



MAD COUNTRY

Samrat Upadhyay

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If you see Orwell and Kafka together walking down a street, you are in the world of Samrat Upadhyay's Mad Country. The editor of an investigative magazine contends with the trauma of a disappeared colleague, a political tragedy that vies for her attention with a more domestic crisis: a friend who's suicidal over a divorce. An American hippie in Kathmandu in the 1980s undergoes a drastic identity change, only to discover that the metamorphosis brings its own heartbreak. A young man forms a bond with an African woman who has inexplicably appeared on the streets of the city. A wealthy Nepali boy—a Richie Rich—finds himself pretending to be a beggar to understand why his mother abandoned him. These eight stories are from the master chronicler of our modern-day anxieties, globalization and exile. Mad Country takes you to places that you have always yearned to go but were always afraid to.

MAD COUNTRY Details

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Author : Samrat Upadhyay

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From Reader Review MAD COUNTRY for online ebook

Lauren says

Upadhyay's story collection incorporates larger themes of political unrest, class and race struggles, and personal and institutional freedoms (freedom of speech, free press, etc.) Through seven stories and one longer self-described novella, we see these notions in both Upadhyay's native Nepal, and his now-home, the US.

Many of the stories have a amorphous dream-like quality that made me question whether the events were truly happening. The novella "Dreaming of Ghana" was most notable for this. A Nepali man begins having vivid dreams of (what he believes is) Ghana. He soon meets a woman who he believes to be from Ghana and almost instantly falls in love with her. As readers, we question whether this woman is real, and wonder if the narrator is reliable. No definitive answers, but still a unique and compelling story.

Upadhyay's political stories ("Fast Forward", the eponymous "Mad Country", and "America the Great Equalizer") introduce a strong narrator and the events that surround them, unrest, struggle, and suppression. In "Fast Forward", we see a plot to suppress a reporter and a magazine from reporting on the government, "Mad Country" carries the weight of political dissidence and imprisonment, and "America the Great Equalizer" follows a Nepali man living in Missouri during the riots of Ferguson, Missouri after the murder of Michael Brown in 2014.

Mad Country is a strong collection, and I'd recommend it for short story lovers, and anyone wanting to learn more about Nepal.

**I talk about this one on Ep 123 of Reading Envy: Godlets and Forests. Check it out!

Nirooj Bista says

I am gonna say its a nice read. It could be just me, but I found difference in Mr. Upadhyay writing style in Mad Country from his other stories/books. As a fan of his works i can say that the stories in Mad Country are really gems.

Bernie Gourley says

I've recently started reading at least one work of literature from each country I visit, and I picked this book up in Nepal as a first take on that country through the lens of literature. I couldn't be happier with my selection. This book provided exactly what I was looking for in such a book, and more. What I want from such a book is insight into culture, lifestyle, and politico-historical context that can be difficult to witness through travel. Traveling a new country is like dating a new person; one doesn't see the rough edges for some time. (Usually the relationship – in either case -- is over before one sees into the murky depths.)

Over the course of eight stories, Upadhyay not only gives one insight into the nature of life for a variety of Nepalis (e.g. rich, poor, and middle class as well as young / progressive v.) older / conservative), he also shows the life of a hippie ex-pat gone native as well as presenting the worldview of a Nepali abroad (i.e. in America for college.) Where this book exceeded my expectations was in the skillfulness of tension-building

employed in the stories. Often a book that achieves the aforementioned objectives does so in a way that is flat on story because it takes the character-centric orientation common in literary fiction. These stories are gripping as well as insightful, and don't abandon story for character. It dances a beautiful line in that regard.

The first of eight stories tells of the trials and tribulations of an editor of a hard-hitting journalistic magazine, and the dual challenges she faces in taking on a corrupt regime while at the same time she has a friend who is going through a messy breakup. However the editor juggles these competing demands, we know she won't escape some guilt of failing someone important to her.

The second story is about a rich boy whose life is tormented by the fact that his mother abandoned him and his father and moved on to form a new family. The boy takes to impersonating a beggar, secretly hoping his mother will see him and will be shocked into change. The story is also about the young man's wake up call to the fact that he'll never have the killer instincts bred by necessity into those less fortunate that are arrayed against him.

The third story is about "the Sharmas," a dysfunctional Nepali nuclear family in which the mother is pure shrew, the father is trying fumblingly to have an affair, the son is a dim-wit, and the daughter is dating a young man that everybody seems to think is out of her league.

The fourth story is about a girl in the early 1980's Kathmandu who goes from the drug-addled life of a Freak Street hippie to going full native. Here we see what draws the foreigner to Nepal and to Nepalese people, as well as how attempts to escape into another culture can be as troubled as attempts to escape into drug-induced euphoria.

The fifth story is by far the longest and might be classed as a novella. It's about a young man who becomes obsessed with an African girl that he rescues in Kathmandu. The piece has a very dream-like quality to it, and through much of the story one is left unclear as to what is real and what is the product of the lead's mind. In fact, the title "Dreaming of Ghana" suggests this imagined state of affairs.

