



Chef

Jaspreet Singh

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Kirpal Singh is riding the slow train to Kashmir. With India passing by his window, he reflects on his destination, which is also his past: a military camp to which he has not returned for fourteen years.

Kirpal, called Kip, is shy and not yet twenty when he arrives for the first time at General Kumar's camp, nestled in the shadow of the Siachen Glacier. At twenty thousand feet, the glacier makes a forbidding battlefield; its crevasses claimed the body of Kip's father. Kip becomes an apprentice under the camp's chef, Kishen, a fiery mentor who guides him toward the heady spheres of food and women.

In this place of contradictions, erratic violence, and extreme temperatures, Kip learns to prepare local dishes and delicacies from around the globe. Even as months pass, Kip, a Sikh, feels secure in his allegiance to India, firmly on the right side of this interminable conflict. Then, one muggy day, a Pakistani "terrorist" with long, flowing hair is swept up on the banks of the river and changes everything.

Mesmeric, mournful, and intensely lyrical, *Chef* is a brave and compassionate debut about hope, love, and memory set against the devastatingly beautiful, war-scarred backdrop of Kashmir.

Chef Details

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Author : Jaspreet Singh

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Mary says

Singh's first novel is told by the protagonist Kirpal in flash-backs on a train trip back to Kashmir. Kirpal has agreed to prepare the wedding feast for his former General's daughter. This is a story India; of the conflict between India and Pakistan. Listen to Singh description of Beethoven's 9th: "...but I have heard the music. My fear, my fury, my joy, my melancholy-everything is embedded in this piece. The Ninth is real. It penetrates my body like smells, like food. And yet: is is solid and massive like a glacier. Shifting. Sliding, Melting. Then becoming air...."

Stacy says

This award winning debut novel takes many unexpected turns as it weaves a complex story of history, war, love and death. The story blends a historical and fictional account of the Indian and Pakistani territorial dispute over Kashmir. It balances the imagery of the beauty and ruins of Kashmir with the desolate, icy living conditions on the Siachen Glacier at 21,000 feet above sea level.

I found the narrative layers more like that of a glacier than an onion, and the flashback style difficult to grasp the full depth. I received this book through Goodreads First Reads. On my initial reading I found it to be very confusing, and on my second to be quite brilliant.

Traveling by train from Delhi, Kirpal Singh, also known as Kip, is returning to beautiful, war torn Kashmir after a 14 year absence. He is prepared to deliver the perfect wedding banquet for the General's daughter; in return he hopes to receive hospital care for his brain tumor. After overhearing a child's innocent question about death, Kip asks himself the question, 'Why did I allow my life to take a wrong turn?'

On the trip, he ponders about his life. At the age of 19, he is a new army recruit and an apprentice to Chef Kishen in General Sahib Kumar's kitchen. Besides teaching both native and international cuisine, the Chef gives him a taste for German music and women. Kip has many misguided attempts at setting up an intimate female encounter. These show the depth of his naivete as well as the complexity of a region divided by Muslim, Sikh and Hindu beliefs. An enemy woman, challenges Kip's views about the line drawn between his country and Pakistan.

'The greatest gift he gave me was not food. Chef gave me a tongue.' In his many languages, Hindi, Punjabi, English and Kashmiri, Kip, uses the power of the spoken word. More importantly I found, is what was left unsaid and it is this detail that comes back again and again. One can't help believe the story would have changed many times over had the words only been said. I think a hidden gem of this story is how it makes one think about the power of words, spoken and unspoken.

Gail says

I thought this book, told in a spare style with that subtly rhythmic language one finds in books by Indian writers, to be quite good. There is a distance between the reader and the characters, as others have noted, but I thought the effect was deliberate: Kip as the narrator was himself distanced from everyone else, and we see them through his eyes.

Chef is about the devastation left by war and its effects on people and on the environment. It's a sad commentary on all those trumpeting "war aims" that we always hear about. You'll read it and weep.

Teresa says

While the themes and ideas behind this novel are quite important, it ended up just being an okay read for me. Perhaps I'm missing something (and I say that sincerely) but I didn't find the writing poetical or lyrical (as it was 'advertised') for the most part. And while the style is purposely informal and conversational, to me, much of it was either underwritten or overwritten, with the metaphors feeling forced. I do give lots of credit, though, to a passage about 'movies' being made in hotels that was very well done.

By the middle of the book, I started getting rather annoyed by the much-used one-word sentence "But." that was used maybe effectively at first, but ended up being just repetitive. By the end of the book, I was wishing perhaps someone like Rohinton Mistry (one of my favorite writers) had written this story, that, for me, had much potential, but ended up falling short.

Here are a couple quotes I did like:

"I knew what was outside: my cycle leaning against the plane tree, and next to it was the nurse's cycle. The nurse and I had failed to connect, but our cycles had met and they were making love to each other."

