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GENERAL

The Incompetent Cook
Ivor Thomas
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Moments of sensitivity shine in this humorous collection of short travel stories.

In this humorously diverting collection of stories, the narrator highlights the cultures, people, and food that he encounters during his seven years of globe-trekking adventures. A transplant from England, narrator Idris Granger's story begins in Australia, where he landed the year before. As his time as an exchange student draws to a close, he seeks employment and finds himself in the company of some beer-loving rugby mates and elbow deep in the sheep-slaughtering business. Granger seizes further opportunities for jobs that take him to more exotic locations.

Ivor Thomas not only offers up a bevy of exotic countries in his stories, but a myriad of enticing, international characters that he encounters in each. The rich diversity and backstories of the people he meets along the way make for some interesting cultural commentary but also lively physical descriptions. For example, in "Busting the Sanctions," Granger finds a seemingly innocent job in Africa, only to find himself a prisoner in his hotel room and guarded by a large man named Monga. Granger's description of Monga reads, "A seriously ugly guy with a head like a football and badly pock-marked skin. The flesh around his eyes was swollen so that they bulged out of his head … I could see straight up his gaping nostrils. They were so big you could have driven a truck up them."

The recipes included in the book, one at the end of each story, come from these lively characters. For example, in "The Kenzo Palace Hotel," the recipe for Kenzo's Classic Stock comes from the Japanese American man who, eighteen months before, left the United States on a cycling trip around the world but then stayed in Israel when his bike broke down in Eilat. His broth recipe, created from the food scraps he collects from butchers and vegetable stall owners, graces the conclusion of the tale.

Though the stories follow a chronological order, some jump from one country to the

next, which the author often remedies with descriptions, such as “Rio de Janeiro is a shorts and t-shirt place,” that usually reestablish Granger’s whereabouts. Each story also has a dry, ironic tone that emphasizes the oddball nature of the book. In “Pig Shoot,” Granger and his Aussie friend, Bryon, stumble across a kidnapping while on a pig shoot. In the midst of grappling with the kidnappers, Bryon discovers that one of the criminals is a cook and begins a conversation about cooking lamb: “So, what makes them shanks so damn tasty, mate?”

Although many of the interactions are humorous, there are moments of sensitivity in some of the stories and character descriptions. In the story “The Disappearance of Mr. George,” George recounts how he found his assistant, Smeek, in England in 1946, when she was a child of just thirteen who had been abandoned after the war.

Thomas’s writing is clear and concise, conveying his adventures with humor and a respect for the cultural lessons learned during his travels. The black-and-white ink illustrations that accompany nearly every story effectively complement the sensual and spirited descriptions of the settings and characters.

Through the offbeat account of one man’s global misadventures, *The Incompetent Cook* brings together a gourmet mix of eclectic short stories topped off with international recipes.

Maya Fleischmann