Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

The Guptas
Fred Gupta
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Immigration can bring out the best and worst in people, a fact fully illustrated in *The Guptas*.

The saga begins in the late 1800s in India when Gani Gupta loses his father. Not yet a teenager and counted on to support his family, Gani displays a natural gift for bartering and he and his brothers and mother prosper until gangsters destroy the marketplace where the boys work, lynching Mr. Bahl, Gani's employer and mentor.

The brothers are then sent to find a new life in South Africa with an uncle where they quickly encounter racial prejudice. Struggling to get along amongst the Boers and *pommies*, they settle in Vryburg, and with the support of the uncle's childhood friend, Javeen Patel, they become merchants.

A good portion of *The Guptas* is devoted to the life of Gani, the author's grandfather, and it is a delightful story, but sheer enthusiasm leads the author to embellish dialogue, facts and feelings he cannot possibly know. For example: "When he reached the farthest stall, he launched immediately into his prepared sales pitch. "Kind sir, I am working for Mr. Bahl, the greengrocer … Would you be interested in any of the fine fruits or vegetables I have to offer?"

The latter half of the book follows the author and his father, about whom he writes "The spirit of adventure must have skipped a generation, because my father, Ali, did not dream of exploring the world." While in his teens, Ali had been thrust into the role of managing the family's store and, "…was content to look after Gani's business rather than going in search of his own."

Born in 1952, Fred Gupta offers a nuanced view of growing up in South Africa as apartheid grinded away. Often bullied by the mixed race children at Mafeking Methodist Colored School, Gupta eventually graduated from the University of Durban-Westville and became the first "colored" employee of a firm of chartered accountants. Beneath the strictures of

apartheid, his life was schizophrenic. Accepted and appreciated by some in his firm and rejected by others, he even dated, surreptitiously, a white woman. But Gupta could not resist the allure of freedom awaiting him in the United States. He eventually discovered that “Racism might exist everywhere, but only in South Africa was it legal.”

The Guptas concludes with an accounting of the author’s own pursuit of happiness in the US, but for many readers, the most powerful part of this family history will be Gani Gupta’s story, the patriarch whose success began with a cart of leftover produce in the markets of Porbandar, India.

Gary Presley