"... I realize there is no bigger tragedy for a land that forces its own people out and makes them wander from place to place, and leaves them damaged with an intense longing to return home."

Chris says

Full disclosure for purposes of this review: I won this on the Goodreads giveaways, which was very cool because I really wanted to read this after hearing an interview with Jaspreet Singh on BBC's The Strand.

I have never been to India. I've watched Michael Wood's series about it, but never actually set foot there. I also know nothing about Indian literature (outside of legends), so I have no idea how this book compares with current Indian literary product.

It is an affecting and moving book. The kind of book that sticks with you after you have read it. The book is a travel to Kashmir, a travel into memory and the pain/effects of the past as well as a ode to food and the act of cooking.

Kip travels back to Kashmir years after leaving. He travels back so he can cook the wedding feast for the daughter of the General, whom Kip served under during Kip's time in the army. As he travels to Kashmir and

deals with the news of his impending death due to cancer, Kip takes the reader on a journey into his memory by telling a story about his service in Kashmir (the section of India that India and Pakistan fight over). Over the course of the story, the reader gets a sense of the conflict, the price of the conflict, and an idea of modern India (in particular with the characters on the train. If you pay attention to the news, at least two of the couples will be currently revelent). What also occurs is a slight sense of hope mingled with bittersweetness and sorrow. Singh doesn't care about which country is in the right; he simply focuses on how the battle effects those who live a generation removed from partition.

Singh's prose is at times poetic: "She is so beautiful. I can't point at a concrete detail of her face and say *that is why she is beautiful*. I just turn away my eyes" (140). More importantly, Singh has mastered the way of showing the reading without saying more than should be said. His silences speak just as loudly as his words. His recipes speak as loudly as the thoughts, and the description speaks the loudest of all.

Farah Al.Mosawi says

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Renita D'Silva says

A beautiful book.

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Pragya says

Sigh Even though I wanted to like this book, I just didn't.

It started off well, weaving me into the story, wanting to know what had happened in the chef's past. But as the book progressed, it went downhill. I felt like there was so much need to take the book to a higher, cognitive version of itself that it ceased to make any sense, to me.

The story is of a Sikh army chef and his reminiscing about his past experience in Kashmir - the war troubled zone. The life there, the food (of course) and the politics involved.

Good points about the book:

Everything related to food was yum! Beautifully talked about.

The picture presented of politics and war is hopeless but true and revealing to quite some extent.

Some people and incidents tug at the heart.

Not so good:

Either I am not abstract minded to make sense of the abstract or there was senseless abstract in the book. To some level abstractness and randomness add interest and appeal to a book but in this one, the pages were filled with abstract that went beyond my understanding.

In all, if you want to read it, read for the description of food. Nothing else would make me recommend this book to anyone.

Cynthia says

This is the reason we readers read, for books such as this. There seems to be a trend for inward books recently and this falls into that category. There is plot but mostly to hang thoughts and feelings on. Kip, is a

Sikh working in Srinagar as an Army Chef attached to a powerful General's house. The world outside their house is at war. He's a quiet, contemplative man and the attention he receives is second hand, mostly associated with the heroic deeds of his soldier father. When people meet Kip they seem to not see him. They talk at him about his dad's exploits. By the way if you're a foody this is only peripherally about cooking and food though the sights, sounds, smells of Indian cuisine are interwoven throughout the book as you follow Kip around the kitchen their there as metaphor or as a description of place and mood.

Mostly this book is about political issues that plague India, Pakistan and the pivot is Kashmir. Kashmir is where the best and the worst play out. Another theme is unrequited love both on a personal level and the unrequited love for one's country and countrymen. Both these loves almost break Kip and it does break some of the other characters. I don't want to give the impression this is a philosophy book though that's here. Jaspreet shows the human rights offenses with a deft touch. Bombs don't go off in your face; the prose builds up layer upon layer until there's a slow implosion. I kept thinking, "he doesn't mean that, surely not", and then, with dread, "he does mean that". It makes the horror more real but without having to wipe blood off your face. The relationships have a push pull that read frighteningly close to real life especially the story of a woman, Irem, who is Muslim and living in Pakistan with her husband. She's so desperately unhappy she throws herself into the Ganges and winds up on the Hindu side. She's taken prisoner for being an illegal alien and a possible terrorist. She's under the general's care which is how Kip meets her and falls in love. He's never sure if his love is returned or not. This is a sad book. And so well written it could break your heart.

Tze-Wen says

Through food, we learn the stories of two military cooks. The first *Chef* is proud Kishen, Kip's mentor, whose strength lies in international *haute cuisine*. His unorthodox way of asking vegetables and fruit what they wish to become, results in extraordinary dishes. But when he makes a careless mistake, even his wonderful cooking cannot save him from reassignment to the Siachen icefields. *Chef's* misfortune results in a promotion for Kip. Although he has learned his kitchen skills and recipes from his predecessor, there is a difference in his cooking style: Kip tries to unite Muslim and Hindu Kashmiri flavors, creating more authenticity, and one could even say unity, in his dishes.

