

guardian.co.uk

Snakes and ladders

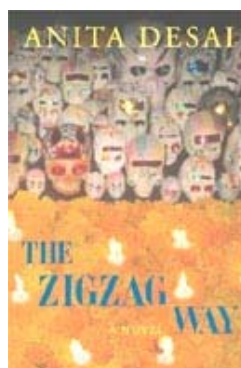
Maya Jaggi is entranced by Anita Desai's *The Zigzag Way*, a tale of intersecting histories leading from Cornwall to Mexico



Maya Jaggi

The Guardian, Saturday 23 October 2004

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



[Buy *The Zigzag Way* at the Guardian bookshop](#)

The Zigzag Way

by Anita Desai

182pp, Chatto & Windus, £12.99

Outsiders in Mexico have often been notorious for their rapacity and obtuseness, from conquistadors and missionaries to, some would argue, the fictional forays of DH Lawrence or Graham Greene. Anita Desai's 12th novel is suffused with awareness of the irony of such travels. Yet as she links Mexico with Cornwall, New England and Vienna in an "intricate cat's cradle" of questing and voyaging over almost a century, the novel recalls a history of predation while affirming more generous human ties and ways of travelling.

The Zigzag Way opens in a ghost town in the Sierra Madre, whose silver mines were abandoned during the Mexican revolution of 1910-20. The American Eric, a bespectacled, scholarly misfit reminiscent of other timid, bossed-about failures in Desai's oeuvre, has arrived in Mexico from Harvard at the instigation of his more purposeful girlfriend, Em. But finding her preoccupied with her medical research, he begins to follow his own trail, tracking down the ageing "queen of the sierra" and ostensible champion of Huichol Indians, Doña Vera, who holds clues to his English father's birthplace in the Mexican mountains. Eric learns of his grandfather's arrival with other Cornish miners after the collapse of Cornwall's tin mining industry and of his

but descent into the past, a metaphor that gives the novel its ambitious structure. Just as Eric descends a dark stairwell in the ghost town inn, the novel proceeds backwards in time, to Vera's account of her escape from Nazi Austria to marry a Mexican silver baron, then to Eric's grandmother Betty's letters home to Cornwall in the run-up to the Mexican revolution. The title, from Humboldt's essay on the New Spain, alludes to Indian porters, bent double by enormous loads, ascending from the pits in a zigzag to allow them to breathe against the current of air from above. Eric, drifting without knowledge of his own history or his roots in the soil he is treading, struggles to enter the past "as if it were a mine that no light pierced and where no air circulated".

Doña Vera, whose quetzal-coloured kimono conceals "layers of worn and lumpish grey flannel", is unveiled as one of Desai's unctuous charlatans (like the decadent Urdu poet of *In Custody*), having fled not the Nazis, but her family's Nazi past, sloughing it off to emerge "like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin". Though she houses local Indians, Eric notes that she "never speaks to them, only of them". Yet her private mourning for a Huichol boy whom she adopted may hint at a deeper grief and guilt. Drones of US university researchers charting the pre-Columbian past and peyote-fuelled visions are meanwhile likened to missionaries harvesting souls.

Solipsistic travellers, who see less than if they never left home, or seek a fresh backdrop to reinvent themselves, are contrasted with those like Eric's mother in a Maine fishing village, and grandmother Betty, whose minds are "buoyant with curiosity and quest" wherever they are. Though Indian, Mexican and Cornish mining families - "pagan", "Popist" and Methodist - are clamped in a hierarchy of snobbery and toil, Betty crosses lines that revolutionary upheaval further erodes. Cornish refugees forced to rely on a lowly Mexican circus troupe "feel themselves for the first time no different from the Mexicans they had lived among".

Though Eric's scholarly leanings make him an insipid and ponderous guide, and his quest is more than a little contrived, the novel improves with each section. In the most intriguing, Betty's perceptiveness illuminates intersecting histories, of the revolutionary Pancho Villa, "resplendent under a sombrero the size of a cartwheel", and rows of miners' cottages in the sierra, Cornish but for their brilliant colours and shutters.

Desai's acute sense of history infuses sensuous landscapes, from a Maine coast redolent of diesel oil, brine and seaweed, to the "stained and peeling stucco" of wartime Vienna. In a Mexico built on genocidal attrition, cacti emerge from volcanic rubble "like stakes rising from secret graves", and cobbles are the "shape and size of human skulls". The past, writes Desai, "was alive here - crepuscular and underground, but also palpable". At its best, *The Zigzag Way* is a stinging reminder of that past, while slyly dissecting the greed and delusion that are still so often part of the traveller's baggage.

