

Is It Me?

Rathan Kumar

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George Waldorf meets the girl of his dreams. Literally. When the woman haunts his nights materializes in broad daylight, George is compelled to uncover the truth behind his vivid dreamscapes. This premise makes Rathan Kumar's book *Is It Me?* an intriguing journey into George's subconscious and perhaps into his past lives in an original, though underdeveloped, debut novel by Kumar.

By day, George lives and works in Philadelphia, hanging out with his buddy, Richard. At night, however, he seems to travel back in time, where he rides a jet-black horse and meets a beautiful woman riding a pure-white horse through a thick forest. George keeps the recurrent dreams to himself until one day he meets Tina Lawler and feels certain she is the lady he has dreamed of for years.

Kumar uses this mysterious meeting as a jumping-off point for exploring the meaning of George's dreams. Is he going crazy? Could his dreams really be memories? Soon enough, George is on the analyst's couch, under hypnosis, and remembering things from an earlier century. He needs to figure out how this story-within-a-story, about a Georgia slave in the 1840s, fits with his life in the twenty-first century.

The many questions about history, reincarnation, and fate that arise in George's dreams are compelling, but his actual experience is more of a sketch than a finished painting. We know what happens, both in the present day and in pre-Civil War times, because Kumar tells us, not because we experience things through George's eyes. More introspection on George's part would be welcome. He is grappling with some pretty stunning possibilities, and yet he moves swiftly from one revelation to another without deep consideration. When his doctor suggests a road trip to explore the possibility that his dreams reflect real life, for instance, George instantly agrees, as though traveling into his own visions was an everyday, run-of-the-mill experience.

Is It Me? covers a lot of ground, spilling several intergenerational secrets in less than 150 pages. Kumar delivers much of the tale through dialogue, with mixed results. Some conversations ring true, such as those between longtime friends George and Richard, who exchange barbs and support in equal measure. Other conversations are incongruously formal and lacking familiarity, particularly between long-time spouses. For instance, Tina greets her husband with, "Hi, Tom, how was your day?" and he replies, "Not bad and how was it for you?" The conversation continues in this vein, offering little insight into the relationship.

Most of the tale comes out of George's hypnosis sessions, in which he "remembers" a passionate romance between a black slave and his white mistress 170 years in the past. Here, Kumar frequently switches perspectives, from first- to third-person, apparently to show the intertwined relationship of present-day George and his enslaved counterpart. Unfortunately, the shifts interrupt the flow of a potentially engaging story.

Kumar's story is rich with possibilities for expansion. He could, for instance, further develop the racial issues introduced with the black and white horse imagery, and the Georgia plantation setting. Readers may also wish for a more intimate look at the day-to-day lives of the characters, especially the historical lovers, than Kumar provides with

this brief trip into the past.

SHEILA M. TRASK (June 20, 2013)

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