

The Oarsman

Zubin Mathai

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The Oarsman by Zubin Mathai is a strong plot-driven novel with intriguing allegorical elements. With vivid descriptions of place and lasting character details, Mathai creates a parable that is almost universally relatable.

The novel follows an unnamed protagonist referred to only as “the Man” and his river guide, the Oarsman. Following the death of his wife, the Man sets off to fulfill one of his lifelong desires: reaching the fabled shores at the river’s end. However, he is blocked by the Judge, who deems him unworthy to travel upriver. If the Man is able to revisit his past experiences and alter them to become more worthy, he will gain access past the Judge. Thus, the duo must visit all of the Man’s past roles in life in order to find a way to become worthy of passage to his paradise.

The layout of the book is interesting, as the journey of the protagonist becomes a frame story and each subsequent chapter is a smaller substory. In this way, Mathai creates many smaller, self-contained stories within one large, overarching one. *The Oarsman* has many of the same elements as a parable, meaning it aims to teach or question moral truths primarily through the use of human actors. As the Man visits all of his past roles, he learns great truths about life that stem from important decisions.

The novel’s poetic voice makes for very vivid details about the physical environment. Lines like “The river also twisted and turned through time, one of its special tricks, and brought the pair to exactly one month ago” showcase this poetic nature well. Additionally, the narrative voice personifies inanimate objects in a way that is clearly indicative of a master storyteller: “By the time the Merchant, Oarsman, and Man were running from the hallway of paintings, the castle was having a great time. It was finally getting to dance and yell like all those silly people had been doing.” Narration so beautifully written makes the piece hard to put down. Even with the serious overtones of the narration, there are still moments of humor.

The Oarsman is thoughtfully written and will be enjoyed by those who enjoy fantastic narratives that inspire self-reflection. A plot-driven story line and distinct narrative voice make this tale truly breathtaking.

GREGORY A. LOWE (January 5, 2017)

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