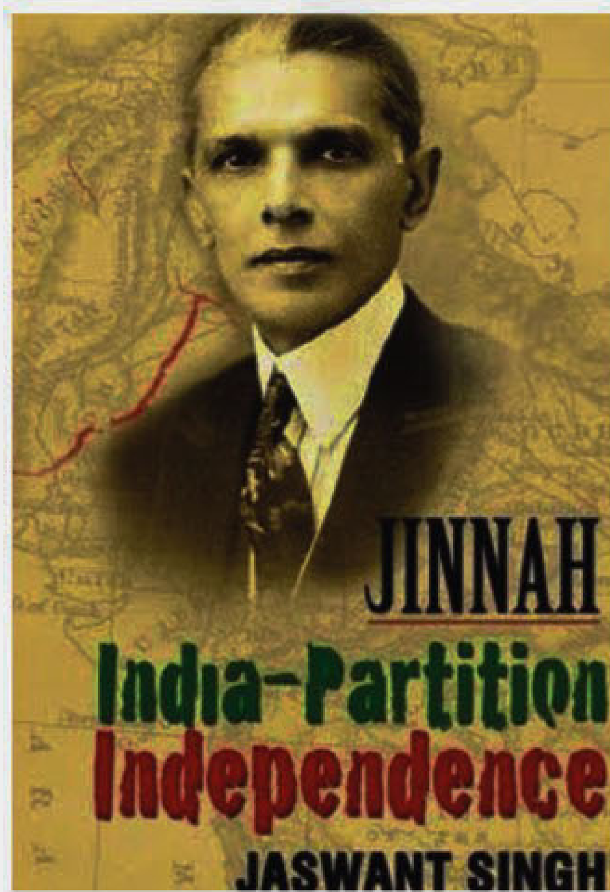
Jaswant's Jinnah and fault lines of Indian history

Ali Ahmed Ziauddin examines the background to partition

BREAKING with tradition is a courageous act. In the social arena one is labeled either a rebel or a crank. In the political world one risks finding oneself on the wrong side of popular opinion. In academia one can face blazing guns unless equipped with solid arguments and references. Breaking the stereotyped portrayal of Jinnah as a villain in mainstream Indian historiography, Jaswant Singh's recent assessment of him is one such act. He is candid without malice, a rare feat. He doesn't mince words when pinning due responsibility for partition on the leadership across all divides in general but Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru and Mountbatten in particular. His wit and eloquence are superb, though a bit repetitive at times. Nevertheless, since history is viewed through the prism of the present no matter how objective (a highly sensitive topic like partition more so), his appraisal of Jinnah on the wide canvas of India's independence movement too is not free of its constraints. I will mention only two.

A political analyst of South Asian affairs might find this excellently well researched book a gripping thriller. The captivating cascading of events of high political drama in pre partition India's volatile populist politics over half a century inadvertently blinkers the wider picture of discerning millennia-old historical forces at play. In other words, it gets trapped in a typical case of losing sight of the woods because of the trees. But before addressing the woods and trees issue let's explore the loose ends of Singh's central argument briefly. He is obviously sad and hurt over the catastrophe of partition. He thinks it would have been prevented if Congress had addressed the legitimate concerns of the Muslims in time despite the League's absurd claim of Muslim nationhood. Regrettably, he attributes this failure to the shortcomings of individual leaders. It's like holding the actors responsible for playing a script that was intrinsically divisive long before they arrived on stage.

That script began to be written in the early 19th century. The Bengal renaissance and other similar social movements across India, though with lesser intensity, unfolded early in the century in whatever rudimentary form. The central focus of these initiatives was to rediscover India and awaken to the new conditions of a Euro-centric world order. As the decades rolled by this soul searching influenced by



Jinnah
India Partition Independence
Jaswant Singh
Rupa

Orientalism drew inspiration from India's imperial past, i.e., before the arrival of the Turks, Afghans and Moguls. Although groups within the movement differed sharply on how to draw the future they were however unanimous, with few exceptions, in concluding that centuries of Muslim rule by different dynasties was in general the darkest period in Indian history. Thus began nationalist historiography, providing a conceptual framework to the future. The Congress admitted, with two major inclusions, democracy and secularism, the first of which is operational but doubts remain of its efficacy, while the other has remained illusory ever since. Where would Indian Muslims figure in a future with such a past except as a subject people at best or uninvited guests at worst? From there onward the Hindu-Muslim cleavage widened further and turned nasty in the 20th century. The Muslim League was the reaction to such majoritarian chauvinism.

