
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal

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petty thief who pretends to be a Rasta and who was paid to help steal the mask, wants much more money, as he wrongly assumes it will be sold for millions. In contrast to Gus's idealism concerning Africa and bitterness toward white England, there is Dr. Okigbo, a vicious, powerful, corrupt businessman and politician who escaped from Nigeria after being imprisoned by an even more corrupt, violent, tyrannical military government. Okigbo financed the stealing of the mask, which he wants to use to negotiate his return to power and status. Justine Oyebanjoh does not know that her father died in prison in Nigeria and foolishly hopes to use the mask to bargain for his release. Osmond, the son of a former minor chief, has served in the Nigerian army and seen opponents of the government massacred; he knows it is time to forget dreams of an ideal Africa as home, better to begin again in England.

Bruce King
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Muriel Spark. *Reality and Dreams*. Boston. Houghton Mifflin. 1997 (© 1996). 160 pages. \$22. ISBN 0-395-83811-8.

The wonder of Muriel Spark's latest novel is how her cast of unsavory characters and their selfish, ignorant actions slowly, almost slyly, pull on the reader's interest until a sure identification with and loyalty toward them ensues. That Spark can make the unlovable familiar and comfortable as an old shoe is just one of her writing gifts. Her wicked sense of humor is of course another, and it has ample opportunity to show itself amid the comings and goings of Tom Richards and his extended family.

Tom is a film director whose latest film crashes to a halt when he crashes to the ground from his crane. The crane is an unnecessary vanity which Tom's crew has tried to replace with the more modern aerial shot, but Tom likes the view from on high, enjoys very much feeling like a god ordering his creation into something less messy and chaotic than real life. During Tom's painful and protracted convalescence, the reader has the opportunity to meet his rich American wife Claire, their unlovely daughter Marigold, and Tom's daughter from a previous marriage, the glamorous Cora.

With their assorted lovers and husbands and with Tom's constant philandering, the novel's world is awash with love, lust, disillusion, and banality. England is suffering through its own economic crisis, and so Spark makes full use of the idea of "redundancy," the euphemism for losing one's job. As the various family members are made redundant by their companies, they find themselves redundant in their marriage beds and homes as well. Everyone is changing partners: Cora's husband has a fling with Marigold; Tom's mistress's husband has a fling with Cora. Tom of course is constantly sleeping with the actresses in his films, and Claire has a lover who can also double as a chiropractor for Tom should his own fail to show for an appointment.

It's all so civilized and so ridiculous; yet Spark's writing compels the story forward, and the reader laughingly follows. The film underway is first called *The Hamburger Girl* in homage to the face Tom once glimpsed on a camping trip. He has transformed that image into his vision of the

True, yet as the film is taken over by others, Spark uses the title changes to skewer artistic pretensions: *I'll Kill You If You Die*, *The Lunatic Fringe*, *The Lump Sum*, *Unfinished Business*.

Tom tries to make sense of his professional and personal life; he is surprised to discover that his children and his lovers don't always like him. He rediscovers his love for Claire. By novel's end, the crane is back for a new film, this one featuring Marigold as Cedric, a fifth-century Celt whose prophecies about the future bring him nothing but trouble. And once again the crane brings misfortune, but Tom and Claire seem prepared to carry on; their wealth inures them to so many of the problems the novel has exposed. In Spark's world, love is a luxury which luxury alone ensures.

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Meera Syal. *Anita and Me*. New York. New Press. 1997 (© 1996). 328 pages. \$23. ISBN 1-56584-372-X.

Anita and Me is a remarkably good first novel cleverly combining, and often inverting, many formulas. Part of the amusement is that you already know what is likely to happen, but the characters, location, ethnicities, and social setting are different and challenge traditions of gender, race, even class, in such stories. Think of an ironic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* set in a English mining town, with Huck the well-brought-up daughter of Indian immigrants and Tom the unwanted daughter of the town tart. The frontiers here include race, class, nationality, and generations, while the message is the need for community rather than a proclamation of individualism. Syal is consciously writing a black, feminist, postcolonial novel, but those are as much tired conventions to be played with as is the bildungsroman.

Anita and Me is a tale of childhood friendships and a portrait of a small but complex society. The narrator is a nine-year-old Indian girl in the 1960s who lives in a dreary ex-mining town near Birmingham among a white, downwardly drifting British working class where only the women are still employed. Meena rebels against the polite ways of her educated parents; although she lies and steals money, she is more adventuresome than bad. Not wanting the confined world of the Indian immigrants who continually visit one another, she imitates and tries to become the best friend of Anita, a toughened, nihilistic product of a broken British working-class family with its violence, poverty, and resentment. The story takes us into Meena's eleventh year, by which time she learns more about her own family's history, including the horrors of the Partition, and understands that they have come to England for the future of their children. The warm, binding ways of her family and their friends are contrasted to those of Anita's mother, who is racist and promiscuous and who abandons her children.

