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REVIEW

Indian writer describes unease felt by the perpetual foreigner

Sandip Roy

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Karma and Other Stories

By **Rishi Reddi**

HARPERPERENNIAL; 216 PAGES; \$12.95 PAPERBACK

A retired 70-year-old judge from India tries uneasily to make a new home in Boston, a place whose accents confound him, that has no

sense of his stature and where he has no sense of his surroundings. A

7-year-old Indian immigrant housewife sets tongues wagging

when she walks into her librarian's house wearing pants and

carrying a container of chicken soup for him. Fourteen-year-old

Amrita copes with being the only person who looks like him in his

town in Wichita, Kan. Hyderabad-born **Rishi Reddi**, whose work

has already appeared in "Best American Short Stories 2005," fashions her first collection out of

everyday experiences of immigrant life in "Karma and Other Stories."

One story "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy" is one such gem. Writing in the first person, **Reddi** is

perfect in erecting an armor of formal English behind which a rather pompous,

formidable retired judge now hides his insecurities as he settles in with his daughter and

American husband. "It is a point of discipline that Manmohan and I meet always on

Tuesday afternoons to take luncheon together," says Justice Murthy, as if writing a court

opinion in Hyderabad. When the Hindu vegetarian Murthy gets served a beef-and-cheese

burrito instead of a beef-and-cheese burrito and decides to sue a fast-food "hotel" (as he calls

restaurants), **Reddi** performs a marvelous balancing act between bathos and pathos, laying

out Justice Murthy's stiff pride and his lonely dignity.

Reddi's stories show is that even in a well-assimilated minority group, its members

never feel an undercurrent of unease, as if despite orderly lives in manicured suburbs they

never feel quite on

firm ground. That sense of unease is so delicate, so different from suffering

from in-your-face

"towel head" racism and pining-for-the-foods-of-home nostalgia, that only

a very deft writer

can mine it for dramatic tension. **Reddi's** characters don't lack for the tastes

of home like a pre

of previous generation of immigrants. They feast on spinach dal and eggplant

with peanut gravy

and curries. Amruta Auntie teaches the younger girls authentic Indian classical dance,

though the perfor

performances happen not in an Indian temple but in the Winchester High School

auditorium. The c

question becomes, what is the price of immigration now?

It is a vague sense

of living on borrowed time in someone else's suit, of children growing up

and away (even if

the rebellion is limited to "purple hair, black fingernail polish, and smoking

weed once in the p

parking lot behind the gym") and the "the speed of their lives." The widowed

mother arriving from

India is suddenly overwhelmed at the thought of taking care of her

grandson, even thoug

though it's a grandmother's duty. A mother strays from her orderly life when

she suddenly lies to h

her son on the phone for no good reason. Young Krishna is on the high

school honor roll, bu

she wants to be like the lesser boys, craving their "swashbuckling

swagger that was so

natural for them, or the ease with which they ran down a football field or

dribbled a basketball

or drank beer or talked to girls." Again and again, what comes through

are not so much clich

ed representations of racism but that ineffable feeling of the perpetual

foreigner. When Uma



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