

Book Review

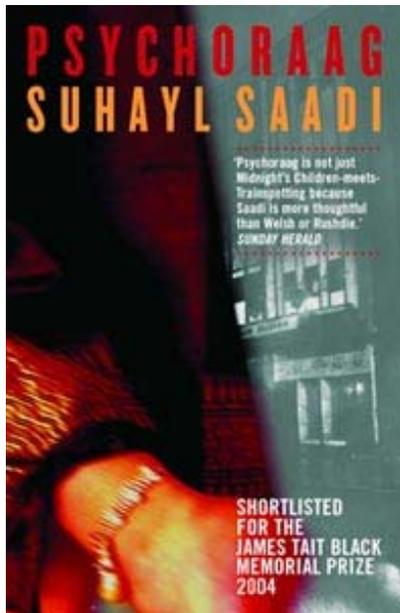


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Psychoraag by Suhayl Saadi, Black and White Publishing. 2004 HB, 438 pp, £12.99, ISBN 1 84502 010 3



An absorbing novel of the small and personal spaces of life that inhabit the small hours of the morning. Set in Glasgow and within the minds and thoughts of those involved in bringing music to others who are also inhabiting the same time line but who are geographically more remote, within a city trying to sleep, the book charts the last hours of a radio station. Played out in micro real time but infused with the past and also the future, the author delves into the thoughts and emotions of those involved. It's an absorbing read if for no other reason that reading the book as a whole within the same time line of the 5-6 hours that it takes place (and preferably also in a time where

quietness and thoughts coalesce), allows the reader to drift into their own imagined constructed identity.

Familiar places within Glasgow take on new resonances from those ascribed by earlier communities. In this sense the book is terrific at opening up the notion of how new communities and new cultures absorb, re shape and re affirm a sense of place and meaning. The author is especially poignant when it comes to depicting experiences of social groups. The overall sense in which the reader gets the notion of the similarities rather than the differences that inhabit the experiences of different cultures, is particularly marked. Indeed this is the strength of the book as it clearly marks out our common humanity rather than our difference. This could be Leeds, Dundee or Birmingham.

The book is peppered with musicality and musical quotations reminding us of the ways in which music speaks a common language. Written in the patois of Urdu, Glaswegian and indeed Gaelic on the odd occasion, its refreshing for the reader to play with the sounds of words woven together reflecting personal identity. 'Welcome, the nutters ae the waruld' was an especially strong and familiar greeting! As was the time given as 'wan meenut tae three oan this broilin, seepin, slidin summers night'. Language linked to the thoughts and memories of the principal character, Zafar (D.J. Zaf), take the reader through living and existing in a city. It's an emotionally raw and whirlwind engagement with emotions and feelings about relationships and places. Indeed this book conjoins these two well. It is a tough read in places, however. The assumption the author makes about the nature of sexual encounters; the use of metaphor in describing and defining and the micro examination of the thoughts of the character seemingly within each minute of each hour, makes the book difficult at times. Switching from standard English to street language to Urdu and back within the same sentence entails strong concentration.

At times one wishes for stronger key moments to lift the reader from the constant; to move the time forward to see what happens. However, that of course is not the point of this book. It is about the radio station and the last poignant hours in the lives of those producing it as well as those one imagines listening to it. Musicality is ever present and especially at key moments. Extracting from lyrics the author uses these extracts skillfully to blend with his text to ensure deeper meaning. Bollywood features as does folk and rock.

The book is a reminder of the similarities of cultures as well as the differences in meaning and emotions when recounting experiences. Reminiscences are the central strands. Childhood, being young and understanding the familiarity of the past as well as what the future holds and, of course, regret mould this book. Within the six hours in which the novel is set, the voices of the characters both present and in their minds, emerge to remind us how our past shapes us and also how powerful regret can be.

Absorbing, challenging and a reminder that in the case of Zaf's parents theirs had been a need to keep 'the ghosts of the past ... very much alive'. This book is about how each subsequent generation acquires their own ghosts with which they both sense life and at the same time remind themselves of what life means to them. An absorbing read of the Scottish – Asian experience which simply reminds us of experience without the need for labels.