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Lust for Numbers

By NELL FREUDENBERGER

In the most common type of historical novel, invented characters inhabit a real place at a particular point in time. They may fight in the Civil War, or watch the Kennedy assassination on a black-and-white TV, but they live in an essentially separate space, and the author may decide which real events (if any) should touch their lives. The second type, rarer in so-called literary fiction, is a novel about people who really

existed, recreated by an author who plays with the facts, and especially the intriguing lacunae, of their lives. “The Indian Clerk,” David Leavitt’s richly imagined seventh novel, is such a book, and for several reasons Leavitt is brave to attempt it.

“The Indian Clerk” is loosely structured around a lecture given by the brilliant English mathematician and Cambridge don G. H. Hardy. In 1913, as Hardy is engaged in trying to prove the Riemann hypothesis — a mathematical problem involving prime numbers that Leavitt (the author of a brief biography of the mathematician Alan Turing) seems to understand deeply and that I won’t embarrass myself by attempting to summarize — he receives a letter from one S. Ramanujan, a poor clerk working in a colonial accounts office in Madras. Without the benefit of any formal training, Ramanujan claims to have come close to a solution to the famous problem. What little Hardy knows about India is derived from a grammar school drama pageant — a “paste and colored-paper facsimile of the exotic East, in which brave Englishmen battled natives for the cause of empire” — but on the basis of the letter, he and his collaborator, J. E. Littlewood, invite Ramanujan to come to Cambridge. While Ramanujan is living in England, war breaks out, and the young mathematician is not able to return to India for another five years.

Hardy was a member of the Cambridge Apostles, an illustrious secret society that counted Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, John Maynard Keynes and Lytton Strachey among its members. Many of the Apostles were homosexuals, although Hardy explains that most would follow convention and “marry in the end.” Leavitt’s portrait of Hardy is a remarkable achievement: he is both sympathetic and cowardly, intellectually arrogant and profoundly insecure. Hardy never marries, but he also describes himself as “the sort whom those who refer to themselves as ‘us’ would consider ‘our sort.’ ” He passes, if not among his friends then at least with strangers. When D. H. Lawrence visits Cambridge, he gravitates to Hardy, horrified by the other Apostles, and confides that he finds homosexuals “horrible little frowsty people.” He says, “They make me dream of black beetles.”

Leavitt has been praised and condemned for the explicit sex in his fiction, but it is his candid exploration

THE INDIAN CLERK

By David Leavitt.

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of class that sets him apart from most American writers. In particular, he's interested in the betrayal of the lower classes by those richer and more powerful. When they occur in an American setting, in short stories like "Dedicated" and "A Place I've Never Been" or the novel "The Body of Jonah Boyd," those betrayals are usually domestic: characters with a lot of stuff lording it over those who have less. But in England, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, the stakes are much higher. Hardy is acutely conscious of the fact that he doesn't come from the same class as most of his fellow dons, and yet to Ramanujan the distinction means nothing: "All are children of affluence to him." Class, like mathematics, consists of complex equations that may shift with the substitution of different values for X and Y, but the equations themselves remain rigid and fixed.

Once Ramanujan arrives in England, he becomes a Cambridge celebrity: there is competition among the dons for proximity to the "Hindoo calculator," as he's called in the press. Another mathematician, Eric Neville, takes Ramanujan into his home; his wife, Alice, becomes obsessed with their guest's comfort, catering to his dietary restrictions, albeit in a very British fashion (a "vegetable goose" is one of the more appealing attempts). There are various justifications for the impulse to save Ramanujan: Alice claims to be easing his culture shock, while Hardy hopes to develop his mind. In both cases, however, their fascination has a sexually predatory edge: Hardy "cannot deny that it excites him, the prospect of rescuing a young genius from poverty and obscurity and watching him flourish. ... Or perhaps what excites him is the vision he has conjured up, in spite of himself, of Ramanujan: a young Gurkha, brandishing a sword."

The real G. H. Hardy famously called his association with Ramanujan "the one romantic incident in my life," and Leavitt's Hardy makes the same claim. But what he makes of their relationship is much more subtle than a love affair. Initially frustrated by the young genius's tendency to pursue several ideas in an associative fashion, Hardy eventually realizes he has come in contact with a mind that expands his notion of their discipline. At the same time, the relationship brings Hardy — emotionally as well as sexually closeted — into the messy realm of human friendship, where even the most well-intentioned attempts to rescue another adult can result in further injury.

Hardy has had the impulse to nurture genius before, with a student named James Mercer. The attempt fails, and he abandons Mercer: "Imagine a writer who, embarrassed by the callowness of a first draft, stuffs it away in a drawer. Somehow he knows that a day will come when he will write the story again, and perhaps write it better." If one of Leavitt's earlier novels could be considered a draft for this one, it is "While England Sleeps" (1993), the story of an upper-class writer who falls in love with, and subsequently betrays, a bright but uneducated subway ticket-taker. The story was inspired by Stephen Spender's autobiography, "World Within Worlds," and when Spender sued, Leavitt was forced to defend himself and his novel. (His publisher eventually agreed to cut three pages from the book, including some explicit sex scenes Spender particularly objected to.) Having survived that ordeal, many writers would've scrapped historical fiction forever, especially historical fiction populated by a profusion of illustrious people. Luckily, or circumspectly, Leavitt has chosen this time to portray people who are no longer around to file lawsuits.

A situation remarkably parallel to the one depicted in “While England Sleeps” occurs in “The Indian Clerk”: Rupert Brooke, under the influence of his upper-class lover, Eddie Marsh, goes off to war and is killed. Bertrand Russell argues that Marsh “might as well have murdered” Brooke, having “brought him into his posh circles ... and put it in his mind to be the great hero.” While Hardy, significantly, defends Marsh’s role in the incident, it is a quiet argument for the way that stories reoccur, refusing to belong to any one person. More historically and emotionally detailed than the earlier novel, “The Indian Clerk” reprises what is obviously one of Leavitt’s primal stories: an insider betraying an outsider and struggling for the rest of his life with the consequences.

The challenge of a novel of this scope, which unfolds over the course of the entire First World War but tells a story only tangentially related to it, is that so many real events intrude on the primary narrative. Hardy’s appropriately pedantic voice is perfect for explaining the significance of the Union for Democratic Control, a pacifist organization he belonged to, as well as Bertrand Russell’s antiwar activities, and Leavitt effectively evokes the atmosphere of the Apostles’ meetings, both heady and silly. Nevertheless, the narrative sometimes gets bogged down in the academic politics of the day, and the reader can’t help wanting to get back to the book’s central intellectual relationship, between Hardy and Ramanujan. It’s usually not possible to know real people as well as writers can know fictional characters, and it’s to Leavitt’s enormous credit that he makes these historical personages so vividly complex. The few invented people in the novel (especially Littlewood’s mistress, Anne, and Hardy’s soldier lover, Thayer) suffer by comparison.

Leavitt has a passion to inhabit the past, a particular novelistic impulse that goes beyond simple “animation” of history. The research that went into “The Indian Clerk” is impressive, but a good historical novelist has to do much more than get the facts right: he has to illuminate the relationship of his own time to the period he’s writing about. “The Indian Clerk” is a story about guilt. It’s about the impulse to save a foreign stranger (in spite of the fact that your idea of his country is no more than a couple of colorful clichés), and a story about a war in which the boys who die are most often poorer than the ones who stay at home. Reading it offers the pleasure of escape into another world, along with the nagging feeling of familiarity that characterizes the best historical fiction.

Nell Freudenberger is the author of “Lucky Girls,” a collection of stories. Her novel, “The Dissident,” was published in paperback this month.

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