

anything in the Americas. But old is not the same as unchanging, and although a visitor to India hundreds of years ago might have met people taking paths to God similar to those Dalrymple describes, the lives he depicts are part of a recognizably modern world.

From a heartbroken Jain nun in the middle of a prolonged ritual suicide to a low-caste Hindu man who, for a few weeks a year, becomes the star of a sacred drama that culminates in his sucking the blood from the neck of a just-slaughtered bird, Dalrymple's subjects, though links in an ancient chain, are not sealed in shamanistic amber. A devotee of a Sufi saint, uprooted time and again by the violence that accompanied Partition, is a refugee from modern nationalism; and a man who has memorized a vast epic poem is threatened by modern education: "It was the ability of the bard to read, rather than changes in the tastes of his audience, that sounded the death knell for the oral tradition."

In Dalrymple's telling, Indians have long struggled to reconcile the demands of the ephemeral with those of the eternal. "For many centuries there has been a central tension between the ascetic and the sensual," he writes, pointing out that "the oldest scripture of the Hindu tradition, the *Rig Veda*, begins its myth with the creation of *kama*—sexual desire." Dalrymple shows one attempted resolution of that tension in his portrait of a doomed woman named Rani Bai, a sacred prostitute dedicated to the goddess Yellamma; for Rani Bai, sex work and religious devotion are one and the same.

Beginning with "The Nun's Tale"—there are echoes of Chaucer throughout the book—Dalrymple's account of these Indian pilgrims is informed, compassionate, and careful to place the emphasis where it belongs: on the extraordinary people whose stories he conveys. His long study of India and his years of living there have given him access to characters that a casual visitor could never hope to meet, including a woman who took up residence on a smoky cremation

ground in order to escape her miserable marriage.

Her plight was dire; so, too, are the lives in Adam Ross's first novel, *MR. PEANUT* (Knopf, \$25.95). "No matter what they did, David thought, no matter how hard they tried, they'd always come back to this place of disappointment," Ross writes, and this place—where one can carefully nurture inexplicable grudges; starve oneself to the point of fainting; fantasize in lurid detail about offing one's spouse; and nearly throw oneself, in a fit of spite, off a Hawaiian cliff—is marriage.

The novel revolves around two couples, one fictional and one historical, both of which include a man who may or may not have killed his wife. First are (the invented) David Pepin, a successful computer-game designer, and his fat wife, Alice, who is highly allergic to a whole range of foods and who is soon dispatched by a peanut. Did David force it down her throat, knowing the consequences? The second are Marilyn and Sam Sheppard, who were at the center of a real-life "trial of the century" drama in the Fifties, when the pregnant Marilyn was found dead in her bedroom. Did Dr. Sam bash her head in?

"Perhaps it's simply the dual nature of marriage, the proximity of violence and love," one character muses. This is a dubious and often tiresome thematic underpinning, and the novel's overambitious plot struggles to cohere. Ross's dialogue sometimes reveals an awareness of this predicament. One can imagine him sitting at his desk, scratching his head: "What's it about? 'It's about a man who may or may not have killed his wife.' Mobius smiled. 'Uh-huh.' 'But I'm stuck.' 'Of course.' 'I don't know what happens next.' 'You need an editor.' 'It's more like a plot.'"

Despite all this, *Mr. Peanut* crackles with life. Ross's long set pieces—Alice's miscarriage on a plane to Hawaii, Marilyn Sheppard's dreams of trysting with her hunky housecleaner—

reveal his talent for conjuring characters and imagining scenes that, like good short stories, could stand nobly by themselves.

"A life based on survival as opposed to love was perhaps desirable," David Pepin speculates, a line that could almost serve as an epigraph for another novel of fraught coexistences, *HOMESICK* (Dalkey Archive, \$15.95), by the young Israeli writer Eshkol Nevo. Castel, a crummy hilltop village between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, is haunted by typically Israeli ghosts: of a young soldier recently killed in action, whose parents and little brother are stuck in an airless apartment decorated with macabre mementos of the dead hero; of a baby who died in Kurdistan and seems, to a brain-damaged old man, to have returned in the guise of an aged Palestinian. This man, forced to flee with his family in 1948, has recently returned in search of a treasure his mother left behind.

At the center of the novel is another unhappy young couple, Amir and Noa, good-looking, urbane students—she of photography, he of psychology—forced out of the big cities by financial considerations. They soon find themselves fantasizing about leaving, the town and each other.

Homesick is set in the mid-Nineties, just as hopes for peace were quashed by Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. Nevo is not a political writer, but he shows how Israel's troubles seep into the lives of his characters. Noa is inspired to take pictures of Palestinian families in front of the homes from which they were expelled, but with few Arabs allowed into the country, she has to make do with Romanians.

Nevo alternates between several different voices, and because the speakers are not clearly marked, the narrative can, at first, be difficult to follow. But the technique also operates like a camera exploring every recess of the unhappy town of Castel, a place where everybody is looking for home, and where nobody can find it. ■

