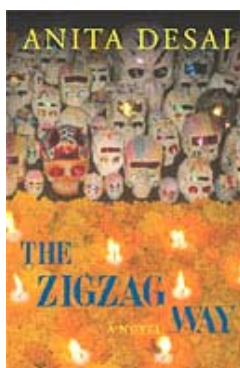
A better painter than novelist

Anita Desai's characters are swamped by their surroundings in *The Zig Zag Way*, says Liz Hoggard

Liz Hoggard

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The Zig Zag Way

by Anita Desai

Chatto & Windus £12.99, pp179

Salman Rushdie once described Anita Desai's subject as solitude. Her characters tend to be outsiders, torn between privacy and the powerful family and social bonds that both stifle and unite them. No doubt her dual heritage (she is half-Bengali, half-German and her first language was German) gives Desai an 'outsider' status.

In her work, characters often adopt escapist ways to cope with the banalities of everyday life. In *The Zigzag Way*, her 14th novel, Eric is a self-absorbed North American academic, bored by his studies, unable to commit to the fantasy of writing his novel. He may have reached premature domestic bliss with his girlfriend, Em ('They seemed already to have reached a stage that many couples require 30 years to achieve'), but he is beginning to stifle her with his possessiveness. Will the relationship last?

When Em is offered a sabbatical in Mexico, it seems a fresh start. Eric decides to accompany her, somewhat to her concern. But Mexico is where Eric's journey begins. He travels high up in the Sierra Madre to undertake a quest to find out more about his grandfather, a Cornish miner who, as a young man, emigrated to Mexico to work the mines in the days just before Pancho Villa and revolution came to Mexico.

closest I can get to India when I'm in America'). The heat, the strangeness and the colour of the country seduce Eric. Through his journey, and the people he meets, Desai offers a complex, dreamlike history of 20th-century Mexico, making clear the exploitation of the Mexican Indians by some of their greatest 'supporters'.

The novel is structured as three interwoven narratives: Eric's modern-day story; the life of Dona Vera, the autocratic 'Queen of the Sierra', who has a dubious European past of her own; and the story of Eric's grandmother, a young Cornish girl who journeyed to join her fiancé in Mexico only to die while giving birth.

It is only on the feast Day of the Dead, when the locals celebrate their lost loved ones, that the various strands of the novel come together and Eric faces up to his past.

Refreshingly, instead of saddling Eric with a creaky new romance, Desai makes the true revelation in his life more internal.

Like Desai's earlier novels, *The Zigzag Way* tackles stereotypical Western views of Indians, anti-semitism, the tensions of family life and the alienation of middle-class women. But, at times, character loses out to detailed panoramic descriptions of Mexico and it is easy for readers' attention to flag. Only in the final section about Eric's grandmother, a proper, flesh-and-blood woman, does the novel stop being a poetic travelogue and really start to live.

At her best, Desai approaches the Mexican landscape like a master cinematographer (her earlier novel, *In Custody*, was filmed by Merchant Ivory) and one senses *The Zigzag Way* might work best as a film.