

THE DEATH OF VISHNU BY MNIL SURI



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67 of 72 people found the following review helpful.

Simply Amazing! Mind Boggling

By Vivek Tejuja

On a breezy Sunday afternoon, I happened to read "The Death Of Vishnu" by Manil Suri. I picked up this book with great trepidation. Also, on the personal front, who would like to read about a man dying? That's what I thought until I read this one. As the title goes, the narrative also comes directly to the point - that of Vishnu, an odd job man, laying dead on an apartment landing of Mumbai. This is where the crux of the story lies.

Here we meet the Pathaks and the Asranis, two arch rival neighbours; what's worse is that they share the same kitchen and each claims to be taking care of Vishnu better.

Then on the other hand there are the Jalals - the husband who doesn't believe in any religion and just wants to gain spiritualism the easy way; the son Salim who is madly in love with the Asranis' daughter Kavita (here comes the Hindu-Muslim divide).

Not to forget the Tanejas - Vinod Taneja whose wife's death has left him with so much grief that he just doesn't get out of his apartment anymore...

And what's surprising is that all these characters are intertwined with one. And the connecting factor: Vishnu! The story binds itself based on what others perceive Vishnu to be - his mother, the Pathaks, the Jalals, the Asranis, Padmini, Kavita, and others like the scavenger and the sweeper working in the apartment. There is a holistic perspective to the point that it infringes on who Vishnu really is and what he embodies for all the bystanders.

There is a singular thread running through the book - that of isolation on various levels. The Pathaks and Asranis share a kitchen, almost to the point of invading each other's privacy and yet are so distant and cold. Vishnu is dead and yet no one wants to claim him and take him to the nearest morgue. Her husband and son, seeking refuge in intellectualism and staunch belief, leave Mrs Jalal alone.

Vishnu in another realm altogether believes that he is God (or rather is made to believe that by Mr Jalal) - Vishnu, who had ten reincarnations. His love for... Padmini, his longing for Kavita, and his thoughts on living make the book one delicious course.

This book is not an easy read. There are layers and sub-layers to this course though. On the surface, things are quite simple and easy to understand, but what Mr Suri has created is something else. He has created what one might call "a quilt of emotions" - right from love to the isolation one feels in the metropolis to the bare human nature. In short, Manil Suri has created a Universe in an apartment of Bombay - a city so huge and yet so cold and distant. So uninviting.

The spiritualism as one would expect from this book is on many levels rather ambiguous and unclear. In the sense that while the author tries to portray the elements of reincarnation and giving up on worldly pleasures - like Mr Jalal often tries doing - it all is actually a mockery of the same. One of the redeeming features of the book is that it is not written from an outsider's perspective. It is carved by an Indian living in India and breathing the air, which was what Vishnu did. An ordinary man elevated to something extraordinary to

satisfy the superstitions and religious notions of the upper notches of society. This is where the element of comedy throws itself in your face.

The prose is certainly clever; however, the ending is left hanging. Possibly the author expects the reader to decide that for himself. In many ways, this resembles a grand chorus from a huge and wonderful comic opera, with all the inhabitants of the building singing at once. And underneath all the voices wailing about their personal concerns is the insistent bass of Vishnu as he prepares to die. Dealing with the most basic aspects of religion, love, and human kindness in a city setting which challenges its inhabitants to the limit, Suri creates a warm, funny, and very human drama of a every man's search for meaning in life.

Suri writes with obvious affection about a Bombay perhaps already lost, evoking easily its moods and attitudes, its light and smells. One can almost feel the heavy evening sea breeze, taste the roasted peanuts sold in paper cones along the sea wall, or see the Maharaja looking down from the Air India hoarding. A Bombay that rings true with its Irani Cafe, cigarettewalla, and radiowalla. Manil Suri's sharp eye for detail and natural ability to create a strong sense of place and time define his considerable talent, and one can look forward with a certain assuredness to its maturing in his promised books on the other two Gods of the Hindu trinity, Brahma and Shiva.

33 of 34 people found the following review helpful.

Fabulous

By San

The Death of Vishnu has become one of my absolute favorite novels. Although some reviews have called its characters a representative microcosm of India, I believe the message is much simpler and much broader than that. This is a book about human nature, in all its ugliness and glory. The characters are superbly well drawn--sometimes they come across as despicable, other times sympathetic, but they are always heartbreakingly real. Watch how all thier seemingly altruistic acts have selfish human motives behind them and you will recognize yourself. One of the nicest things about this book is the odd little quirks that Manil Suri gives his characters. Mr. Jalal (my favorite) trying to burn himself with pink candles in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment, Mrs. Pathak serving kraft cheese as a foreign delicacy, Kavita's obsession with Hindi films, Sheetal's dying wish to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records...and of course Vishnu, who starts to wonder if he might be god. It's a rich tapestry, and so very different from anything I've ever read before...Despite the aimless nature of the plot, the novel still built up a great deal of suspense at the end, and unlike most supposedly "suspenseful" stories I honestly had no idea how everything was going to turn out. And when I finally finished it I was left with a greater understanding of how human beings can be so horrible in so many little ways. I believe this is a book everyone would benefit from reading, not just people specifically interested in India or Indian fiction. However, it should be noted that there is a great deal of Hindu mythology in this book. Being Indian myself I was familiar with most of it, but other readers might want to get a little background information beforehand.

29 of 31 people found the following review helpful.

A Quiet Flash of Brilliance!

By Grady Harp

Difficult to believe - that this is a first novel! Manil Suri has chosen a theme both timeless and extraordinarily unique as he sculpts the life of a dying man (the proces is not morbid, just a fine substrate for weaving a tale) through the overheard conversations of the folk living in the boarding house on whose steps he lies. In many ways this short novel is like extending that flash of light when all of our life appears before us just at the moment of death - extending it long enough to relish the myriad aspects of living. This is a last gasp...but filled with so much treasure that you'll find yourself hoping it never ends. Suri's writing style is unfettered, concise, colorful, and always maintains a simplicity of style that begs for revisiting. An auspicious debut. Highly recommended.

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