The intriguing question is: why would a very high calibre Congress leadership fall prey to such narrow history reading? That brings us to the story of the woods and the trees. And to get away from the trees to have a glimpse of the woods one needs to delve into the contours of Indian history, even if very briefly. Not in history itself but rather the pattern it evolved into over millennia. History can be fascinating or tedious depending on how one goes about it. If every action has an equal and opposite reaction in the physical world humans can't be exempt from it. And they are not. The history of any people can be compared to a wide surging river. Carrying numerous streams from the hills, it expands in the plains and splits into multiple offshoots. The cascading force loses steam and multiple currents are born. In time, with deposition of silt, counter-currents are born.

In such light, three main currents and their counter-currents within the broad flow of Indian history can be identified. First is the gradual evolution of the racial segregation of society into castes, broadly defined as Brahminism, that gave birth to numerous counter cultures within and outside its fold. Second, though endemic exploitation of the peasantry stemmed from the economic relations of Brahminism, it nevertheless operated within a feudal order (in various forms) that was adopted by all ruling classes, irrespective of caste or creed. Third, despite attempts by various imperial dynasties to impose political unity in different ages, the centre-province dichotomy remained a constant trait of India's political order all through history. For purposes of this review only the first feature needs attention.

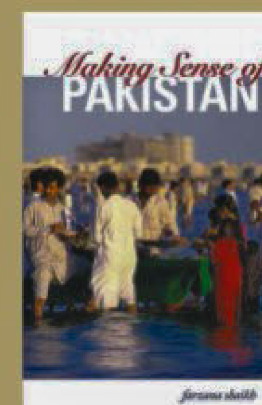
With the rise of monarchical states in the Gangetic plains around 600 BC, Brahminism emerged as the guiding doctrine of these states. It's a socio-political system that brands all other castes and faiths inferior, some even untouchable except Brahmins and Kshatriyas. It grants an individual or a community a particular caste status only after it submits to the Brahminic order. Obviously, it was deeply resented by the lower castes who constantly struggled to find a decent place in society. Buddhism, preaching a casteless social order, provided this space. From the 2nd century BC Buddhism gradually replaced Brahminism as the main current until the rise of the Gupta Empire in the 4th century AD. From then on and till the end of the 1st millennium, a Brahmin backlash methodically persecuted Buddhists, which included the destruction of monasteries. Buddhism slowly went into eclipse in India. From the early 2nd millennium AD Islam emerged as the counter current and remained so till the advent of British supremacy in the 18th century. From the mid 19th century nationalist claims created conditions for the ascendance of the Brahminic order once again. Since the Congress was the product of this mental landscape coated with a nationalist colour, it was impossible for it to accept Muslims as a distinct entity outside the Brahminic fold.

It is true that Indian Muslims weren't a very rational lot either. Their claim to a separate nation was based more on sentiments than substance. The rudimentary elements of constructing a modern nation were absent, which, however, didn't deter them from striving for one, thanks to the British who were more concerned with planetary power politics than prospects of a bloodbath in the subcontinent. Muslims were saddled in their past glory, little realising that the industrial revolution had already packed the thousand year-old but by then crumbling Islamic world system into history. Although most Indian Muslims were converts from Buddhism and low caste Hinduism, their ancestors, unlike earlier invaders, carried the gift of a mature civilisation. They bore the legacy that made it impossible for them to revert to the Brahminic fold. Moreover, the fate of the Buddhists of earlier times was a scary reminder. The historical baggage of both the communities and the compulsions of a rapidly unfolding Cold War made an utterly ruinous partition inevitable. It would turn the subcontinent into one of the most poverty stricken, volatile places on earth, with the prospect of an accidental nuclear war not unlikely. It's pointless to point fingers at any individual or party.

Hopefully, Jaswant Singh's attempt to heal the past will open a debate for South Asians, one targeted at shaping a more inclusive future.

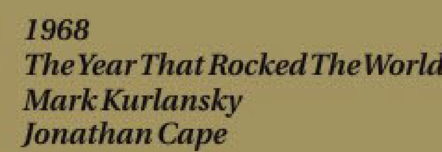
Ali Ahmed Ziauddin is a historical researcher and takes interest in farming.

