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Book Reviews

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A sick state of affairs



Returning to a life he made earlier



The image shows a newspaper page with a 'Book Reviews' section. The main article is titled 'A sick state of affairs' and features a portrait of a woman. Below it is another article titled 'Returning to a life he made earlier' with a photograph of a fire. The page is numbered 49 and includes a 'Page 49' label.

This is the article's web address for reference.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/2010/0320/Pg049.html#Ar04908>

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Returning to a life he made earlier

Chef

By Jaspreet Singh

Bloomsbury, 248pp. £14.99

EVEN BEFORE he has opened his extraordinary debut novel, Indian writer Jaspreet Singh hints at what is to follow by prefacing it with a quote from the great Austrian, Thomas Bernhard: "The cold is eating into the centre of my brain." That cold refers to the chill Singh's narrator, Kirpal, is experiencing as he suspects his cancer is invading his mind. Weary and vulnerable, he boards a train bound for Kashmir. He has been summoned back to the place he had abruptly left 14 years earlier to return to Delhi, where he had since lived quietly, cooking for his mother, who is now ill. Kirpal is a cook, but even that, his vocation, was a thing of chance. His father, a soldier, had died a hero's death, lost in the vast glacier that physically and symbolically divides India and Pakistan, causing his only son to travel to the camp where he had served, to join his father's regiment.

Kirpal has spent his life watching, waiting to take some form of action. He blames himself, his guilt stalks him. While reliving his earlier life, he decides: "I have never been able to do what I really wanted to do. I am so weak." Instead of becoming an active soldier, Kirpal's career had been organised by the general, who sent him to be trained under Chef Kishen, a strange genius alert to the symbolism inherent in life, who saw Kashmir as a tormented Eden caught between India and Pakistan.

Chef is an elegant, angry novel, and curiously European in tone. It is worthy to stand among the finest of Indian writing, while also being different. It is bleak, solitary and intense. There are none of the familiar set pieces, none of the exasperated exchanges. There is no comedy. The tone is muted. Kirpal knows he is dying and has little time left in which to make sense of all that happened to him in the past.

Since the events of 14 years earlier he appears to have existed in a limbo. On the day he leaves the doctor's office with test results amounting to a death sentence, he receives a letter from Kashmir, from General Sahib. That letter had been expected for a long time. The reason the general finally made contact seems somewhat banal: he wanted Kirpal, known as Kip, to prepare the wedding meal for his daughter, last seen by the narrator as a child playing with her dog. Singh imposes a powerful sense of drama on this novel. Kirpal is dying and aware that his mother is also failing. He has yet to tell her of his condition, but he knows he will return to Kashmir.

The train journey becomes a small epic and is handled with subtle grace and the impressive restraint which defines Singh's prose: "Not far from me, a little girl is sitting on the aisle seat . . . Moments ago she asked her mother, What do we miss the most when we die? And I almost responded." He hears the child's mother dismiss the question by saying, "children should not talk about death". The narrator confides: "Food, I almost said to the girl. We miss peaches, strawberries . . . The dead do not eat marzipan. The smell of bakeries torments them day and night."

These wonderful sentences linger and Singh immediately consolidates their effect with a masterful touch: "Something about this exchange between mother and daughter has upset me. I look out the window."

This is a portrait of a lonely, haunted individual. There is no self-pity, no melodrama. In a rare dart of irony, he notes: "This train is moving slower than a mountain mule. The engine is old, I know. It resembles me in many ways. But the railway-wallahs insist on calling it an *Express*."

Returning to Kashmir causes him to revisit his 19-year-old self. Working under Chef Kishen had taught him about more than food. Sex and politics were also part of the training. The chef soon made it clear that once he had succeeded in teaching the boy, he, the chef, would move on to greater things. Chef Kishen was moved

on, but in disgrace. The narrator had been assigned to discovering the mystery behind a female prisoner. The project ended disastrously. Throughout the novel, Kirpal the watcher is constantly learning, whether as his present self or as he once was, the young boy intent on following his father.

It was as a young apprentice cook that he was told the story of the horrible event that had dominated his father's boyhood. One day when his father's mother, the narrator's grandmother, whom he had never met, insisted that his father, then a boy, went to school, he returned quickly because the school was closed, and found every member of his Sikh family had been decapitated; their heads arranged in a pile on a sofa. His father's escape and subsequent survival cost him his culture.

Brutality and violence, the politics tearing asunder India and Pakistan, and between them Kashmir, seethe and fester in a novel of stark beauty. Unusual and slow-moving, *Chef*, longlisted for the 2010 International Impac Dublin Literary Award, is written with eerie grace and quiet courage. Late in the novel, the narrator recalls a conversation he had had on the bus with the woman sitting in the seat beside him: "For five and a half hours, almost half of the way, we were silent to each other, lost in our own worlds, and then suddenly we started talking . . . She was a Kashmiri Hindu . . . she said her situation was a bit like the exiles in the epic *Mahabharata*. I apologised for my limited knowledge of Hindu epics. I grew up in the Sikh tradition, I confessed. She studied my face carefully. So why, *sardar-jī*, have you cut your hair and removed your turban?"

The wedding banquet never happens, a death intervenes instead, truth continues to emerge. The calm, haunted narrator carefully gathers together anecdotes and details, memories and feelings, to tell a story as sharp as a blade.

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Kashmir: incendiary history. Photograph: Rouf Bhat/AFP/Getty Images