My summary and interpretation destroys the feel of Meera Syal's often amusing and witty novel. The treatment of English speech is clever and precise, the narration is understated, the story full of events, twists, and characters; the work is more like farce than the moralizing tale which it too obviously becomes toward the conclu-

sion. Syal is a television actress as well as the screenwriter of *Bhaji on the Beach*. Television film conventions are interestingly integrated with those of the novel. The organization and movement is by distinct scenes, each of which builds to a major action. Instead of psychology or social exploration, there is recognition and strong sense of location. Cultural nuances are visualized. The characters, even when bland, are forcefully present stereotypes. Even the excellent notation of British class and regional speech works well because treated as a given. Shaved hair means skinhead, violent, racist, hopeless, futureless. I will want to read whatever Syal writes in the future.

Anita and Me was published in England by Flamingo (a HarperCollins imprint) but in the USA by New Press, a not-for-profit alternative publisher of novels by Tahar Ben Jelloun, Patrick Chamoiseau, Tibor Fischer, Romesh Gunsekera, and even Marguerite Duras. Have the insanities of American commercial publishing and the dumbing down of a supposedly postcolonial America really reached the point that such authors cannot be published for profit?

Bruce King
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Paul Theroux. *Kowloon Tong*. Boston. Houghton Mifflin. 1997. 243 pages. \$23. ISBN 0-395-86029-6.

Through Paul Theroux's long and varied career as a writer, he has shown himself to be an acute observer of foreign cultures. Whether he is recording his railway experiences everywhere from England to Asia, or exploring, through fiction, the lives of characters who find themselves for personal or professional reasons in cultures not their own, Theroux never shies from strong opinions and often provides his readers with rare insights and local color.

Kowloon Tong, subtitled "A Novel of Hong Kong," is no exception. Set on the eve of the handover of Hong Kong by the British back to the Chinese, it explores the cultural zeitgeist of British settlers living a life that is more British

than the one being lived back home and the Chinese who are ready to reclaim what they believe is rightfully theirs.

While the premise of the novel is intriguing, it is difficult to imagine a more disagreeable cast of characters. Neville "Bunt" Mullard's family has been in Hong Kong for a generation, co-owners with a local Chinese man of a factory that produces stitched insignias. Mullard is a mother-obsessed drudge who fears change but ultimately comes to embrace one of his Chinese workers as his one chance at salvation. His mother, a racist at heart and greedy to boot, is only too happy to sell their family business to the mysterious Mr. Hung, who is also, perhaps, a murderer. The unfolding of the plot does not involve much in the way of suspense. Instead, the reader sees more and more, often repeated, evidence of how the British residents have failed to understand the Chinese (mainly by willfully ignoring them in favor of preserving their own imported culture) and how the Chinese have assimilated the British only to the extent that they could take advantage of them. Regardless of Deng Xiaoping's pledge that life will go on as before, life in China will clearly be different. It is hard to imagine, though, that it will be particularly worse or better, all things considered, than the life portrayed here. As Bunt himself thinks, "Hong Kong was just an anthill with a Union Jack flying over it. The flag was changing but Hong Kong would remain an anthill."

It is difficult not to read this novel as an allegory of life in Hong Kong under British rule, and not just because of the subtitle. In the end, the "selfish and sneering and greedy and spineless" British come off looking like dull, narrow-minded opportunists, whereas the Chinese, though "always out of focus and the nearer you got to them, the harder they were to see," seem infinitely more human while not completely trustworthy. As involving as this message may sound in summary, the book itself is often repetitious and almost unrelievedly dreary. In the end, Theroux's eye for exotic detail is *Kowloon Tong's* central saving grace.

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John Updike. *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. New York. Fawcett Columbine / Knopf. 1996. 491 pages. \$25.95 (\$12.95 paper). ISBN 0-449-91121-7.

———. *Toward the End of Time*. New York. Knopf. 1997. 334 pages. \$25. ISBN 0-375-40006-0.

John Updike's seventeenth novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, covers eighty years and four generations of an American family. In the first few pages its basic theme is adumbrated. It is 1910, and in Patterson, New Jersey, D. W. Griffith is directing a film titled *The Call to Arms*. Mary Pickford, the movie's star, "sweltering in the tights, velvet cape, and the heavy brocaded tunic of a page," faints, while simultaneously a few blocks away Clarence Arthur Wilmot, a Presbyterian minister, "feels the last particles of his faith leave him." The moviemakers disappear immediately, but Wilmot's loss of faith in God affects the Wilmot family through three more generations. What Updike suggests as religious faith's replacement in American

