



The Compulsive Reader

Reviews of books by some of the hottest writers working today, exclusive author interviews, literary news and criticism.

BESTSELLERSWORLD.COM
REVIEWS, BOOK GIVEAWAYS, & FORUM

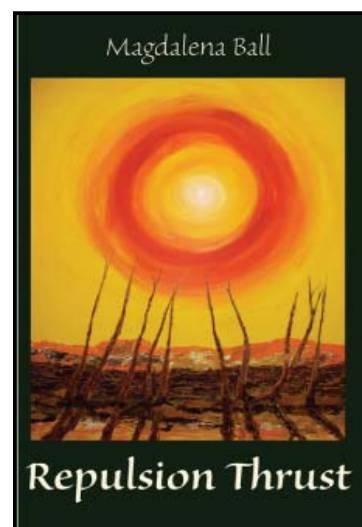
A Hundred Possible Answers: Anita Desai's Diamond Dust

Individually, the stories in Diamond Dust traverse a wide geographic terrain, moving from the Himalayas to Manitoba, Toronto, Cornwall, Amherst, Massachusetts, Mexico, and Delhi, but throughout the stories there are similarities in the characters, and in the theme; that of the underlying complexity of humans. People begin as one thing and end up another. There are always layers of meaning; the first a superficial one, what is apparent, the sociology of the story, society, what the visitors see, while below lay other stories, of love, forgiveness, meaning, understanding. There is always a revelation, although the writing is very subtle, and the underlying meaning is only hinted at - left to reveal itself in the space between the reader and the work.

Reviewed by Magdalena Ball

Individually, the stories in Diamond Dust traverse a wide geographic terrain, moving from the Himalayas to Manitoba, Toronto, Cornwall, Amherst, Massachusetts, Mexico, and Delhi, but throughout the stories there are similarities in the characters, and in the theme; that of the underlying complexity of humans. People begin as one thing and end up another. There are always layers of meaning; the first a superficial one, what is apparent, the sociology of the story, society, what the visitors see, while below lay other stories, of love, forgiveness, meaning, understanding. There is always a revelation, although the writing is very subtle, and the underlying meaning is only hinted at - left to reveal itself in the space between the reader and the work.

In Royalty, a visit from the revered and campy Raja interrupts the preparations from for the summer exodus to the Himalayas. Raja is a poet; an academic. In Sarla's eyes, he is the one who "opened their eyes, who made them see it [the Lodi gardens] as they



Poll

Do you think that literary prizes are biased against genre fiction?

- No, genre fiction's biased against literary prizes
- No, genre fiction tends to be formulaic
- No, there are plenty of prizes for genre fiction
- Some genres do better than others

Free Newsletter

Fill out your email address to receive our newsletter!

email address

Submit

Home

All reviews by genre

Compulsive Listening

Compulsive Viewing

Advanced Search

Submissions

Recommend Us

Magdalena's Blog

Media Room

Compulsive Reader Ads

Book related links



Get new reviews the instant they are posted to the site with RSS

What is RSS?

Monetize Your Site

Past Articles

Friday, October 02

One Man's Deep Disturbance: The Skating Rink, a novel by Roberto Bolano

A review of My Father's Tears and Other Stories by John Updike

Wednesday, September 30

Interview with Jo Reed, author of The Tyranny of Blood

never saw it themselves, as a place of magic, enchantment, of pleasure so immense and rich that it could never be exhausted." When Sarla's cook leaves on his overdue summer break to escape the summer heat of Delhi, Raja leaves Sarla and Ravi for the more socially graceful Dutta-Rays' houseboat in Kashmir. Sarla's disappointment combined with the superficiality of Delhi social life, and the enduring depth of Ravi's love as they sit on top of a mountain provide a powerful opening to the stories. Winterscape is a beautiful story, resolving itself in the visual white image of two women looking out at the snow.

Rakesh's story of his two mothers, of old India and new Canada; the bond between sisters, parental love and sacrifice combines the subtle and the humorous, as Rakesh's mothers come to terms with the North American world: "Together the two would open the refrigerator twenty times in one morning, never able to resist looking in at its crowded, illuminated shelves; that reassurance of food seemed to satisfy them on some deep level - their eyes gleamed and they closed the door on it gently, with a dreamy expression." The mingling of longing, love and irritation capture a beauty "as complete, and as fragile, after all, as a snow crystal" in the midst of the very ordinary domestic world of a new family. In Diamond Dust, Mr Das's puppy Diamond grows into a "badmash", a wild devil, who attacks the neighbourhood children and roams the streets in search of female canine victims. As is always the case in Desai's world though, nothing is as simple as it seems. Mr Das' attachment to Diamond is genuine, as is his grief when Diamond disappears. The story is billed as a Tragedy, and it raises the kind of questions good tragedy always does. Who is right? Who is wrong? Is love and end in itself? Or is the tragedy in the delusion, the mis-placed adoration?

