

## An Extraordinary Destiny

**Shekhar Paleja**

Brindle and Glass (May 9, 2017)

Softcover (272pp)

978-1-927366-59-2

*Characters' stories influence one another compellingly, making An Extraordinary Destiny hold together despite its wide-ranging structure.*

In *An Extraordinary Destiny*, Shekhar Paleja weaves together a number of characters' stories, all of them influenced in some way by predestiny and the consequences of a few choices. Though largely a coming-of-age story about Anush—the son of a successful Hindu businessman in Bombay—it also tells the stories of his father and of Anush's possible wife, switching perspectives and moving between the story's present day and flashbacks. The result is a well-rounded picture of these characters and how they ended up where they are.

The India-set story opens with the aftermath of the partition with Pakistan, when Varoon Sharma flees Lahore with his father, then skips ahead to Varoon's son, Anush, growing up as an only child with a distant father and a kundali (an astrological birth chart) allegedly promising him the title “extraordinary destiny.” By the 1990s, when the bulk of the story takes place, Anush is a young adult trying to make his own life while living in his father's shadow, falling for an exciting woman he meets at a club, and learning woodworking based on the miniatures his late grandfather left behind. At the same time, Anush deals with the consequences of his wounding of another boy during his childhood, and he begins to learn about the questionable choices his father made to create their current life.

*An Extraordinary Destiny* also tells the parallel story of Jyoti, a young Gujarati woman studying in London who falls for an Irishman below her social standing and has to deal with her overly protective mother's attempts to arrange a successful marriage for her. Through flashbacks, it also tells the full story of Varoon's younger years, filling in some of the gaps the book introduced in other characters' knowledge and altering readers' assumptions. These lives play out in an India that is going through its own massive changes, with a rapidly changing business culture, the influences of globalization, and conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir and the development of nuclear weapons.

These characters' stories influence one another compellingly, making *An Extraordinary Destiny* hold together despite its wide-ranging structure, and helping it reveal how each character carries with him the choices of generations.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Religion 2017)

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