AT A GLANCE



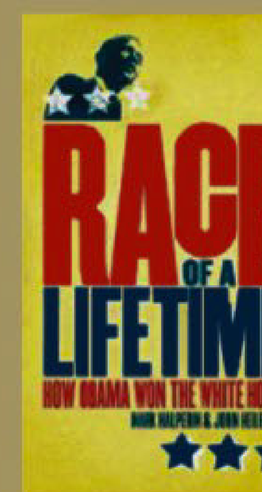
Making Sense of Pakistan
Farzana Shaikh
Hurst

What ails Pakistan? Given its recent troubles, both with its internal politics and its external compulsions, you could argue that the country is in deep trouble. But, then again, its problems have had a lot to do with the way it was created and the manner in which it has been governed since. Farzana Shaikh has her own take on the situation.



1968
The Year That Rocked The World
Mark Kurlansky
Jonathan Cape

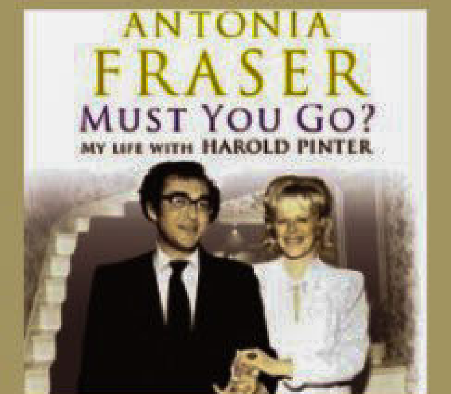
No one who lived through 1968 will easily forget the way it shaped lives and thoughts throughout the world, and especially in the West. Assassinations in America, Vietnam, trouble in Paris, Dubcek's misery and every other thing seemed to be happening. Kurlansky brings back memories of the good and the bad. You will love this book.



Race of A Lifetime
How Obama Won the White House
Mark Halperin, John Heilemann
Viking

Accounts of US presidential elections have been written before. It was Theodore White who, beginning in 1960 and ending with 1972, spoke in detail about the way politicians have waged their battles for the White House. Now Halperin and Heilemann try doing the same with the 2008 elections. An enjoyable read.

Must You Go?
My Life With Harold Pinter
Lady Antonia Fraser
Weidenfeld & Nicholson



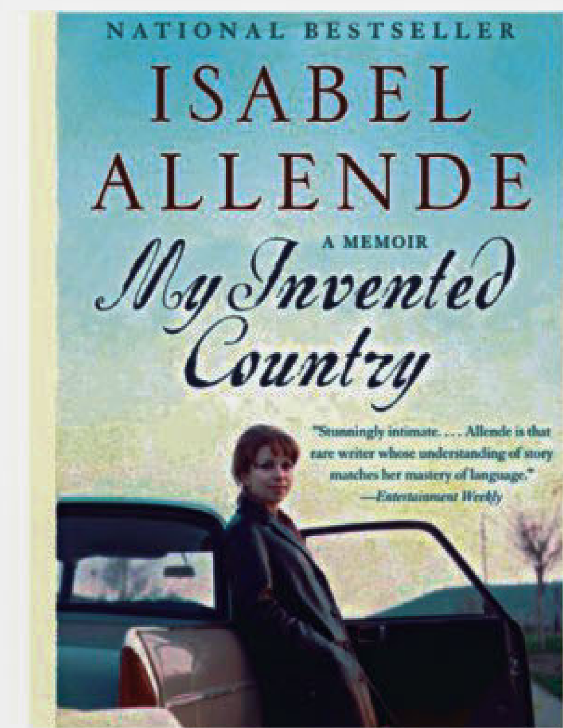
Pinter died on Christmas Eve in 2008. And here Fraser recalls the tempestuous affair she had with him in the mid 1970s before marrying him a few years later. Both left their spouses and children, giving rise to what was then a society scandal. But they clearly had no regrets. In this work, Fraser lives through that experience.

Eyes of madmen, signs of torture

Syed Badrul Ahsan shares in a writer's pain

ISABEL Allende, like so many of her compatriots, left her native Chile long ago. Unlike many of them, however, she has kept returning to her country, coming away every time with newer insights into the society and politics of the land. As a writer, indeed as a novelist, Allende has known enough about Chile, about herself, to convince herself of her identity. She knows, certainly, that her second marriage, to an American, was guided more by the temptation of making a home abroad than giving expression to romantic passion. For all that practical demonstration of reality at work, though, Isabel Allende has remained the Chilean she has always been. For her, Chile is something more than a patch of geography. It is an image, an idea she has constantly nurtured and shaped and reshaped in the mind. And that is how she has reinvented the old country.

