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Book Review: The Romantics

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BOOK REVIEW

THE ROMANTICS

By PANKAJ MISHRA

New York: Random House, 2000. 272 pages, \$22.95

Andrea Kempf

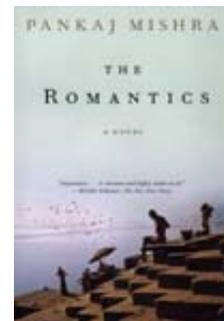
While Europeans and Americans have had a long, noisy love affair with the mystery that is India, it is sometimes surprising to remember that many Indians have had a similar romance with the West. Pankaj Mishra's evocative first novel is peopled with both varieties of romantics. Samar, the novel's Brahmin protagonist, is diligently studying Western literature and philosophy while his European acquaintances are immersing themselves in Indian culture and religion. Having completed his university studies, Samar aspires to passing the civil service examination and getting a good government position. He is in Benares to study, but the world around him continually intrudes.

His friends, both Indian and Western, are searching for ways out of their lives: Samar's neighbor Diana West is a middle-aged British woman who is living in India in order to see her married lover without causing him scandal. Mark is a restless American intellectual, a Buddhist one day, an expert on ayurvedic medicine the next, unable to find a cause that will fully engage him. Sara from Germany and Debbie from the United States are both flirting with Buddhism. Catherine is in love with the exotic itself. She is carrying on an affair with Anand, a sitar player whose career she plans to promote in Paris.

Anand looks for validation of his traditional Indian music in the West. Like Samar, he is of high caste but is denied the opportunities his caste would have afforded him before Independence. The theme of the impoverished Brahmin is a subtext of the novel. When the Indian constitution guaranteed a percentage of university and civil service positions to low-caste and minority citizens, the traditionally privileged Brahmins found themselves at a disadvantage. While their priestly benefits were unaffected, Brahmins were no longer first in line for education and job preferment. Samar's Brahmin friend Rajesh, a charismatic and possibly criminal figure on the university campus, exemplifies the issue as he squanders his prestige and intellectual capital for money and power in the underworld. Even Samar's father has been forced to make difficult and unhappy choices because of the Brahmins' loss of automatic preferment.

The novel captures the vastness of India. Whether he is describing the cool clarity of the Himalayas in the north, or the heat and light of the south at Pondicherry, or Benares with its funeral pyres along the Ganges, Mishra conveys the essence of each place—its similarities to all of India as well as its differences.

His character studies are also deft. He captures those seekers of the world whose own cultures have not given them sustenance and who look to the East or



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the West for fulfillment. Yet because the novel's characters learn to make accommodations to life's realities and discover how unlikely it is that they will find the fulfillment they seek, the bittersweet ending is more moving than one in which an author neatly wraps up his story with good news for all. This finely nuanced novel is a harbinger of an exciting new talent.

Andrea Kempf, *who recently returned from a month-long visit to India, is a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She is an alumna of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center and a regular reviewer of fiction for Library Journal.*

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