

Baumgartner's Bombay

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A somewhat paradoxical argument against a work of fiction is that it is 'made up'. Baumgartner's Bombay is exactly of this character, as it depicts the life of a German Jew, hounded out of the country still as a boy (the writer is a bit vague here, you certainly get the impression that as he is being sent to India, the main protagonist is still a boy not yet unweaned from his mothers lap, yet when in transit in Venice he is already a young man), finding a refuge in India, in which he is kept in camp as an enemy alien under the British. The story is told in retrospect unfolding a life which fails to grip you. Maybe because it is too 'made up', the writer writing about things of which she has no first hand knowledge, only her imagination to breath life into what is essentially second-hand knowledge gleaned from books. In short the dilemma of every writer of historical fiction, but when it comes to the Jews of Germany, there is no need to write historical fiction, there are enough first-hand experiences to draw from. Thus the book, as a work of fiction, is ultimately unsatisfactory.

True, she is an Indian writer, and one turns to her to get a first-hand look at the everyday life of India. Sure, there are nice passages, also, to be honest, imaginatively evoked ones set in foreign Germany, still the book fails also here to provide what one is looking for. The taste, the smell, the very 'qualia' of what it means to live and simply be in India.

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