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The Washington Times

August 25, 2002, Sunday, Final Edition

Exploring the world by literary journeys

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SECTION: BOOKS; SHORT FICTION; Pg. B06

LENGTH: 1277 words

One of the ways to experience a country is to read its books. Short fiction collections from international authors offer a particularly refreshing experience, because each book offers not one but many plots, characters, musings, and settings. So before summer vacations come to a close, there is still a bit of time left for faraway journeys of a literary nature.

Our first stop is India, with detours to Bangladesh and America. **Video** [Pantheon, \$21.95, 191 pages] is the debut collection of **Meera Nair**, who came to the United States in 1997 to study creative writing. For those who know India, her 10 stories abound with authenticity. For those intrigued by the region, she deftly brings to life the array of peoples, cultures, social cleavages, and religions that live in a jumbled mix of tradition, modernity, and East-West confluences. The stories range from comic to distressing. The author has an uncanny ability to get under the skin of her characters, be they men, women, children, Hindus, Muslims or Christians.

"The Curry Leaf Tree" is a particularly amusing story of immigrant life in the United States. Dilip Alva, a Catholic software engineer, finds himself bewildered and lonely in Scottsdale, Ariz. Like most Indian boys in such a predicament, he decides to get married. "He asked his mother to find him a wife. His mother [who had fasted every Wednesday since Dilip had turned 21, so that he might find the perfect bride] muttered over the photographs of girls the marriage broker brought to her in response to her matrimonial advertisement [educated, wheatish-complexioned, reasonably well-off] in the Deccan Herald."

Mr. **Nair's** keen observation skills paint vivid scenes. Back in the America at a dinner hosted by Mrs. Mathur, a society doyenne, the new couple are seated at a huge dining table with elephants carved from teak for legs, as "two Hispanic maids dressed in identical pink saris walked in with bowls and platters of food."

If on the one hand, **Video** is a portrait of India, it is also an unflinching exploration of the universal impulses, dark sides and loving capacities of human beings. "Sixteen Days in December" charts the deterioration and death of a Hindu woman's alcoholic father against the backdrop of the 1988 riots [after Hindu extremists tore down the Ayodhya Mosque, which they believe stood on the site of Lord Rama's birthplace]. Her description of his cremation rites is painfully poignant. "I, who had never seen a dead body in my life, was finally performing the only funeral rite I was allowed," she writes.

"While the priest chanted his prayers, I held the bones in my hands and waited for something to happen—for the familiar father scent of tobacco and rum to permeate me, or for their brittle, pitted surfaces to transmit some forgotten but precious memory."

There is an uneven quality to some of the stories, both in terms of plot and prose. Kitchy phrases such as "She stood there until he looked up at her. There was a glittering fervor in her eyes," made this reader want to roll her eyes. These

shortcomings, however, do not mar a generally masterful collection.

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Further to the east comes *After the Quake* by Haruki Murakami, translated by Jay Rubin [Knopf, \$21, 192 pages]. What inventive stories. What a mix of characters, plots and musings. Mr. Murakami, a contemporary Japanese writer with seven previous works translated into English, is back with a collection of six stories, set in the aftermath of the devastating Kobe earthquake of 1995. The stories are tough, emotionally full, compelling, bleak but also hopeful. Forget geishas and salarymen. "After the Quake" is about contemporary Japan - alienated youth, broken marriages, almost unrequited love, existential crises - and a giant frog battling an evil worm to prevent another earthquake.

The author interlaces his characters' tribulations with simple yet brilliant insights into the human psyche. In some instances, one has the feeling that Murakami himself is the narrator. In "All God's Children Can Dance," he writes, "Our hearts are not stones. A stone may disintegrate in time and lose its outward form. But hearts never disintegrate. They have no outward form and whether good or evil, we can always communicate them to one another."

And what about that colossal pond-dweller? In "Super-frog Saves Tokyo," a nondescript collection officer returns home from work to find a six-foot tall frog who likes to paraphrase literary geniuses such as Joseph Conrad and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The anti-hero reacts with a wonderfully pathetic soliloquy.

"I'm going bald, I'm getting a potbelly, I turned forty last month. My feet are flat. The doctor told me recently that I have diabetic tendencies. It's been three months or more since I last slept with a woman - and I had to pay for it . . . I don't have a single person who likes me, either at work or in my private life. I don't know how to talk to people, and I'm bad with strangers so I never make friends. I have no athletic ability, I'm tone deaf, short, phimotic, nearsighted - and astigmatic . . . All I do is eat, sleep and s--t. I don't know why I'm even living. Why should a person like me have to be the one to save Tokyo?"

* * *

Our final destination is Europe, back in time to the years around World War I. *Cross Roads* [Translated by Norma Comrada, Catbird Press, \$23, \$14 paper, 256 pages, illus.] brings to our shores two volumes of stories by the great early 20th century Czech writer, Karel Capek. He was a critic of Adolf Hitler, novelist, playwright, essayist, and children's author whose theatrical productions appeared on Broadway soon after the Prague Spring.

"Cross Roads" is rich in meaning, metaphors, language and concepts. Be forewarned, the first collection, "Wayside Crosses," requires engaged, slow reading. Each of the 13 stories is an existential, spiritual or philosophical inquiry couched in complex yet beautifully rendered prose. In "The Footprint" and "Elegy [Footprint II]" two travelers come upon a single footprint on untouched snow. The bizarre phenomenon sets in motion a series of rational, scientific and finally divine postulates for its occurrence.

One finds oneself joining their debate about miracles, revelations, truth and what it all has to do with the footprint. One of the characters exclaims, "I know of things from which nothing flows, which bring salvation to nothing and no one, and yet - Things have happened which led nowhere, offered no help in living, and yet were perhaps the most important things in life. Didn't it strike you that this footprint is far more beautiful than any you've ever seen before?"

Very different from the first volume, "Painful Tales" is just that - nine stories about betrayal, despair, revenge, heartlessness, sometimes told from a limited, post-Victorian, male perspective. Nevertheless, Capek displays a timeless understanding of human psychology. In "The Bully," an industrialist learns that his young wife is having an affair. "He expected to be seized by a paroxysm of rage, but instead all he felt was infinitely feeble, and this suffocated him. From this very desk he had resolved so many conflicts, from here he had commanded men and events, here he had parried and dealt so many blows with the formidable, instantaneous speed of a skillful boxer. And now, with horror and dark rage against himself, he felt incapable in every way of responding to this assault."

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LOAD-DATE: August 26, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

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