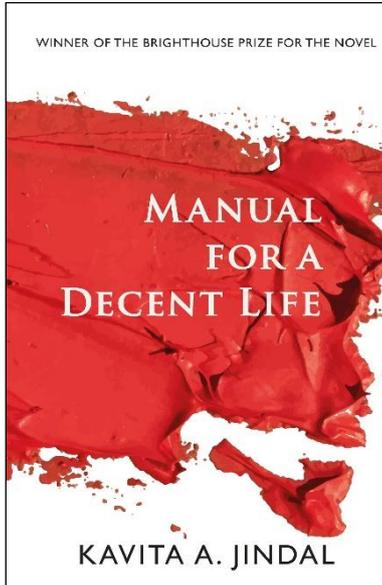


Decent Life Gets its Manual

Review of Kavita A. Jindal's 'Manual for a Decent Life' by Jason A. Reading in The Book Review Literary Trust



A winner of the Brighthorse Prize, Kavita A Jindal's debut novel builds slowly at first; the mood is tense, both pace and complexity rise steadily to an almost rabid crescendo. Jindal's rich prose seduces you into northern India: Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and rural Theog—the sights, sounds, people, and places. The dialogue is crisp and convincing. The patina of domestic settings and familial relationships is believable.

The key players are Waheeda: Muslim, single mother (separated from her artist husband), and Monish: Hindu, playboy, eldest son of a business tycoon. We see an India of the late twentieth century from Waheeda and Monish's very different perspectives, but at times the novel feels more of an ensemble piece, so convincingly rendered are the other characters—family, friends, enemies—many of whom may be more than one of these.

Even on first reading, the book drips with symbolism and portent. The expectation of tragedy builds from the outset with the presence of a single magpie, for what bird better heralds evil? Is Waheeda's *adaab* to the gardener really a salute to ward off the sorrow on the drive? The evocative opening foreshadows the most horrific—and unexpected—moments to come.

Juxtapositions between Monish's playboy lifestyle, and Waheeda's more precipitous life, create the axis of the driving narrative, but it is far from the only point of contention. Waheeda's India is a dangerous place, and not just for women. The loss of her brothers, a mere six months prior, is mentioned almost in passing. By choosing not to dwell on the harrowing nature of those deaths, Jindal heightens the surrounding suspicions and the malice that lurks unseen for Waheeda.

Waheeda is undoubtedly brave: standing for the Nulkazim Peace Forum and entering a dangerous sexual liaison, these are not the actions of a timid woman. Whilst Waheeda can be reckless, her upbringing—knowing that *tahzeeb*, cultivated manners, are important—both restrains her and perhaps enables her to navigate the complex situations she now faces. The heat and discomfort of the campaign trail are brought vividly to life on the NPF bus. No relationship, no action nor glance, is beyond question or reproach. Who can she trust, who can she rely on? What are people thinking?

Manual for a Decent Life draws its strengths from questioning the essential truths. How much is in the hands of fate? Is it a coincidence that '*chit*', the word for the origami triangles, which ultimately hold Waheeda's fate, also means 'an impudent or arrogant young woman'?

Despite the prevailingly ominous undertones, in places the mood is vibrant. Interactions with family and friends are convincing: food, cooking and music bring detail to the prose. And yet even here we have contradictions, not every taste is good: Waheeda's stomach-turning dislike of goat's milk, and more abstractly, the lingering bitter distaste of her father's electoral defeat add a constant gritty realism.

The book inhabits a deftly rendered collision of place, religion, class, person, culture, and politics. No convenient lines are drawn between these things, and yet it is at the boundaries between them that the heart of the novel's growing tension lies. Nothing is ever simple. As Monish observes, 'no one even properly understands the precepts of their own religion'. In a world ever more obsessed with identity politics, Jindal's work reminds us that in real life there are rarely, if ever, convenient delineations between such things.

Waheeda's first encounter with Monish Selvani is purely physical, as she '[...] stepped out hurriedly into the dark and into something'. Not some one, but some thing in the dark, before 'she was forced to bump into someone's chest again'.

This playful take on what can be seen, and what one chooses to see, recurs: 'Blinkered horses always seem terrified, flinching at the clamour around them,' thinks Waheeda. And yet, if she mentioned this to Monish, 'he'd offer to procure a pair of blinkers so that the two of them could properly experience blinkered vision'.

Blinkered to what? Their differences, or to the danger they are courting? The frequently sensuous encounters at Monish's Delhi pad take place with the blinds and curtains drawn at Waheeda's behest. The chemistry between them is as palpable as it is irresistible: 'nothing I do here will be dignified,' she realizes, her fingers splayed on Monish's chest.

Later, no longer blinkered but metaphorically blind, Waheeda tours the polling booths of Dhoonpur ruminating that '[she is] a dark horse in the race, a blind dark horse'.

These bleak thoughts pertaining to political ambition echo her insecurities regarding one of Monish's previous, tempestuous and paler-skinned lovers.

For all this, it is the book's underlying narrative that drives the reader on. Texture and complexity are never at the expense of readability and relatability.

The judicious use of Hindi enriches the flavour of the work, and much of its use is explained with a light touch in the text but, for me at least, a glossary would have proved useful. Simple details pertaining to food, music, and even items of clothing had me reaching for Google translate. Occasionally this revealed nuances that I would have otherwise missed.

There is depth to this book, and layers I suspect that will only reveal themselves upon revisiting. There will be things that my male, western eye has not seen, and others I have seen that are, perhaps, not consciously intended. The overall effect is captivating; the themes disquieting and uneasy. It is a work that will live with me for a long time. There is undoubtedly scope for a sequel.

Jason A Reading has an MA in Creative Writing from Kingston University. After a career as a technical architect in the City, he is now working on a contemporary horror-fantasy novel.

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