And well she might. As a cousin of the murdered Salvador Allende, she has watched politics operate at close quarters, has survived the ferocity of Augusto Pinochet's goon squads, much like Michelle Bachelet, the about-to-retire president of Chile. But what makes My Invented Country a proposition different from the general run of memoirs is the light-heartedness which cloaks the seriousness of Allende's thoughts. She resorts to banter, to healthy, self-deprecating humour to portray a people with whom her political umbilical links cannot be severed. Watch the beginning of her tale: 'Let's begin at the beginning, with Chile, that remote land that few people can locate on the map because it's as far as you can go without falling off the planet.' The premise of her narrative is thus laid out



My Invented Country
A Memoir
Isabel Allende
Flamingo/HarperCollins Publishers

and what happens as the story rolls is a fascinating exposition of images that dot the many layers of the work. She has time to glimpse the elongated country, as she calls it, through the poetry of Pablo Neruda besides rushing through descriptions of the frenzied childhood she has been through among a vast train of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, et al. Whatever you might spot in that narration, boredom is a thought that will not strike you.

And so the story telling goes on. As happens in so many other countries across the globe, bureaucracy takes quite a good toll on the health of the average citizen. It can, in Chile, climb to ludicrous heights, even where the point of discussion happens to be the death, or otherwise, of an individual. Listen to Isabel Allende again: 'even if (a citizen) throws a tantrum to prove that he hasn't died, he is obliged to present a "certificate of survival"'. And then comes the clincher: 'Recently, a busload of us tourists crossing the border between Chile and Argentina had to wait an hour and a half while our documents were checked. Getting through the Berlin Wall was easier. Kafka was Chilean'. The interpretation here is all, but what surely cannot be shied away from is the truth of the writer's careful staying away from rancour. If anything, it is the amusing aspects of life, a quality that must come to every writer, that constantly grabs her attention. Allende may have made a home in foreign land, but her gaze has never wavered from Chile. She advises the foreigner who might be at risk of failing to comprehend the speech of Chileans, who speak, as Allende informs us tongue-in-cheek, at least three official languages (the educated speech of officials, the colloquial language of ordinary people and the indecipherable and endlessly changing speech of young people): 'The visiting foreigner should not despair, because even if he doesn't understand a word, he'll see that people are dying to be of help. We also speak very low and sigh a lot'.

For all her seemingly unserious way of observing the world around her, though, deep inside Isabel Allende's soul a sense of tragedy runs through. And it comes with memories of 11 September 1973 when her cousin's government was overthrown in a violent military coup. The nature of her story telling may hide the scars left over from that manifestly doomsday happening, but it is there all the same. For Allende, for tens of thousands of other Chileans, the coup was a decisive point. It pitted them against organised villainy and then forced them into exile, external as well as internal. 'Friends and acquaintances', Allende writes, 'began to disappear; some returned after weeks of absence, with the eyes of madmen and signs of torture. Many sought refuge in other countries'.

In exile in Caracas, Isabel Allende and other Chileans sought to recreate the old Chile of the happier days. They came together to listen to the music of Violeta Parra and Victor Jara and to give one another posters of Salvador Allende and Che Guevara. The writer began to read Neruda again, even as her children grew up and her marriage to her first husband started falling apart. Chile turned into part of memory and took rebirth in Isabel Allende as the land of the poetic and the poor. But then, Chile lives, as her grandchildren keep telling her, as a country inside her head. She agrees, but then cannot escape the magic realism which comes with thoughts of the old country being a symbol of beautiful pain. She whispers, to no one in particular: 'Only the landscape remains true and immutable; I am not a foreigner to the majestic landscape of Chile'.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

