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The God of small things

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The book made a splash in 1997. It earned the young Indian author an advance of half a million pounds, and carried the Booker Prize. Well-deserved? Opinions were, as usual, mixed. Dissenting voices dismissed it as a concession to populism, some even rejected it outright as 'execrable'. It had of course much going for it. A young Indian voice. Exoticism. The opportunity to learn about Kerala, where the plot is plotted. I read an excerpt of it in *Granta* back in France in 1997. I must say that it intrigued me, and I got a copy of it, in fact the first book I ever ordered on the Internet. I brought it to our retreat up north, started reading it, lost interest, and since then it has been left at the cabin. Now in anticipation of our pending visit to India and Kerala I decided to read through it in order to get into the mood.

It is novel written by means of a fragmented and jumbled chronology. This is a common trick, not to say a cheap one¹. It has certain advantages, because it mystifies, and thus suspends the fascination of the reader, who is continually awarded by piecemeal illuminations. The story can be told straightforwardly enough. It deals with an old Christian family in Kerala. The father beats the mother until the son is big enough to confront him. There is also a daughter in the family who is arranged to marry a good-for-nothing drunkard up in the tea-growing districts. Out of this union a pair of fraternal twins are born, one boy one girl. The mother divorces and returns to the family. This is a minor scandal. The brother goes to England with high expectations, meets a British woman whom he marries and fathers a daughter with. After the first exotic excitement has worn off, she divorces him and he returns too to Kerala. At the opening of the book some time have passed. It is in the early sixties and the twins are around ten, as is their British cousin. Her stepfather, the husband of her mother and the ex-wife, has met with an accident and died. The ex-husband has always kept up friendly relations with his ex-wife and invites her to come to Kerala. They are on the way to meet them at Kochin airport, but before that they are going to once again watch the movie 'The Sound of Music'². In the intermission the twin-boy goes to the toilet and is molested in the process by a seller of soda and candy in the lobby. The cousins get along and embark on a little adventure involving a trip on the river. The boat capsizes, the British cousin drowns, and a dalit, a friend of the family, and the lover of the twins mother is accused of abduction by a spinster aunt, and manhandled by the police to the point of dying. It is all an unmitigated tragedy.

¹ One of Aldous Huxley's novels was written in that way, and one critic actually took the trouble to reassemble it into proper chronological order, finding more or less to his surprise, that it certainly did not make too much difference. I was somewhat aghast at someone should take the trouble to do so.

² The whole scene is set in the early sixties, 1962 or so, the movie 'Sound of Music' was not released until 1965. As known it was a huge popular success, while it was thrashed by the critics, some of whom were reportedly unable to see it all through.

The uncle loses his daughter and only child, his ex-wife returns devastated to England, the mother is inconsolable and dies a few years later, still a young woman. The twins are separated, the girl staying on in Kerala, while the boy is moved to his father in the north. When they get re-united again, the boy is permanently damaged, reduced to an almost autistic existence.

Is it a good book? Or is it when all is said and done, a bit too melodramatic? There are some standard criteria in which to judge a novel. Plot, evocations be it of locale or the times, and character depiction. Do we really care for the characters, do they hold our interest? Then in addition one may look for beauty of language, often intimately connected with its evocative powers, richness of information, which of course should be considered peripheral to the concerns of a novel, but which not seldom provide the lasting reward of reading one. Finally one may marvel at cleverness, be it of dialogue or philosophical asides. Plot is rather trivial, and I have already sketched its outlines. Plot is necessary of course, often it is the one and only thing which makes us turn the pages. The plot can be inane, it can be incongruous and strain credibility, but if the literary aspects are done well, this does not really matter at all. The most important thing to ask about this particular novel is whether it makes a vivid evocation of living in India at that time and place. Now, India is at least to Western readers a most exotic country, bordering on the magic. It is also a country whose daily life tends to overwhelm the casual visitor, being bombarded by an embarrassment of sensory riches, cluttering his space, visually, aurally and olfactorily. Does this come across? Or maybe it is an unfair question to ask, how much of Indian literature has really conveyed this richness of detail, that every visitor is struck by? If you are honest very few. In fact who would be the Kipling of today, that writer who now is neglected and not thought of as fully politically correct, but who managed after all to define India to a generation of Edwardian readers. Roy writes indeed slowly and with a great fondness for details. Still the lushness of India is only peripherally glimpsed as in an underdeveloped print. She should not be faulted for not trying hard, but trying hard is not always tantamount to succeeding. It is richly written, in fact at times overwritten, and as such, one would surmise liable to convey exactly this characteristic overflow that characterizes the Indian experience. Yet, I must admit to a certain disappointment. After all what one expects is not entirely unreasonable, and I am reminded of the poetic evocations of 'Twilight in Delhi'. Finally when it comes to character do we care? Obviously the novel is, if not in actual plot at least in conception, autobiographical, and that shows in particular in the delineation of character. This has some advantages. Characters whom are drawn from life, so to speak, tend to be more well-rounded and full-bodied, than those who are merely made-up. That part of the novel is all competently done, even if none of the people really stays with you afterwards.

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