

Review of YOU, ME AND THE INSECTS

by Lynn Crawford

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Jean Rhys Jane Bowles and Doris Lessing are among novelists who depict female characters of a certain age, building new lives away from home. Their displaced heroines risk failure, yet they also face new prospects in discovering, creating, reconstructing or fortifying themselves. Barbara Henning's astonishing new semi-autobiographical novel, *You, Me and the Insects* set in Detroit's Cass Corridor, New York, and finally in Mysore India, some 20-odd years later, fits solidly within this tradition. In Detroit, amid the bohemian culture of the early 70's, narrator Gina meets, marries and has two children with a colorful man named Lenny. Over time, the marriage dissolves, but their home remains unbroken and, eventually, the family moves to New York. When Lenny becomes fatally ill, it is Gina who cares for him, even though they live apart. While nursing him, Gina finds solace in practicing yoga. After Lenny's death, she travels to Mysore to deepen her study. The novel distinguishes itself here, as Henny faithfully observes yogic traditions in India and the Westerners take on the tradition, all while rendering a detailed portrait of the city.

Mysore is famous to yoga practitioners as the home of Patanjali, the founder of the popular Astanga yoga, a set series of poses involving swift motion and deep breathing. In the novel, it is mentioned that Gina previously studied with a man like Patanjali. But this time she chooses to study with a Brahmin Acharya, a master teacher of meditation, philosophy and hatha yoga. The author's portrayal of the differences between the two teachers is fascinating, as is her take on the constant presence of the Western students in the city, who for better or worse, have become indispensable to the cultural fabric.

Henning's narrator is astute because she acknowledges her Western roots—and in some cases, her biases—while living wholeheartedly, learning the city's rhythms, she masters daily living in southern India, navigating dirty and crowded streets on a motorbike, taking harmonium lessons and shopping in markets. In her rented room, she boils water and cooks food on the floor—where she also bathes and washes her clothing.

Gina grows spiritually, developing a profound relationship with her guru while discussing yogic traditions manifested in India and the United States, as well as the history of Hindu mythology and sacred Vedic texts. But one of the few clear philosophical directives he gives her—"It is your duty to be joyful"—illuminates the foundation of their work together, and informs Henning's project as a whole: Discipline is an undeniable component in a spiritual quest, but creative force is equally vital. Enlightenment is not for the passive. In *You, Me and the Insects*, Henning has written a testament to living and devotion—Lynn Crawford.