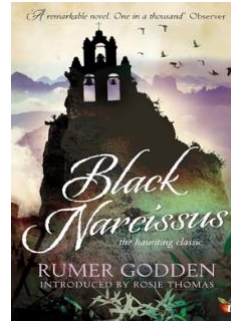


BLACK NARCISSUS

Rumer Godden

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This is the story of five nuns who leave their monastery in Darjeeling to establish a chapel, school and health clinic in an abandoned palace in the foothills of the Himalayas that once housed the concubines of an Indian general. The nuns are led by Sister Clodagh – the youngest Mother Superior in the order – who tries to deal with the difficulties faced in a hostile environment due to the terrain, disease, mistrust, superstition and fierce independence of the natives. “Black Narcissus” is the name given to the general’s young heir, Dilip Rai, who adds to the drama, stirring up different emotions in the nuns and manipulated by a young native girl, Kanchi, an orphan who comes to the school “behaving so badly that no-one wants her”.

The nuns are aided by the general’s agent, Mr Dean, a hard-drinking enigmatic character who helps Sister Clodagh whilst clearly expecting the venture to fail (as did a previous effort by a religious order of Brothers). The nuns struggle with the high-altitude environment, primitive living conditions, inability to speak the language and servants who dislike the foreigners, along with the presence of a man, Mr Dean, who stirs up passions and memories in both Sister Clodagh and Sister Ruth. All these influences take their toll on the individual nuns and the project. It becomes clear that the venture is heading for disaster.

Some comments from members of the group:

“I enjoyed reading this book and found myself pulled along by the pervading sense of inevitable tragedy. The lush descriptions of the outside world and the heightened emotions experienced by the nuns give the novel an evocative dream-like quality combined with a gothic (melodramatic even) sense of impending disaster. Some anachronistic language and stereotypes aside, I found the novel surprisingly modern for its time and an effective critique of the follies of colonialism.”

“The story was slow but well-written with vivid descriptions of the setting and local life. It reinforces differences in cultures and ideologies showing that there is no “right” way, just different ways. Orientalism runs through the story—this is the western way of viewing and representing the East, often through a lens of dominance, portraying the East as “other” and inferior to the West.”

“I found this a very difficult book to review as there is so much detail. Mr Dean has a bad reputation yet the nuns become dependent on him. All the nuns are affected by the atmosphere of the place “There is something in it that makes everything exaggerated” and the comment from Father Roberts who visits them “You all of you seem changed, not as

single-hearted as you were". There were so many interesting characters and an underlying sense of humour in the conversations between Dilip Rai and sister Clodagh"

"The plot is unremarkable but the author's detailed description of both characters and situation is engaging from the first page. A small group of Anglo-Catholic nuns in the foothills of the Himalayas coping with high altitude (a place I did 6 months voluntary work in when I retired), an alien environment with local poverty and ignorance amongst a range of ethnic groups. The nuns' aim is to fulfil a God-given vocation of doing good, but coming to terms with their differences is hard. The book has a rare, direct quality of honesty about how different folk cope with being human, conflicting emotions, sexual bewilderment and desire for love and kindness - a situation that God does not automatically provide for."

Christine Wright