Kip is a man whose life is shaped by others. He joins the army and obtains a posting in Kashmir, in order to feel closer to (and perhaps to better understand) his late father Major Iqbal Singh. The much respected Major died in a plane crash and his body is still somewhere in the Siachen glacier. After his arrival, it is Chef Kishen who makes him a cook. In Kashmir, Kip learns of the injustice that is done to the native Kashmiri, Hindu and Muslim alike. People just like him, people who do not matter to the high command of the military nor to the rest of the world, die every day. They sacrifice themselves, and are sacrificed by others, but their cries are silenced. He is angry at Kishen, and angry for his sake as well. Kip suffers from his inability to intervene on poor Irem's behalf, a simple Muslim woman who is treated like dirt under the Indian military's feet. Even those who are indirectly connected to Muslim threats are disposed of, their value reduced to nothing. And at the center of his anger lies General Kumar himself.

I believe Kip, who is of Sikh origin, cut off his hair and discarded his turban as a method of protest against all the injustice done to Kashmir. He is not just Sikh, or Indian, but also a man, a brother to the oppressed Kashmiri.

The strong sense of nostalgia, pervading every page of this book, appealed to me the most. I enjoy stories in which strong emotions are connected to the past, precious memories that make clear how displaced the protagonist is in the here and now, and how he or she can only exist peacefully in the past for which so much

longing is felt. I also liked the importance of food in the novel, of how food was used to convey messages and feelings.

As for the weaker parts of the book: I could not help wondering what had happened to Kip during his years away from Kashmir. Did he put his life on hold, waiting for the General to reach out to him? Or is there no ulterior reason for the way he wasted away his life? Kip's long waiting made his return all the more ominous, but I have to admit I felt slightly let down by the ending of the book.

Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS:

Finished: This book is good all the way through. One should read it to experience this author's writing style. It is original, very moving, sometimes disjointed, but always more is said than the simple words. The quote given below is not harsh, other portions of this book are. Don't think you will be served a syrupy treat. Much is said about countries in conflict and how the people of the conflicting sides react towards each other. It wasn't until the very end that I realised how well personal conflicts mirrored the India / Pakistan conflict over Kashmir.

Through page 49: Oh yes, I like this! The most important thing for me is HOW a writer writes, which words he chooses, are the messages blatant or subtle? I am happy! I will give you a taste:

"Autumn is not a season in India. In Kashmir autumn arrives in the month of October. Through the soot-coated kitchen window I could watch the chenar trees dance. They moved like dervishes in the wind. I had never seen autumn before. Both sides of the street were lined by plane trees. The whole valley would burst into Technicolor. The leaves turned as they fell on the roofs and the streets, turning any surface into a red and yellow and orange carpet. The wind carried them, swirled them and then abandoned the leaves one by one. Contemplating their sadness I would forget my own, and I would forget too the Siachen Glacier. Even if blindfolded, I will still be able to detect the chenar leaves. I can't forget the smell of cut grass and the smell of plane trees. How sad the trees look when shedding leaves, and yet how happy as if trying to kiss the whole world. Autumn is not the end of happiness. It is the beginning."

Some people don't like descriptive writing. For me good descriptive writing creates an atmosphere that depicts particular emotions. I like that questions arise in my mind - what has happened in the past, what exactly does he mean by that? I like the ambiguity. But that is me! Rather than just being about food and recipes, it is more about all the senses and how they move us as human beings. Food is important in how it affects our emotions.

I guess when I am very silent about a book that I am reading it is because I am fighting to LIKE the book. I don't want to criticize until I am sure I don't like it. I WANT to like it. I am searching for the good qualities but am having a hard time finding them.... I think maybe I am mistaken! Or sometimes my computer is down!

BEFORE READING: Too much talk about food? I am hoping I will get a good story bringing to life the Pakistani / Indian conflict in Kashmir.

Kathryn says

Starting with the cover, this book is wonderful! The cover is breathtakingly beautiful and just transports you to northern India. The story, told by Kip, is simple in its telling, but at the same time shows the complexity of human relationships.

I loved this book and highly recommend it. If you liked "Buddha's Orphans" by S. Upadhyay or "A Fine Balance" by R. Mistry, then this book is for you!

Reeman says

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Heather says

I could barely get through this book. It's written in a style that some would call lyrical, but for me it's too slow-paced and convoluted.

I just couldn't plod my way through and it felt like a chore to read through 250 pages.

I never got a good feel for the narrator's personality as we skipped through perspective and time. He doesn't engage me and I can't relate to him in any way. In the end, I didn't care about him, his dying, his relationships, his food, nothing at all.

At the end of the book I understand Kashmir and its occupation no better, I understand Kip's personality and his relationships with women no better, and the relationship between food and life seemed shallow and ill-formed connection.
