

TREE HUGGER

*Kiran Desai's first novel
doesn't waste a word*

**HULLABALOO IN THE GUAVA
ORCHARD.** By Kiran Desai.
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BY PAUL SIGNORELLI

KIRAN DESAI has brewed an unusual stew in her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. The ingredients include the protagonist, Sampath, the village idiot who climbs into a guava tree and immediately becomes the village wise man; his mother, who displays a penchant for cooking with unorthodox items; his sister, whose beloved hardly notices her until she bites off a piece of his ear; and a religious zealot who literally ends up in the soup.

The elements of the story are hardly original. Italo Calvino has offered us a tree dweller in *Il barone rampante* (The baron in the trees). Jerzy Kosinski has bequeathed to us his simple-minded philosopher Chance the Gardener in the pages of *Being There*, and Susan Trott has entertained us with her two "Holy Man" books, featuring a character who dispenses simple wisdom to the masses.

Desai provides a diverting addition to this particular canon of works with her charmingly literate and poetically scripted fable, and there is hardly a wasted word in the book. We enter the story in the drought-plagued village of Shahkot, in India, where Kulfi Chawla is pregnant with her soon-to-be-born son Sampath (Good Fortune). The drought breaks just when Kulfi's water does, with the onslaught of a fierce, elemental storm.

The neighbors assure her that "her son was destined for greatness, that the world, large and mysterious beyond Shahkot, had taken notice of him." Imagine the family's surprise, then, when this fortunate child has a less than stellar scholastic career—failing his courses and displaying little initiative. Picture their mortification when he barely manages to function in his job as a low-level postal employee, spending his time surreptitiously reading everyone's mail. Relish the scene in which he loses his job because he disrupts his boss's daughter's wedding by dressing in her finery and then disrobing, before the wedding guests, in a fountain on the family estate.

It's not difficult to understand why Sampath, at this point in his life, might seek refuge in a guava tree, and Desai effectively exploits the material on behalf of her readers. Every twist of the plot is delicious. There are the crowds of people who, unaware of his postal voyeurism, stand in awe of Sampath's ability to reveal the most intimate details of their lives. There's the father who immediately finds ways to make money—by selling advertising space in the abandoned guava orchard, staging a photo session in the tree, and reselling the alms purchased on-site and then left in homage at the base of Sampath's tree each evening. There's even Sampath's groundbreaking "Sermon in the Guava Tree"—in which he establishes a reputation for delivering comforting aphorisms—and his disciples, a pack of unruly, thieving, inebriated monkeys who provide his spiritual name, "the Monkey Baba."

His family is entertainingly poignant and bizarre at the same time. His self-absorbed sister Pinky, for example, has a unique way of expressing herself during moments of passion. Her ear-biting gesture is, of course, not easily understood by the poor boy or his family, and Pinky must take extraordinary steps. Desai outdoes herself with the letter of apology she creates for Pinky:

"I am so sorry to have bitten your ear," the girl writes. "But it was done only out of affection. Please understand, the sight of you filled my heart with so much emotion, but it unfortunately came out in the wrong way. Here's wishing you a speedy recovery."

Pinky, of course, can be expected to find a way to ruin this twisted expression of remorse. She finds the object of her affection leaning out of the window of his parents' house, decides to deliver the message by attaching it to a rock and tossing it to him, and succeeds in hitting him squarely in the jaw.

"An hour later, he sat still dazed ...," Desai writes, "pondering the strange possibilities of affection. Was this love? he wondered."

Whether it's love or a perverse twist of fate, it is indicative of the delicacies awaiting those readers who will create a hullabaloo in local bookstores as they try to obtain a copy of this fanciful novel.

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