

Outside the Lines

Ameera Patel

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In Ameera Patel's novel *Outside the Lines*, narcissism and addiction blur the lines of reality.

Drug dealers kidnap Cathleen, but her distracted, middle-class family fails to notice her disappearance. Meanwhile, the family's housekeeper, Flora, nurses a secret obsession with Runyayaro, their mute house painter, who becomes embroiled in the family's dark drama. And Flora's drug-addicted son, Zilindile, struggles to maintain appearances with his Muslim Indian girlfriend, Farhana.

Descriptive language draws these characters out. Hazy, dreamlike images capture Cathleen's drug-addled state of mind, while Farhana's uncomfortable truce between her sheltered upbringing and the fast, furious lifestyle that Zilindile represents is mirrored in alternating scenes of indecision and quiet rebellion. Runyayaro lacks the language to codify his feelings, but his observations ground the narrative, as when he observes, of Flora's work,

An outsider being on the inside, she is attached to a family like acquaintances. By the end of the day he can at least leave, but she's there from before he arrives and is still there long after he leaves.

Immigrant culture, class disparities, and social marginalization lead to momentum. Runyayaro's sense of culture shock is darkly humorous, and his critical assessment of immigrant marginalization is crucial. Farhana and Zilindile's relationship highlights the class disparities that exist between immigrant groups; illusions of economic and social privilege are a primary source of conflict.

Despite the near tragedies that consume each of the characters, there is little sense of redemption. The book ends as it begins, with stubborn adherence to the status quo. Individuals are loath to confront their own fears and emotions; instead, they resign themselves to a repetitive cycle of abuse and neglect.

Outside the Lines is a sharp novel that critiques how personal excess damages those who indulge in it.

NANCY POWELL (May / June 2020)

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