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So Good in Black

Sunetra Gupta
Clockroot Books (March 2011)
Softcover $18.00 (380pp)
978-1-56656-853-1

Although a decade has passed since Sunetra Gupta's last novel, this lucid and mesmerizing masterpiece shows she has used every minute of that time wisely. Told in memories and fragments, it chronicles the history of a group of friends and lovers who are brought together when a member of their group, a journalist who has just opened a women's shelter, is killed. They gather at a home on the ocean in Bengal on the evening of the expected Transit of Venus, in 2004, to mourn and solve the mystery of Damini's death.

Gupta uses a disjointed narrative to mimic the random recall of memory, something she accomplishes with superb skill and manifests through highly stylized, minimalist prose and distilled pieces of dialogue. As pointed as those fragments are, she also manages to employ rich and evocative details to summon the lush sensory atmosphere of Bengal. Told in alternating points-of-view—the first-person voice of Max Gate and the third-person memories of the others—the reader gets a full and textured tapestry of each person and how they connect to one another.

Max is a middle-aged travel writer who has known Damini for years; she was the cousin and best friend of his lover, Ela. Piers O'Reilly is Max's ex-brother-in-law and friend. Barbara is Max's ex-wife, who is now remarried with children. Byron Mallick is an older, wealthy businessman who owns the oceanside villa on the Bay of Bengal where they all meet. Byron is also thought by many to be responsible for Damini's death: He sent milk from one of his factories to her shelter and it was found to actually be chalk, and Piers is convinced that Byron killed Damini in order to mask his culpability.

Through the ruminative first-person thoughts and accounts of Max and the memories of others, Byron's greed, generosity, intelligence, and charm make for a compelling and flawed character that seemingly defies judgment. Gupta uses the Transit of Venus, which is supposed to bring with it a moment of heightened consciousness, to emphasize each character's sense of regret and remorse about the choices they have made.

A philosophical inquiry into the boundaries of friendship and guilt makes *So Good in Black* a book that causes us to examine our sense of loyalty as a society. It delves into the dark and hidden corners of our relationships and asks if we truly know ourselves, our friends, and our lovers. This is an exquisite, mournful novel that focuses on the intersection of memory and reality to reveal how, and how often, we deceive ourselves.
MONICA CARTER (September / October 2011)

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