

*The Perfect Man* by Naeem Murr (Heinemann) R205

*The Perfect Man*, recently long-listed for the Booker Prize, is in many respects an old-fashioned novel. Set in the nineteen fifties in Pisgah, a small town in Missouri, it recreates something of the fiction of the period, in its relentless delving into the secrets of a small and tight community: *Peyton Place*, *The Bramble Bush*, *A Summer Place*, all those forgotten shockers come to mind, with their sleazy suppressions, their furtively steamy sex, their teen pregnancies, their stern indictment of small-town intolerance.

Naeem Murr is of course quite aware of the tradition in which he is writing. What he adds to the tradition, in this compelling and moving novel, is his central character, who would never have made it in *Peyton Place*: Rajiv, an enigmatic and charismatic boy, half-English, half-Indian, who through a bizarre but entirely credible sequence of events is foisted upon an unsuspecting inhabitant of Pisgah through the fecklessness of his father and the connivingness of his British kin.

The reluctant adoptive parent of the boy is one Ruth Winters, a forty-something writer of romantic novels, whose sole qualification for the job is that she was harbouring the boy's uncle when he committed suicide. Fiercely resistant to this imposition, she nevertheless with time warms to the boy ...

Here, too, any number of over-cute precedents loom, the kind of thing that tends to get filmed with Hugh Grant being inducted into maturity by a twelve-year old. But again Murr glances at the stereotype only to shun it. His Rajiv is an entirely original creation, an undeniably charming, even enchanting presence, with nevertheless a strangely elusive quality. Since this is nineteen fifties small-town America, Rajiv's dark skin elicits the usual near-panic in many residents; but on the less hidebound inhabitants, who tend to be children, Rajiv exerts a spell as mysterious as it is potent. Surprisingly, Rajiv experiences, apart from the predictable prejudice, an almost frightening degree of acceptance amongst the children of Pisgah, who seem to find in him something that is lacking in their lives. His special friends are the darkly beautiful Italian-Polish Annie, the troubled, doomed and also preternaturally beautiful Lew, the stolid, determined Nora, whose father spies on her in the shower, the decidedly creepy Alvin, son of the pathologically vain local preacher and his edgy wife.

In part, then, the novel is a childhood chronicle; but the children grow up, and secrets from the past return to haunt them, as new secrets are forged from their burgeoning sexuality. Lew, having witnessed the murder of his autistic younger brother, has been brainwashed by a psychiatrist spouting psycho-babble into believing he killed the boy; Annie's role as confidante inevitably modulates into that of comforter and lover. Nora is determinedly in love with Rajiv despite her father's nakedly racist resistance; Alvin takes a ghoulish delight in accompanying his father on death-bed visits, and has built up quite a collection of purloined memorabilia from the homes of the stricken. On the periphery broods Frank, Annie's drifter of a brother, forever at loggerheads with his feckless father, who compensates for his cringing self-abasement amongst his cronies with strutting self-assertion at home.

As the above examples will illustrate, the adults of Pisgah are in no position to advise or guide their young; indeed, one of the most insidious motifs of the novel is the gathering of the elder males of the town, under the sardonic eye and hand of Bennet, the town's big business man and orchestrator of some of its more bizarre events. A kind of disappointed god, he stakes wagers on the behaviour of his cronies; he seems to need to prove exactly how despicably human beings can act, and yet to hope that he will be proved wrong. As Frank notices, "somewhere in him Bennet believed that

even the lowest might behave against expectations, might ascend to unexpected heights of courage and decency.”

On this showing, Bennet is doomed to perpetual disappointment: the men who hang around with him seem intent on proving only how weak or malicious they are.

It is something of a miracle that Rajiv survives in this environment. Murr does not labour the point, but it gradually becomes evident that the boy's trick is never to settle into a stable identity: he is a shape-shifter and clown, adapting himself entirely to whoever he is dealing with, mimicking their behaviour, or otherwise adopting any one of a number of humorous personae.

Indeed, it is only in the last chapter that we are given access to Rajiv's own thoughts: up to that point we have seen him only as others see him. And what he reveals to us is the insecurity underlying his play-acting: “As a child he would spend hours imagining himself ruggedly handsome, laconic and dangerously impulsive as the men of Ruth's romances. Brutally powerful, morbidly sensitive, he was the perfect man. Would it ever leave him, that desire to shed himself like a skin, to abandon whatever life he was in, to become, again, a stranger, fraught with mystery and potential?”

By a happy irony, Rajiv, in failing to become the perfect man of romance literature, achieves a rare humanity and responsiveness to the needs of others that make him, in an imperfect world, the closest thing we are likely to see to perfection.