

The Meagre Tarmac

by Clark Blaise

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Reviewed by Madeline Coopsammy

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”

— Francis Bacon, *Of Studies*

The Meagre Tarmac easily belongs in the last category. This book has been described by Joyce Carol Oates as “a novel in short story form.” The author advises that the stories are intended to be read in order. The book is a compact, dramatic delineation of the lives of several successful East Indian immigrants to North America, men who have made vast fortunes in Silicon Valley and who now live in upscale areas in large cities or suburbs of the United States. Toronto makes an appearance in the hilarious story “Potsy and Pansy,” and Montreal in “The Quality of Life.” In his depiction of present-day India and the viciousness that can be part of the Indian joint family or arranged marriage system, Blaise is brutally honest, removing the gloss of idealism that often pervades these cultural issues.

The Meagre Tarmac is imbued with startling observations about North American life, as seen through the eyes of Indian immigrants, and acute commentaries on life in various communities of India’s complex culture. Though the mostly male protagonists have been financially successful beyond their wildest dreams, many of them yearn to be back in India, naively believing they can recover the carefree times of their youth. Those who return find a new India, with changes that time and development have wrought on their previously privileged lives. Some of these lives were led in mansions fortified by high walls, replete with servants and guarded by chowkidars or gatemen, their fathers belonging to British-style clubs after the demise of the Raj.

The stories veer between California – places like San Francisco, San Jose, Stanford, and Berkeley – and childhood recollections of Bangalore (the “meagre tarmac” of the title story), Bombay, Calcutta, Goa, and other Indian locales. While the scents and sounds of these Indian places are skillfully evoked, important issues from history are also woven into the stories. In the words of the old chowkidar who revered Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian leader who defied Britain by siding with Germany, “Mountbatten’s revenge on Nehru” (for his alleged affair with Lady Mountbatten) was “slicing us up in Partition.”

Lines like these make this book unforgettable. The characters stay with the reader, characters like Pansy, a famous Canadian Parsee movie star; the rebellious California-raised daughter who will enter Stanford at thirteen; the Jewish-American waitress, familiar with Parsees and Indian food; Miss Wu, the go-to girl of the movie set; and the Russian émigré’s daughter, who wears a midriff-baring t-shirt over her well-endowed chest – “All this and brains too,” to the consternation of the middle-aged Indian man she is interviewing.

This is a book to be savoured, to be read more than once, complex, entertaining, satiric, and humane at once. Clark Blaise, a white Canadian-American, described by Margaret Atwood as “a master storyteller and border crosser,” has been married to Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born novelist, for almost fifty years. ❧

Madeline Coopsammy was born in Trinidad and received her early education there. Her work has been published in anthologies and journals in North America, and her poetry collection *Prairie Journey* was published by TSAR Publications of Toronto.

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