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Ardashir Vakil

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Ardashir Vakil (1962–)

John C. Hawley

BIOGRAPHY

Ardashir Vakil was born in Bombay; his father was a nationally famous lawyer (“*vakil*” means lawyer, in fact) and his mother established a number of bookstores. Vakil attended St. Mary’s School and finished his schooling at The Doon School in the foothills of the Himalayas before moving to Great Britain to take an English degree at Magdalene College in Cambridge. He lives in London with his wife and two daughters. He currently teaches at the Hornsey School for Girls. While continuing to teach four days a week, he is working on his second novel, which is set in London.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Ardashir Vakil’s principal work to date has been his broadly autobiographical novel *Beach Boy* (1997). He writes from a relatively privileged childhood, and the world represented in the novel is necessarily restricted to a life sheltered from many of life’s indignities. He emphasized that, in his view, telling a story is the first requirement of good writing. It is no surprise, therefore, that the plot of this book is captivating: The story takes place in 1972; Cyrus Readymoney is an eight-year-old Parsi, the middle child of five. He lives in a large house, with many windows, on Juhu Beach until his parents begin having marital troubles. Then he moves with his mother and siblings to a flat in Bandra on the twenty-first floor of the tallest building in town. He attends an expensive private school run by the Jesuits. Vakil’s description of the school and its vice principal has overtones of James Joyce’s description of his own similar schooling, with strong memories of punishment. Consequently, Cyrus tries his best to avoid growing up: “It seemed to me that all these adults were after was tears and sadness. Toothing away at their hearts was a sadness of their own which they dare not admit to, a pain they could expiate only by flogging someone” (107). When his father suddenly dies, Cyrus seems untouched, only later trying to reassemble memories of this distant man. With such sentiments, it is not surprising that the young man often skips school to attend to his real passion: Hindi and American cinema.

The book serves as a good primer on the basics of Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsis, since Cyrus is fascinated by its simple tenets as he comes to learn of them as deaths and other crises enter his consciousness. At the same time, his family’s servants are Hindus and the school he attends is run by the Jesuits. This cosmopolitan religious

mix, coupled with his parents' love of all things English and European, broadens the child's narrative viewpoint as it positions him as something of an outsider in his own culture. He is further marginalized, at least psychologically, by the instability of his parents' marriage, which gradually and almost invisibly unravels in the course of the novel. The boy's father is a shipping broker in the family firm, who often travels to Europe and who seems to have a series of romantic affairs; his mother is a former national tennis champion with a temper. While Cyrus seeks to understand the strained relations between his parents, he also negotiates his first sexual experiences with a boy next door. On a broader social stage, he also comes to divide the world into two types of people, which are represented for him in the two families that take an interest in him. The Krishnans are from Kerala in South India: the father is a Marxist who orders his family with a good bit of discipline. Days are scheduled and predictable. The Vermas, on the other hand, are from Delhi and are full of fun, taking him to Hindi films and encouraging his romantic imagination. Through them he meets the Maharani of Bharatnagar and her seductive daughter, who live in fading splendor by the sea and add a sense of mystery and nostalgia for India's past.

In the novel, the plot proceeds as a series of vignettes with only passing reference to the various crises in the family. Instead, the child's attention (or memory) is captured by sensuous experiences, principally centering around food. Food, sex, and cinema become metaphors for all sorts of hungers in the life of a precocious young man, as when he sits in a theater, waiting for a film to begin: "Hours spent waiting for what you want, occupying yourself with activities that amounted to no more than a fraction of a millimeter added to the surface of a sphere. . . . I understood the meaning of time passing, of time wasted, of being left behind by time" (70). Vakil's most recent story, "The Whole Biryani," will appear in an anthology entitled *Rites of Spring: New Writings from London*. His second novel titled *One Day* (2002) from Hamish Hamilton in Great Britain.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In 1997, Vakil's *Beach Boy* was short-listed for the Whitbread First Novel Award, won a Betty Trask Award, and was selected by the *Los Angeles Times* as a Best Fiction Title for 1998. It has since been translated into eight languages, including Japanese and Greek. In the introduction to Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West's anthology of recent Indian writing, *Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing: 1947–1997*, Rushdie describes the novel as "highly original . . . sharp, funny and fast" (xx). In his appreciative lengthy review in the *New Yorker*, John Updike notes that the novel offers the reader "an India remembered, a land, like Nabokov's Russia, glistening with the dew of early impressions and ominous with the dimly seen, uncontrollable machinations of adults" (159).

Paul Kafka praises the book for "painting the city of Bombay in the early '70s, with its street dwellers and movie stars, its colonial hangers-on and hungry immigrants, its food stalls and littered beaches, its many movie houses and giant middle-class apartment complexes" (F2). Melanie Haiken also notes the visceral quality of Vakil's descriptions; he understands, she writes, the "supreme power" of "sense-memory," and uses it to sketch "one of the most vivid portraits of India yet to appear in print." But Haiken adds that the novel, "evocative as it is," has a few problems. "The downside of all these sensuous smells and tastes," she notes, "is a sense of skating on the surface of things, an overwhelming amassing of superficial details at the expense of the one telling fact that would help the reader get a handle on any particular character." She blames this partly

on Vakil's choice of an eight-year-old narrator, naïve at best, unsustained at crucial points when the author's adult voice seems to accidentally intrude.

Sarah Curtis, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, remarks on "the enormous amount of information and commentary about layers of Indian life" that Vakil offers, and praises the book for its "telling insights into the characteristics of the different communities which make up the modern Indian middle class." In her view, the main achievement of the novel is its ability "to convey movingly the anxieties of its hero as he grows up" (23). Haiken disagrees here, suggesting that India itself might more reasonably be seen as the real protagonist: "few recent works of Indian fiction," she writes, "have taken the reader into the betel-strewn theater aisles, glass-walled living rooms and smoky kitchens of contemporary India with so much immediacy and so little sentimentality."

Within India, Vakil received the same sort of criticism that has become commonplace for those who, like Vakil, write about India but live outside the country. As Vikram Chandra notes, for example, when the two of them were giving a reading at the British Council in New Delhi the question session focused initially on the right of such authors to be the voice of India for the West. "Why was there that long passage about the preparation of bhelpuri?" someone asked. "We Indians all know how bhelpuri is made. Was that an emigrant's nostalgia, or was it written for the Westerners who don't know what bhelpuri is?" Referring to a similar instance when he was portrayed as an expatriate when he was on an Amul India Show, he turns the critique back on his countrymen and women, noting that "to get proper recognition in India you have to first get recognition in the West. . . . It doesn't seem to be able to create that sort of excitement for its own writers—its own writers who are doing well in India, in their own regional languages." After all is said and done, though, he concludes that "there's no reader more important than you, the writer. . . . I must believe in whatever I am doing. That seems to me to be the most basic rule of integrity that the writer should follow."

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