The explosion of woman power

Audity Falguni journeys through an account of feminism

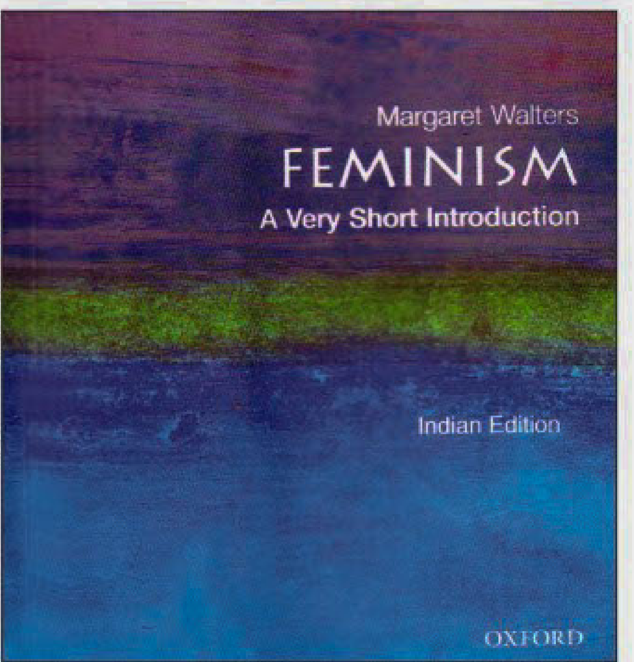
OVER the centuries, and in many different countries, women have spoken out for their sex, and articulated, in different ways, their complaints, needs and hopes. In England, right up until the 1960s, the word `feminist' was usually pejorative. Writers like Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf sharply attacked the word `feminism.' American feminist Estelle Freedman argues that right from its origins, the word has carried negative connotations. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, in their third collection of essays, *Who's Afraid of Feminism*?, argued that `attacks on feminism frequently merge into a wider misogyny.' Who is a feminist actually? Margaret Walters has tried to answer the question in her book.

This 159-page book contains ten major chapters. These ten chapters include analyses on the religious roots of feminism, the beginning of secular feminism, reforming women, campaigning women, fighting for the vote: suffragists, fighting for the vote, early 20th century feminism, the late 20th century and feminists across the world.

In the first chapter of the book, 'The religious roots of feminism,' Walters narrates that how in medieval Europe, middle class families often disposed of 'unnecessary' or `unmarriageable daughters' by shutting them away in convents. It allowed some women to develop a talent for organization and some were able to read and think. Hildegard of Bingen, the 11th century nun and abbess of small Rhineland convent cum writer, the Englishwoman Julian of Norwich in the early 15th century, her contemporary Margery Kempe or the first autobiography writer in the English language were the pioneers. By the late 16th century, the Reformation enabled more women to receive an education and feminists like Jane Anger even took up a challenging position by insisting that Eve was superior to Adam. In 1611, Aemilia Lanyer reminded her readers that Christ was 'born of a woman.'

Chapter three dwells on the `Amazons of the pen' in the early 18th century. Mary Astell published her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* in 1694 urging women to be thoughtful. *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu questioned the 'superior status' of the husband in the marriage. The greatest of these 'Amazons of the pen' was Mary Wollstonecraft who, in the groundbreaking *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1790, spoke in immense courage: *Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming around its guilt cage, only seek to adore its prison.* In 1791, in revolutionary France, Olympe de Gouges claimed equal civil status for women citizens of the Republic. Throughout the 18th century, Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe wrote Gothic fiction exploring the possibilties and problems of women's lives.

A second-wave feminism in the late 20th century emerged after the Second World War. One of the most influential thinkers here is the French writer Simone de Beauvoir. Her writings add up to a remarkable exploration of women's experiences. The chapters of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) range over the girl child, the wife, the mother, the prostitute, the narcissist, the lesbian and the woman in love. Betty Freidan's 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, exploded the myth of the happy housewife in affluent, white American suburbs. In America, expressions of feminism ranged from Gloria Steinem's accessible and glossy *Ms* magazine, first published in 1970, to the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett set out to analyze `patriarchy as a *political* institution.' In England, Australian-born Germaine Greer's lively and provocative *The Female Eunuch*



Feminism
A Very Short Introduction
Margaret Walters
Oxford University Press

(1970) challenged the `sense of inferiority or natural dependence' which women have too often accepted placidly and passively. Sheila Rowbotham's *Liberation and the New Politics* (1970) and Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate* (1971) were both written in response to the emerging Women's Liberation movement in England. Juliet Mitchell argues that four areas of women's lives must be examined and transformed: production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialization of the children.

Protests at the Miss America contest in Atlantic City in November 1968 and 1969, when feminists mockingly crowned a sheep, gave the emerging movement a high visibility. Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1981) and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) explore the physical self-hatred and fear of ageing that plague so many contemporary women. Kathie Sarachild, an advocate for consciousness-raising, underscored the need to `speak the unspoken.' In 1975, the American Susan Brownmiller published a long, scholarly and ground-breaking study of rape, *Against Our Will,* which deconstructed the centuries-old male `myth of the heroic rapist' and coined a slogan: *pornography is the theory and rape the practice.* Susan Griffin, in her *Pornography and Silence* (1981), argued that pornography expresses `fear of bodily knowledge and a desire to silence eros.'