The sixth story is the shortest, and – as its title suggests – it's about an "Affair before the Earthquake." The story evokes the emotion of world events that cleanly bisect our lives.

The eponymously titled penultimate chapter follows a wealthy and powerful woman who is "disappeared" by a corrupt authoritarian regime when she tries to look into the similar disappearance of her son. It's a fascinating tale about a prominent real estate developer who is disabused of the notion that she is too powerful to be man-handled by the State. We see her transformation as a prisoner as the wind is taken out of her sails until one wonders whether she would ever be able to cope in her old life after being cowed by prison life.

The last story, like the fourth, turns things upside-down a bit. In it we find a Nepali student abroad who finds himself out in the cold because of his strong views on race. He discovers he's at odds with the other foreign students because he thinks they should be more outraged about the bias displayed against them. He identifies with the plight of blacks, but they don't see him as one of them.

This is an intense little collection of stories and I'd highly recommend it. The stories are well-crafted and keep the reader intrigued.

Bonnie Brody says

Samrat Upadhyay has the gift of being able to view the world with both a zoom and wide angle lens at the same time. He sees the small details within the larger cultural and socioeconomic milieu. Most of the stories contained in this collection take place in Nepal, a country I know little about, and one of the stories takes place in the United States. Reading these amazing short stories placed me inside a world very different from my own. What I can say with surety, however, is that the commonality of human nature and the struggles that people face, often go beyond culture and place.

The stories are varied and I loved all but one. Working in the field of mental health, I especially appreciated 'Beggar Boy' about a young man whose life experiences have been so difficult for him that he is playing out a fantasy wherein he becomes someone else. 'What Will Happen to the Sharma Family' made me laugh as well as appreciate the issues that many families face despite variances in family dynamics. 'Freak Street' caught the struggles of a young woman hoping to find herself. A hippie in Kathmandu, she ends up living on Freak Street and becomes so ensconced in the family she stays with and the cultural milieu surrounding her, so much so that she changes her name and forgets about her previous life in Ohio. 'Mad Country', the title story, shows how one's stance in life is as precarious as the political environment of a particular time and place. No one should get too comfortable with their life status because all can tumble down at the drop of a hat. 'Fast Forward', the opening story, is about a young woman who runs an investigative journal and soon realizes that her fame and the truth are not suitable adversaries for the current political regime. The last story, 'America the Great Equalizer' looks closely at race, loss, and the disenfranchised.

I don't know why, but lately it has been difficult for me to get into short stories. This all changed when I picked up 'Mad Country'. Each story is separate but there are a few connected characters if the reader pays close enough attention. The stories are mesmerizing and written by a pro, an author whose view of the world is complex and wise.

Jill says

After reading these seven stories and one novella, I want to reach out to all my reading friends and say, "THIS is how it's done!" Samrat Upadhyay, a chronicler of Nepalese fiction, creates fictional worlds so seamlessly that he makes short story writing look easy. And of course, it's not.

The theme that binds all eight of these mini-works together is identity – identity that evolves and shifts as a result of changing landscapes and conflicts of self. Let's start with Dreaming of Ghana, by far the longest in page count. Aakash – a young man who is a profound disappointment to his parents – begins to have strange dreams about Ghana, suspecting that "his dream was a lie, like the circus elephants." That is, until a young, very dark woman appears, the personification of his dreams and a means of writing a new reality. The way the story plays out – the changes that the meeting evokes in Aakash and his roguish well-to-do friend – held my attention to the final gasp-worthy sentence.

The eponymous story Mad Country is my second favorite. In this one, a Type A Nepalese businesswoman named Anamika inadvertently is held in detention by police after attempting to discover the belongings of her neer-do-well son. At first put-out by being inadvertently labeled a political prisoner and forced to mingle with the riff-raff of society, Anamika values and identity undergo an astounding transformation.

Other stories also are compelling: Beggar Boy, for example, where a privileged young man named Ramesh develops an obsession with the poor, even donning filthy old clothes and taking on their identity. And

America the Great Equalizer – the only story set in the United States – where a promising Nepali graduate student learns the reality of being a black man in America.

Truly, this is an impressive collection. Nepal itself becomes a character of sorts, permeating each of these brilliant stories.

T.L. Cooper says

Mad Country by Samrat Upadhyay puts the reader into the minds and hearts of a hodgepodge of characters while examining the social and political issues that govern their lives. These snippets of life push the reader to think about life from different perspectives perhaps even questioning the conventions of life we often accept without a moment's thought. Mad Country delves into the raw emotions and the intense dogmas held by people that create division and destroy communication while pushing the reader to cheer for some characters, commiserate with others, and despise others and sometimes doing all three for the one character or the other. Upadhyay writes stories that feel like snapshots of his characters' lives and drawing parallels that remind the reader just how interwoven all our lives really are.

Surabhi Sharma says

Mad Country is a collection of eight short stories by the award-winning author of Himalayan country Nepal, Samrat Upadhyay. The stories read like a dream like it was played in the writer's unconscious mind and the next thing he did is write them down. The stories are ethereal beauty and characters are very familiar yet exclusive.

