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VIDEO

By **Meera Nair**

Pantheon. 191 pp. \$ 21.95

Poor Naseer; he watched a **video** on his cousin's VCR that glorified a sexual act he had never imagined. Half the college students in America may already be bored with this act, but this is India, and Naseer wonders how, oh how, can he persuade his wife to try it?

"Fifteen years we've been married and now you want me to do this -- this thing!" his wife explodes. And she promptly retreats to the bathroom, through whose walls she proceeds to conduct her business with the family, vegetable sellers and vendors. Instead of bullying her, Naseer solicitously cuts a four-inch square out of the bathroom wall so that she can conduct her transactions more easily.

So precisely does **Meera Nair** depict the farfetched that it becomes convincing, and so tenderly does she hover over her characters that they become not caricatures but fully human. **Video is Nair's** first collection of short stories; it is also a whole world, with all its richness and variety. Her stories do not merely include Hindus, Muslims and Christians; they do not merely stretch across the subcontinent from Bangalore to Bangladesh; they do not merely mingle all castes and classes together. **Nair** quietly conducts a grand tour of how the varieties of contemporary life can be rendered into fiction. In "Summer," for example, she creates a paradise of childhood, and in "Vishnukumar Valentine's Day" an existence in which every detail is a chore and a nuisance.

Nair lives in America, but only one American appears in these 10 stories: Bill Clinton. When some villagers see on TV that the president plans briefly to visit their village, they throw coins at the TV set as though making offerings to a deity. Then the eternal question arises. What if the president has to, you know . . . for the village has no toilet. One villager

reassures, "These world leader types are trained to hold it in," but another counters, "He's not that young anymore. It's possible." Happily, the toilet gets built; sadly, Clinton never arrives.

Nair is on the right side of 40. Not so long ago, when she was a girl, it was all but unthinkable that an Indian author might capture a world audience. Today, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry with his masterpiece *A Fine Balance* are among the most celebrated practitioners of contemporary fiction. In addition, so many other Indian-born authors are intelligent and entertaining that Indian-American fiction has become the literary excitement that Jewish-American fiction was a generation ago. The difference between Jewish-American and Indian-American fiction is instructive, and helps explain **Nair's** achievement and, in a way, her advance.

Jewish-American writings, along with Southern fiction, were midcentury literature's hot tickets, and both were connected to death. Writers from both groups felt an urgency to immerse their traditions -- the Old World Jewish legacy, the South as country within a country -- in a dramatic preservative, before they perished entirely. But the India that **Nair** writes about, for all its myriad problems, is as vibrantly alive as any place on earth. Similarly, the Indian diaspora in America, as she describes it in "The Curry Leaf Tree," has turned into a record of individual successes and thriving communities. Thus, while I.B. Singer and Faulkner created self-contained imaginative universes in literature, Indian-American writers such as Bharati Mukherjee in her National Book Circle Award-winning *The Middleman* and Jhumpa Lahiri in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Interpreter of Maladies* concern themselves more with meticulously observing our immediate world.

But observation and experience, as Faulkner noted, are only two of an author's tools, and **Nair** excels in using the third tool Faulkner named -- the imagination. Her stories are so inventive that they make many of her predecessors' fictions look like sociological studies. **Nair** can imagine magical things -- say, a boy's nose sensitive enough to identify every aroma, or beach-sand sculptures that cause their viewers unnameable longings -- and then so imagine the consequent details that the wondrous becomes reality. **Video** is that rarity, a first collection whose every story charts new areas in human relationships and neither strains nor slips into incredulity.

In one story, the sole order a slightly alcoholic journalist can impose on his life is arranging the P.G. Wodehouse novels he dotes on in alphabetical order. Many readers may finish **Video** hoping someday to have numerous **Meera Nair** books to organize alphabetically, though even then their hands may stray to "V" and the delight that began it all. *

Jeffery Paine is the author of "Father India" and "The Poetry of Our World."

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