

Pittsburgh, PA
Friday
December 18, 2009

[News](#)
[Sports](#)
[Lifestyle](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[About Us](#)

post-gazette.com **A&E**

[A & E](#)
[Books](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Bob Hoover](#)
[My Gen Book](#)
[Club](#)
[Home](#) > [A & E](#) > [Books](#)


Books

'Fasting, Feasting' by Anita Desai

Desai's 'Fasting, Feasting' is all feast, no famine

Sunday, February 27, 2000

By Mary Rawson

Fasting, Feasting

By Anita Desai

Houghton Mifflin

\$13.00

This two-part novel set in India and America is a delicate, moving tale of love and family. It tells the worlds-apart stories of a brother and sister separated by what their parents ordain and the world imposes.

Originally published in Britain, the novel is published by Houghton Mifflin in an original

American paperback in order to increase Desai's U.S. readership.

Part One is about Uma, a child woman growing old on the veranda with MamaPapa (her parents evolved into one controlling entity).

She is pulled from the convent school in the early grades to help at home when the long-desired boy child Arun arrives. It is she who years later must box up the tea and shawl to warm her brother, studying in America.

Plain and myopic, Uma hides behind her spectacles and boxes up her dreams as carefully as her collection of gilt-edged Christmas cards -- carefully keeping them both without quite knowing what to do with either.

"Fasting, Feasting" was a finalist for England's 1999 Booker Prize. It seems now that our language is at its best in the hands of the colonials -- Irish poets and playwrights and Indian novelists.

English can be a mighty sword, but Desai uses it as deftly as a stiletto, calling up scenes, vivid as movies, with an economy of expression that makes her among the most elegant of Indian writers. She uses spare language to tell full stories of desire and disappointment.

Her parents make education a birthright for brother Arun, but the girls' only way out is to marry. The flirty younger sister soon does, moving to

Check schedules,
create watch lists,
watch previews
and more.
Powered by [meel'ee](#)



Get post-gazette.com
on your PDA.
[Click here.](#)

the big city for a life of shopping, but Uma, neither beautiful nor charming, has just her dowry to attract prospects. It does, leading to two unhappy matches: One prospective bridegroom skedaddles after turning her dowry into a brick house for his unscrupulous family, and the other, hoping to pay off some debts, neglects to mention he already has a wife.

What is to become of her?

“The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening -- perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect at all.”

She returns home to live with her parents, fetching them sweets and tea from the kitchen. And as empty as her life is there, she escapes the tragedy of her beautiful and talented cousin Anamika, honored by her family only to the extent that they frame the scholarship letter from Oxford but do not let her go. Instead, they make a match and give Anamika away to a husband and his family who make her their slave.

Part Two is set in Massachusetts during the summer between college terms when Arun is bunking with an American family. It is an overwhelming experience, but if America is a feast in the bounty displayed in the supermarkets and on the suburban grills, Arun cannot partake. Arun's well-meaning hostess, Mrs. Patton, ignores her meat-loving husband and bulimic daughter and focuses on Arun, swamping him with raw vegetables and dry lentils.

Arun is baffled by the abundant world he has fallen into, confused by the deep neglect in this place of plenty.

“He had traveled and he had stumbled into what was a plastic representation of what was known at home; not the real thing -- which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised -- but the unreal thing -- clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment.”

“Fasting, Feasting” is a delicate and moving story about the “sticky web of family conflict.” Its intricacies and vivid images resonate from one culture across an ocean to another, leaving the reader unsettled but more aware of a rich fabric of feeling behind the veil of ordinary life.

Mary Rawson is a free-lance critic.

[Back to top](#)  [E-mail this story](#) 

[Search](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Help](#) | [Corrections](#)

Copyright ©1997-2009 PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.