

paks a punch

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders
Daniyal Mueenuddin,
Random House,
Rs 395

Years back I had come across Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi's *The Old Banyan and other Stories*. Brought up mostly on things written in English, Qasimi's stories proved to be a window to Pakistan's culture and locale. The stories, which later were published by Katha, portrayed the disappointments and gullibility, joys and sorrows of common men and women. An active member of the

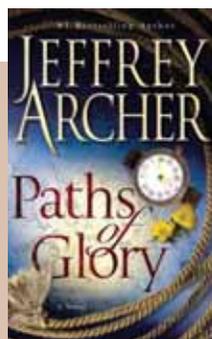
Progressive Writers Movement, Qasimi noticed the lives of his people with the practised eyes of a shrewd observer and found them worth celebrating.

Benazir's assassination, Zardari's coming to power, 26/11 and most recently, the internal strife in Pakistan have brought the country back in news: a very favourable time for Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story collection to be noticed by the literati and the media. Interestingly, Daniyal's world is in no way different from Qasimi's. But it is likely that many may not have heard of Qasimi because he wrote in Urdu.

The son of an American mother and a Pakistani father, Daniyal presently lives on a farm in Pakistan's southern Punjab, where he nurtures mango orchards and grows vegetables. His is a nuanced world where social status and expectations are understood without being stated, and where poverty and the desire to advance frame each critical choice. Daniyal's eight linked stories chronicle the struggles among the affluent and the destitute. The stories revolve around the extended family of a wealthy landowner, Mr K K Harouni, mostly taking place on farms in Pakistan and according to the writer, mostly based on personal experience. An ageing feudal landlord's household staff, the villagers who depend on his favour, and a network of relations near and far who have sought their fortune in the cities and abroad confront the merits and constraints of their being, the dissolution of old ways and the shock of change.

Of the eight, my favourites are 'About a Burning Girl' because of its sarcasm and humour and 'Provide Provide' for its exemplary characterisation of the protagonist Zainab, a poor girl who provides company to the lonesome family patriarch but is thrown out of the mansion on the latter's death.

- Hiren Kumar Bose



mounting mystery

Paths of Glory
Jeffrey Archer
Pan Macmillan
Rs 224

It's a gripping and challenging proposition. That George Mallory may have conquered Mt Everest much before Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit. Jeffrey Archer's new book has raised a minor storm in Hillary country, New Zealand. Archer's book is simply a novel speculating on a mystery that has intrigued mountaineers for 84 years. In fact, he is not openly claiming that Mallory reached the summit of Everest but just imagining through a work of fiction what might have happened if he had. Those lured by snow peaks or interested in mountaineers and their conquests have always been curious about Mallory -- for he was found dead just 600 mts from the peak -- and Archer whets their appetite.

- Hiren Kumar Bose



kiddie kingdom

Star Struck
Charu Babri,
Ponytale Books,
Rs 95

As parents we are protective about our children and often try to shield them from unsavoury details of life and death, thinking they might not be able to handle it. In the process, we underestimate their intelligence and understanding. But children, through their observation, intelligence and intuition, draw their own conclusions. *Star Struck* is the story of one such kid (Gita), who learns about life and death through her interaction with stars, whom she considers to be her companions. Gita is star struck not just about stars but also Lakshmi, a spoilt rich brat, whom she considers to be 'privileged'. A chain of events which follow the appearance of a star in the afternoon, on the day her *dadima* dies, takes Gita on a discovery trip about friendships and most importantly, the relationship between man and God.

- Sreerikha Pillai