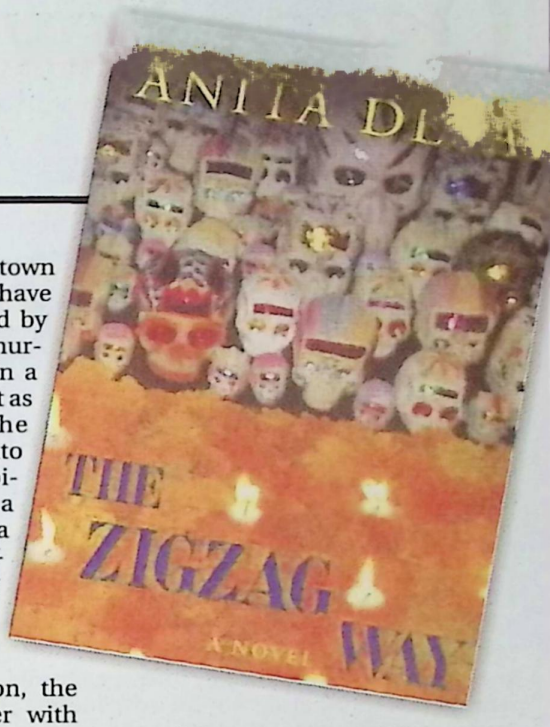
The Zigzag Way



Author: Anita Desai
Reviewer: Sameeha Suraiya

ERIC is a graduate student in History at Harvard who is bored with the topic of his dissertation. He is also an aspiring writer who waits for the grant for publishing his own book. The result is that Eric drifts between wasted days, uncertain and unenthusiastic over his career path. When he decides to tag along his more confident girlfriend to Mexico, claiming that the new place would put him on the right track, the time comes for him to find the focus in his disordered life.

Desai's latest novel does not perhaps, have the most memorable or original title but it certainly is appropriate. It is a story of rootlessness, aimless and impulsive wandering. If the title is not the first clue then consider the quote that the author chooses to begin her story with: "The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past."

It is no surprise, therefore that the story has several strands running non-chronologically, the narrative switching frequently as does the setting, but each stitching together into the protagonist's meandering journey into the unknown. We are driven into the vibrant splendour of Mexico of today, to the craggy hills of Sierrra Madre- the lonely Mexican mining town where Eric, in a flash, remembers his Cornish grandfather, a man he had visited only once in his life, telling him years ago that he had once worked as a miner. Eric feels "reborn"' as a traveller but his path is uncertain. He fumbles for information that might help him in his blurry mission to locate the ghost town where his grandfather may have lived. Eric is soon consumed by the sights and sounds he is hurtled into. He finds himself in a curious quest for his own past as well as unearthing of the intriguing stranger he runs into during his traveling. The suspiciously enigmatic Doña Vera, a fierce Austrian widow of a mining baron, is a local legend, but her reputation for philanthropy glosses over a darker history. Vocal in her grudge against the past mining companies in the region, the young historian's encounter with her, no wonder piques his interest to search for his family's mining past. Thus the whimsical trip turns into a soul-searching journey into the mystic charms of the older world.

Also in focus for the entire novel is the *Dia de los Muerto,* the annual celebration of the Day of the Dead. Paper skeletons flutter in the streets of Mexico ahead of the festivity, as the natives wait avidly to welcome loved ones from the past. In his search, Eric uncovers a time of turmoil and violence where the far-flung city of Cornwall meets the harsh world of mining under the impossibly brilliant skies of Mexico, where sacred peyote cactus grows at the surface of the earth's rich ores, its intake taking the worshipper to a trance and closer to the creator, the world of the living mixed with the world of the dead on Dia de los Muertos, the day that is the culmination for the novel.

The Zigzag Way is not character-driven. Eric is more of a passive protagonist who is an observer for most of the novel, carried along by things he can barely put his finger on. The promising character of Dona Vera too, in the end remains inscrutable, doing no justice to the intrigue she inspires. If the reader is looking for a bit of Mexican history then this book clearly offers a pretty condensed version of it. Which is why, one would be led to feel that the author, very often transgresses from her plot and her characters to spend too much time elaborating on lyrical descriptions of sunsets and the mystical Indians, and ending only where the story should have taken flight.

Mexico is the real star here.

Desai, in her signature style, explores the landscape of one of the most exciting cultures. Most vividly told, the final scenes are the most powerful where past and present come together. It may be a slightly disappointing read for some, but still images of dusk thickened by "the smoke of copal" with candles shining everywhere in walled cemeteries may make you want to pack your bags, hop on a plane and land in Mexico City, just in time for the festival around which the novel culminates.