The cities, big and small and towns of Nepal are in the backdrop of the stories but there is nothing, in particular, to be said in respect to the country or its culture despite the names of the cities and streets he has taken in the stories. The protagonist of every story is a common citizen of Nepal. The stories are not written to teach a moralistic lesson or to convey a message or anything like. They are just stories. They come from the common people and their lives. They do not necessarily end on a good note or a happy ending. Do not expect an ending or closing of the story.

Walk the streets of Samrat Upadhyay's Mad Country to hear the fascinating and delightful stories.

<https://thereviewauthor.com/>

Arun Budhathoki says

Samrat's characters confused me...albeit they possessed the essence of madness, it made little impact on me.

extended review (later)...

Becca says

The first couple stories were hard to get into and I almost gave up on this book. I'm really glad I didn't! The last three or four were really, really good.

Unrevere says

Samrat Upadhyay has moved away from the simplicity of his early stories, but the injection of magic realism simply does not work alongside the mundane prose. Everyone is trying to be someone else, but not in any convincing way, except in the last story, 'America, the Great Equalizer'. The longest story in the collection (occupying a quarter of the book), 'Dreaming of Ghana', is a trainwreck: a young man dreams of Africa, and a black girl enters his city. Other characters enter and exit with little motivation (take the parents who abruptly emigrate to Hong Kong), and at the centre of it all we have the disillusioned, spineless protagonist, who resembles the hapless heroes and heroines of all the other stories; either they have no agency, or the agency they are presumed to have suddenly stops working. The effect is depressing, but not in any profound or enlightening sense. There are ideas and genuinely charming passages in the book, but they are framed sloppily. The glowing reviews of Mad Country in major western papers I am compelled to put down to neo-orientalism!

Kasa Cotugno says

Lately I've been reading a lot of short stories that target specific cultures and/or locations. Present in these collections is, given their contemporary nature, a commonality thanks to globalization. By taking the time to write interconnected stories, authors present a more vivid, encompassing view of the chosen area than would be in one long novel. Samrat Upadhyay is Nepali, and I can safely say, he is the first writer I've read from that country. Don't make the mistake as one character does in the searing story entitled America, the Great Equalizer, and confuse Nepal with India. Kathmandu, a city I will never visit, comes alive, more modern and closer to an American metropolis than I would've thought. In each story there is a reversal of status quo for the central character, a life changing situation or event. Unlike "slice of life" stories, these are mini-novels with complete arcs. Highly recommended.

Rachel says

This book was a cultural experience! As a tourist, my experience was that Nepal and its people are so beautiful. These stories offered a different perspective, of a glimpse into social issues in Nepal and affecting Nepalis abroad. The stories give more life to things I learned while in Nepal, and to things I've been told by friends from that part of the world.

Elliott Turner says

3.5 stars - captivating stories about the Nepali elite both in Nepal at times of great upheaval but also the Nepali immigrant experience in the US. Upadhyay's tales revolve around the economic creme de la creme,

but he writes across gender reasonably well and these stories really stick with a reader long after you've closed the book.

The opening story about a rich kid pretending to be poor from a broken family, and the last about a Nepali immigrant visiting Ferguson, were both strong. I also liked Dreaming about Ghana and also the "hippie young woman" who insists on getting a proper local name while in Nepal.

Booktart says

I'm generally not a huge short story fan - I like the depth of a full length novel-- but I found these stories compelling. I learned a lot about Nepali culture and history - I definitely want to read more on the subject.

Mahesh Sowani says

I had read writers from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. But I never knew that English writers existed in the tiny mountain country of Nepal as well. Thank you Mad Country for introducing me to the Nepali writer Samrat Upadyay.

Mad country is collection of eight short stories, all set in Nepal. The setting works in favour of the book for apart from the scenic locations in movies, we hardly know the true Nepal. The author paints an incredible yet true picture of the country which abuts us.

The opening story Fast Forward touches dynamics of media-politics relationship. I felt indeed Nepal has rubbed something from its neighbour and cultural cousin - India. Beggar Boy demonstrates how lonely we are amidst all the riches. Though the reason why the protagonist takes up the life of the beggar was beyond comprehension. The characters in Samrat's stories work out that way, the way they want, even if it may appear crazy, absurd for the rest of us. He subtly touches homosexuality in almost every story for unintended reasons again.

What Will Happen to the Sharma Family is a light read. It narrates how destiny can turn a zero into hero. In Freak Street we meet an American woman whose soul has turned a Nepali within six months of her stay in Nepal. But what happens when her life oscillates between two nationalities and two contradictory set of values sprouting from them. Dreaming of Ghana again in true Samrat style is the story of freaky people and their freakier journeys. An Affair Before the Earthquake is the shortest story in the book and is about a love story gone all wrong. Mad Country shows who political prisoners are and their lives in the prisons. America, the Great Equalizer is a slightly incomprehensible story again where the protagonist behaves in the most illogical manner.

I liked this book for the different, refreshing flavour which it offers. If you are looking forward for something like that this book is to be lapped up.
