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## Book Review | Surprising variation on popular South Asian themes

Rishi Reddi's first volume of short stories treats culture clash in depth, with substance and emotion.

### Karma and Other Stories

By Rishi Reddi

Harper Perennial. 224 pp. \$12.95

Reviewed by Michelle Reale

The many endorsements of Rishi Reddi's debut volume of short stories reads like a who's who of fiction writers. I groaned when I received the book, flipped to the back cover and read the all-too-familiar terms associated with most new collections: "sparkling," "sympathetic," "exquisite." I figured that the same old formula that so many writers of popular South Asian fiction have employed would be at work here: the triad of arranged marriage, mangoes and controlling parents, willing to sacrifice their children at the altar of tradition. Not that there's anything wrong with these themes; only there is rarely any variation on how they are treated. In fact, Reddi does treat these themes herself - minus the mangoes - but in a soft, almost tentative way.

The book is somewhat reminiscent of Jhumpa Lahiri's award-winning collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* - seven stories set in the Indian community of Lexington, Mass. Culture clash is a predominant theme and nearly every story aches and throbs with emotion. The immigrant experience is, to be sure, highly individual, but here it is rendered with the starkest honesty. In "Lakshmi and the Librarian," a first-generation immigrant, Lakshmi, enjoys the genteel ministrations of the librarian, Elias Filian, a man "unaccustomed to being taken seriously." Lakshmi is trying to be a true friend to Mr. Filian during a time of sadness in his life, but the women in her community misconstrue her innocent actions, which leads to a quiet revelation that sometimes the comfort we take in old friends and customs is nothing more than what comes of familiarity.

"Bangles" is the quiet and controlled story of Arundhati, a widow who out of a sense of duty joins her only son and his wife and children in their home in Lexington. She eagerly meets her granddaughters, but dotes on Rahul, her only grandson. What should be a life of comfort and leisure turns ugly when Rahul, indulged beyond all imagination, wreaks havoc on Arundhati's life, causing her to want to leave her son's home, an unthinkable breach of tradition and an insult to her son.

In the title story, Shankar Balreddy is an unemployed professor from India who depends on the kindness of his brother, a cardiologist, for a roof over his head. Inexplicably, one day, Shankar's brother orders him to leave his home and begin to earn his own way. Shankar and his wife are happy, despite his inability to find meaningful work. When he discovers, one day, dying birds along a path that he is walking, he brings the animals to a veterinarian who traces the injuries and deaths of the birds to the unnatural effect of high-rise buildings that leave their lights on after hours and confuse the bird's natural flight patterns.

Shankar sees a similarity between himself and the birds and how easy it is to lose one's way when removed from all the touchstones of familiarity. Shankar makes a telling decision in the end, the only one that seems to make sense to him in the grand scheme of life.

This is a low-key collection, but one with substance and depth. In their struggle to fit in, Reddi's characters may be flawed, heartbroken and lost, but also, to the reader's great satisfaction, capable of glorious redemption.

Michelle Reale lives and writes in the suburbs.