The lives of women in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia and the Middle East have also been profoundly affected by colonialism and neocolonialism. In Latin America, the local feminists had to wage war with the entrenched patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, in addition to the regionally specific male sexist attitudes termed `machismo.' Latin American women had to battle a lot for sex education in schools, women's suffrage, right to divorce, need for legal abortion, increased sentencing for rapists and help for battered women. The problems of Africa are particularly complex. Feminism in Africa is heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with `bread, butter and power' issues. Genital mutilation, as a way of suppressing unruly female sexuality, is still carried out in some African countries.

Margaret Walters succeeds well in portraying the brief history of the women's movement in her book. However, as a South Asian woman, this reviewer felt a little discriminated against: there is hardly any discussion on the conditions of women in South Asia.

Audity Falguni is a poet, writer and social analyst .

Steam rising in a column

Jessica Mudditt is pleased by a tale

THE third novel by Dhaka-born Monica Ali is a superbly written, behind-the-scenes account of a commercial kitchen in London.

It is no less an achievement than her best-selling debut novel *Brick Lane*, which portrayed a young Bangladeshi woman adjusting to a new life with a doddering husband and a home in a concrete jungle in east London.

In the Kitchen takes a long, cold look at the city's catering industry, which is largely fuelled by immigrants who find an opening in its transience after escaping from complicated pasts. The novel is set in the busy but impersonal Imperial Hotel and opens with the death of a night porter who had been living incognito in the "catacombs" - the downstairs storage area. Amongst a dozen or so others, there is the obstetrician-turned-cook Nikolai, who was sentenced *in absentia* to fourteen years in prison under Gorbachev, the young Liberian who recounts horrific traumas, and the scrawny, uncommunicative Lena, who was trafficked from Belarus. Other than an ambitious Indian and the English executive chef, everyone works at the Imperial Hotel by force of circumstance rather than a love of food.

Nevertheless, Ali injects her novel with rich descriptions of the frenetic scenes behind every dish and it's impossible not to admire her ability to conjure up a living, breathing, sweating, kitchen. To quote her but once: "Steam rose in a column and dispersed, like an idea that can find no words."

The story is told through the eyes of the hotel's executive chef, Gabriel Lightfoot, whose descent into emotional chaos is the real meat of the novel. He is not an instantly likeable character nor perhaps, is he ever, and this makes things somewhat less compelling for the reader. Gabe's attitude to his staff is typified by a cold indifference mixed with spontaneous surges of compassion. During a rare moment of unity when a minute's silence is called for to mark a week since the porter's death, he thinks, "Why in the middle of service, when every minute counts?" He invents a dilemma between maintaining his authority and knowing their individual stories: "He was curious to hear about Benny's history but he didn't want to be burdened with it. If he had to yell at Benny about something, or even give him the sack, he preferred not to know about the truly terrible things he might have been through."

In the Kitchen
Monica Ali
Doubleday

Gabe is in his early forties and he is on the brink of realising his dream to open a restaurant of his own. He is in a long-term relationship with a woman he loves and imagines starting a family together. Despite feeling frustrated by the time it has taken him to achieve his "tick-list" of goals, he feels that "Looking sideways (for what man is strong enough to resist?) he could say that things were not too bad."

Things begin to unravel when he discovers that his father is dying and his only sibling has become a stranger to him. Gabe returns to his home in northern England and feels repulsed by the bigotry, particularly as espoused within his own family. He fights with his father and feels helpless at being unable to escape the pattern of their fraught relations. It is only when he realises that his late mother - his "fairy princess" - was not all that he thought she was, that he begins to re-evaluate his own behaviour, and concludes with the help of his sister - that he has failed as a son.

Gabe begins to question everything in his life, including his relationship to food. His kitchen staff endure tirades of abuse as he rallies against a crisis of confidence. Against all logic, he begins an affair "an indiscretion, rather, because 'affair' was too grand a word," with the trafficked Lena. Here Ali presents the reader with a scarcely believable *femme fatale*. Whilst Gabe is enraged by the exploitation she endured, he himself regards her as dishonest, manipulative and rude. He is irritated by her passive consumption of trashy television and their muted exchanges barely pass for conversation. Nor does she particularly appeal to him physically: "Her hair, tied in a ponytail, was limp and greasy. Her earlobes were stretched by thick gold hoops. A row of studs ran up the cartlidge of the left ear. The tendons of her neck formed two thick cords."

Thus Ali forces the reader to observe, with hand-wringing frustration, a man throw away his all for nothing. Whether he begins anew would make an interesting sequel.

Jessica Mudditt is an Australian intern at The Daily Star.