

# Brief lives, long journeys and moments of magic

Published in the Independent, April 2007

By William Palmer

For some reason the short story always seems to be on the edge of extinction. But writers persist in producing a supply of good material that far exceeds the apparent demand. There are hardly any magazines left that print them. Mainstream publishers assure us that collections sell badly, yet a few independents bring out a steady stream of valuable books, and it is a great pleasure to welcome Amer Hussein's fourth collection of superbly written short fiction.

In the first story of *Insomnia*, "Nine Postcards from Sanluca de Barrameda", a Venezuelan complains that "Muslims in Europe are a demographic problem". The narrator answers him: "I guess I'm a Muslim in Europe too... And foreign wherever I go". It reminds us that the short story is the favoured form of writing by the culturally dispossessed or colonised. Many of the most famous writers have been drawn from the Jewish communities in America and Eastern Europe, the Catholic Irish, and the middle-class in peasant Russia.

The best and longest story in Hussein's book, "The Crane Girl", is almost a classic demonstration, with its cast of Australian, Japanese, African and Pakistani characters living in London in the 1970s. In an ancient Japanese legend, a beautiful woman turns up at a poor weaver's door and declares that she is his wife: "She wove the finest fabrics for him, which he sold... She made him swear he'd never open the door of the room while she was working. One day he did, and he saw a naked crane weaving cloth with feathers plucked from her breast. She flew away then, and never came back. The crane-bride's name was Tsuru."

That is the name of the Japanese girl with whom the student Murad falls in love. She too keeps flying away and in his efforts to win her, adolescent Murad learns hard lessons about friendship and love, and bitterly realises for the first time that the way we perceive ourselves is not how others see us and, in turn, they wear a series of masks and disguises.

Hussein's writing is full of strange and brilliant images, which seem utterly modern, but rooted in history and magic. The narrator of "Hibiscus Days" dreams that he has fallen asleep while reading an encyclopedia, and that the moths on the colour plates escape into the room; "a hundred minuscule white wings marked in blue". He tells his friend Armaan, a poet, who promptly retraps the moths in a poem. Their circle of Pakistani intellectuals in London argues about the place of linguistic philosophy in a revolution of the proletariat and Armaan accuses them of being pampered exiles. He goes back to Karachi and writes a play which, when taken

on to the streets, causes riots. His reward for wanting to get close to the people is to be beaten by the police and criticised by friends as politically naive.

The personal and political come together brilliantly in other stories, particularly the stunning "The Angelic Disposition". In the whole collection, fable and the imagery of traditional Urdu poetry poke through the fabric of modern cosmopolitan life, the young fall in and out of love, ghosts cohabit with the old, the writing is both delicate and powerful: these are very fine stories indeed.