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BOOKS OF THE TIME

By Walter Goodman

THREE CONTINENTS by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. 384 pages. William Morrow. \$18.95.

WHEN we meet Harriet Wishwell, the exasperating heroine and narrator of Ruth Praver Jhabvala's new novel, she and her twin brother, Michael, are 19 years old and at loose ends. Scions of a rich and prominent old American family, they have spent much of their youth kicking around embassies run by their grandfather, an ambassador. Before you know it, the two young dropouts are picked up by "a world movement, involving empires," led by a plump Indian named Rawul, and agree to give the movement the wealth they will inherit when they come of age.

The dates are vague, but we are told that "A lot of time has passed and what has happened has happened." Let us assume that the events recalled in the 1980's occurred in the 1950's. By now the middle-aged Harriet must have learned something, but she writes with the mind and heart of a 19-year-old who just doesn't know what's not good for her.

Harriet and Michael both fall for Crishi, Rawul's adopted son, whom everyone, not least the reader, can spot instantly as out to get the kids' money. The thing about Crishi is that he's sexually irresistible to both sexes and all races. Charm, charisma, you name it. No sooner does he touch Harriet than she becomes "a flame of desire." Even as revelations pop forth of Crishi's present infidelities and past affairs, his shady activities and fits of violence, Harriet can't break away. At some point, you may find yourself asking: Can it be that this is really a novel about an innocent rich girl in the clutches of an unscrupulous fortune hunter? I'm afraid so.

Crishi's provenance is as exotic as a reader of popular novels could ask. He's the illegitimate offspring of a part-Assamese mother who married a Portugese salesman and moved to Goa and now lives in Hong Kong with a Chinese wrestler. Crishi, too, has kicked around the world, with interludes in jail, before attaching himself to Rawul and to the guru's fleshy consort, Renee, who is a blend of Imelda Marcos and Tammy Bakker.

After Harriet and Crishi marry, Renee, who is in the art-smuggling game, takes to joining them in their bedroom after dark. Harriet is a little put off at first, but being Harriet, she accommodates herself. "I had a slight feeling of having been abandoned but it didn't last long - no longer than it took to get upstairs, back to our room, where Crishi was again on the bed with Renee, holding her in his arms, though not so engrossed in her that he couldn't acknowledge me over her shoulder, in the amused conspiratorial way he nowadays had with me." Is that a touch of self-satire? Unfortunately, "Three Continents" is delivered straight. It is West bumping into East in a girlish variation on a theme of Henry James and E. M. Forster.

The cast is large and lush. A gun-toting journalist named Anna falls for Crishi and hangs around for a while. Renee has an ex-husband named Rupert and a son named Robi, who may actually be Crishi's. Then there's Rawul's former wife, Bari Rani, with her daughters. They all live it up pretty well. The story moves from New York to London to New Delhi, giving Miss Jhabvala an opportunity to show her familiarity with great cities of the world, while Rawul promotes Transcendental Internationalism, and everybody waits for Harriet to reach 21 so Crishi can get all her money.

Warnings against Crishi come from Harriet's own family, but they are a feckless and flaky bunch, who may be meant to represent the decline of the West. Anyhow, Harriet is in no mood to hear distressing news about the man who has turned her on. "He had aroused me so completely that the sex he gave me - rationed out to me - was absolutely essential to me. Deprived of it, I was as if without breath and air." She writes of herself as "a starved animal," with a "devouring hunger" for sex.

Four hundred pages of this starving young dummy allowing herself to be exploited by a cad is a lot. It's a relief whenever the story moves away from Harriet to the doings of Rawul, a babyish sort of guru, who eats too much and thinks very little. He is as innocent as Harriet, but knows how to protect himself. We never learn much about Transcendental Internationalism, but Ms. Jhabvala demonstrates her skill as a movie writer as she creates a set piece in which the guru is weighed not against gold but against a stack of books representing the wisdom of the ages. She also gives a cutting description of a lavish party in a plush New Deli hotel, where politicians and their wives "heavy bodies lubricated in perfumed oils," "vast men in thin drapery shoveling food into their mouths," live it up on the expense account of a utopian movement, a movement cut off entirely from the realities of their poverty-afflicted land.

But every time you hope the book will give more on guru gobbledygook, Harriet steps before the camera: "I loved Crishi in such a way that I wasn't capable of keeping back one ounce of myself but wanted to give myself completely for him; my will, my intelligence, my understanding, everything I was." There being little sign here of will, intelligence or understanding to get in her way, she succeeds. When Crishi bursts out at her, "Are you stupid or something?" you have to grant that the rascal may not know much about the wisdom of the East but he's wise to Harriet.

Photo of Ruth Praver Jhabvala (Jerry Bauer)

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