In Underground, Jack and Meg go on holiday in Cornwall, and have trouble finding accommodation. The visual impression of Cornwall at the height of summer is conveyed wonderfully with long descriptive and busy sentences, words jostling with one

- Yes, no Sci Fi in the Man Booker?!
- Yes, it's part of a broader biase against genre.
- Yes, prizes are out of touch with readers
- Other (please comment)

Vote

[[Results](#) | [Polls](#)]

Votes: **80**

Older articles

Search Box (type in author's last name or one key word)

another with few punctuation marks to slow down the imagery, adjectives pushing their way forward to create a visual impression: "Boat sails, surf boards, waves, foam, debris and light. Fish and chips, ice-cream cones, bouncy castles, spades, striped windbreakers. "Where can I pee-pee? I have to pee-pee!"; "Spot come away Come away, Spot!"; "I've cut my foot! Ooh, look, boo-ohh!" The moving story within the story, of Bob and Helen, is handled very well. Kept invisible to Jack and Meg, who muse over the odd bod, that daft owner of The White House who turns them away despite the empty rooms, the reader is forced to marginalise it too. It is the unknown history, the pain and beauty which is under the surface of most lives. Despite McTaggart's loss, as he "felt himself dissolve, become one with the silent evening, having no existence apart from it, there is still hope". The badgers return, along with his breath, renamed Brock and Helen, and hungry.

The Man Who Saw Himself Drown employs an interesting technique. At the point of drowning, the narrative changes from third person to first person. Is the man a ghost, coming to terms with his actual death, or does he take this apparition, a man who looks enough like him to fool his wife and colleagues, as more meaningful than it should be when he allows himself to absorb the death, failing to come forward and reveal himself. This is, a "fantasy many of us entertain in the course of our lives - to end the dull, wretched, routine-ridden, unfulfilling life we lead, and to begin on another - filled with all that our heart desires." His presence is real enough to be seen by the children who throw rocks at him, or the dogs who chase him down the street. However, as his identity is stripped, we begin to wonder what makes a person. Do we exist outside of the ties in our lives? Are the ties themselves meaningless? Is there anything left if you take away the trappings of a life, or do we simply become like the beggars - identityless, despairing. The Hamlet like soliloquy mingles with an almost Kafka like destruction of personality, as the nameless narrator moves towards the quietness of despair, which ends the story in a move back to third person, the noise of a flock of crows and the clattering of a dropped pot

breaking the silence.

In *The Artist's Life*, Polly returns from summer camp imagining herself an artist, while their odd tenant Mrs Mabel Dodd, a recluse, suddenly find herself someone to clean up. Set against the backdrop of middle class Amherst Massachusetts "an ordinary domestic life with neat suburbs and tidy garbage bins", Polly's longing for real Art contrast with the mundane world where "Those unpredictable roseate dreams were cruelly limited, encroached upon by the undeniable reality of the house, yard, suburb - enemies, all, of Art". The disillusionment in the end when Polly hears that Mabel too is part of her secret world of Art, combines with the soft beds of warmth and sweetness in the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made by her mother in a way which is masterful. Desai has a way of contrasting the domestic with the exotic, posing in the most subtle but insistent way, questions about desire, beauty, and the labels we give things. A similar questioning occurs in *Five Hours to Simla or Faisla*, where a family en route to the Himalayas during the hottest part of the summer, are caught in a traffic jam by a truck refusing to move after being hit by a wayward rock. While the story is very simple, sitting itself within the traffic jam, the writing is exquisite, poetic, "out of the pelt of yellow fur that was the dust growing across the great northern Indian plain, a wavering grey line emerged. It might have been a cloud bank looming, but it was not - the sun blazed, the earth shrivelled, the heat burned away every trace of such beneficence. Yet the grey darkened, turned bluish, took on substance." As the stalled traffic line takes on a carnival atmosphere, with the paper toys, multi coloured drinks, bamboo pipes, kits and puppets, the trivial dialogue of the family raises questions about identity, the meaning of this holiday, of where the actual story is. It is a theme which Desai returns to again and again, as in *Tepoztlan Tomorrow*, where Louis returns to his aunt's house, his old family home, in the Mexican town of Tepoztlan to find that some things have changed and some haven't. There is the mingled irritation and love, the longing and the rejection, the halycon past and the pull of the future.

In the final story, the Rooftop Dwellers: Moyna leaves her family for the first time to join a literary magazine in Delhi. The story follows her attempts at independence as she settles into her barsatis (leased room). The contrast between her austere life and her mother's abundance; the daily machinations of the magazine and the sophisticated Tara's patter, along with Moyna's self examination is handled very well, the ending leaving the reader without an answer, even if Moyna herself has one. This is, overwhelmingly, the theme of Diamond Dust. That there are a hundred possible answers, a multiplicity of meanings, of richness and depth in any situation, however seemingly mundane of domestic. It is all part of what it means to be a human. A miraculous dance of life, which we can find by just scratching the surface, stopping to look at any moment: "I began to see that all of life was divided in two or into an infinite number of fragments, that nothing was whole, not even the strongest or purest feeling. As for the way before me, it multiplied before my eyes, the simplest question leading to a hundred possible answers."

All contents copyright © 2001- 2009 all rights reserved. For reprint requests, please [E-mail the Site Owner](mailto:maggieball@compulsivereader.com). (maggieball@compulsivereader.com)