

The Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri.

Welcoming speech delivered by Honorary Chair Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan

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It is a pleasure for me to meet and to be with so many book lovers this morning. It is estimated that in the year 2005 the total number of new book titles published in the United States was 172,000. Clearly the number is large even if we narrow it down to special interests such as fiction, history, poetry, biography, music, food, etc. Reading a book is a personal occupation: we pick up a book in a store or library and set aside some time to read it, sometimes in bed late into the night when there is perhaps less distraction. Some do it fast and some slow. Some read several books at the same time-- a few pages of each title. In the 70s there was a magazine called Book Digest which was useful to people like me who don't have time to read every page of each book, but that didn't make it. And of course in today's www world, you can do almost anything by yourself with little or no interaction with the community or a public institution; you can access articles, books, information, music, movies through the internet and the computer. Even food can be ordered in and delivered if you choose to and if you can afford it. In spite of all these so called conveniences most human beings desire and enjoy fellowship and so the need to be a part of the community.

In any case this individualized activity can be expanded into a community activity, as it is today, through the thoughtful and creative leadership of library directors and community organizers. We are especially grateful to Louise Blalock and Janet Benedict, Chief and Assistant Chief Librarians at Hartford Public Library for providing this opportunity for the whole Hartford area to discuss a single book. This community activity brings us together much as though we were attending a concert, a play, or a movie. Such an approach is always enjoyable because it connects us with each other and we feel a certain sense of comfort in being with people who have similar interests even where our own opinions about a program or a book may be widely different. In a manner of speaking, book discussions allow us to hear different perspectives and that is always a broadening experience.

So here we are in this 1 Book For Greater Hartford program: The Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri. The very words "Death of Vishnu" disturb Hindus because the words Death and Vishnu simply do not go together. God Vishnu is the protector among the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. Every Hindu is aware of the ten avatars God Vishnu took to come down to earth

and restore Dharma or moral truth and justice. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu in Dwapara Yuga (era of the Mahabharata epic), promises just that:

यदा यदाहि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानम् सृजाम्यहम्

*yadaa yadaahi dharmasya glaanirbhavati Bharata
abhyutthaanamadharmaasya tadaatmaanam srjaamyaham*

Whenever there is decline of Dharma,
I shall manifest myself in order to restore the balance.

Our first reaction might, therefore, be one of disgust, shock and surprise until we learn that Vishnu, in the opening chapter of this book, is simply the name of what we might call a homeless person. His residence is a mere landing in a set of stairs in a multistoried residential building in the large coastal city of Mumbai. So it is not God Vishnu. That is a relief! But might he possibly be God Vishnu? How can we tell (his mother certainly encouraged him to think so!) when Hindu philosophy acknowledges potential divinity in each individual? Is this man Vishnu, this half-blind drunkard, a god in disguise, testing His devotees, by any chance? Is He taunting the tenants in the building who give him some presumably stale food (Ref: Mrs. Asrani's comments about Mrs. Pathak's chapattis!), some tea, in return for odd jobs such as standing in line to buy kerosene and other rations.

The theme of the book is universal, and this could be happening in New York City or Hartford. It asks who is responsible for, and how a society deals with, the Vishnus of this world who have arrived at death's door, have nowhere to go, no job, un healthy, eating scraps of doled food, clad in second hand clothing And who yet pulse with all the desire for life including sex, love, entertainment, adventure, dreams ... Much like the rest of us.

And there is comedy in the book driven by the lower middle class families, Hindu and Moslem, families competing, pretending, complaining, suspecting, accusing, ...the common kitchen providing ample opportunity.

Vishnu's love for Padmini, the prostitute, is surprisingly unconditional, non-judgmental; it is touching, and is a final redeeming quality along with the involuntary tear for Vishnu that rolls down teenage Kavita's face when this wannabe pop star tries

to enact a moving scene from her childhood memory of him. A particularly fascinating explanation of love is brought out by the author when Mrs. Asrani places the hand of Kavita in Salim's, declaring that she is now his sister. This turns out to be a big mistake, especially when such joining of hands is symbolic of a specific step known as Hasta Milap in a Hindu wedding ceremony! And as Kavita tries to pull her hand away but stops, we are told that "electrons were being blown out of their orbits, atoms and molecules rearranged ..." -- a perfectly scientific way (an engineer's appreciation of a mathematician's view) of describing this most mysterious phenomenon we all know and have experienced. And Vishnu's sense of adventure is clear when he whisks his lover away to Sunset Point in Mr. Jalal's Fiat stolen for the duration.

The naming of characters in this one building and of those people with whom the principals interact with on a daily basis has a hierarchy. Vishnu, and his lover Padmini, have single first or personal names. The apartment dwellers, i.e. the Asranis, the Pathaks, the Jalals, are usually referred to and distanced throughout the book by last name although we know their first names. The top floor owner, a man of means respected by all, is the widower, Vinod Taneja. At the servant level are the outside help, Tall Ganga and Short Ganga, who convey goods, service and gossip. In between are the otherwise homeless other landing occupants, Radiowalla and Man who Sleeps on the Lower Step. At street level is the commercial class, the equally nameless Cigarette-walla, Paan-walla, Electrician and Tailor, an otherwise neutral group who quickly form a dangerous mob on short notice and slim basis.

So, for Indians and for city-dwellers alike, the book brings back memories in our own lives: the complications of living in a crowded society close to each other, the noise, the smell, the pretenses (upper class, lower class, middle class), the joys of Sunset Points outside the mean streets, phuljadis or fireworks, delicious bhujias, arranged marriages, punishing the young (deserved or otherwise), the desire for sex and its rejection, the passion to rise above religion and yet the comfort of faith ...

All these point to simultaneous experiences of pain and pleasure, horror and amusement, i.e. life in its raw form, unvarnished and natural. If the book and its prime situation produce mixed emotions, that is because we sense a connection us with our own thoughts, actions, fears, desires, successes and failures. Books are supposed to make us get in touch with ourselves and this one truly does.

Enjoy reading, feeling and thinking. It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the One Book program at the Hartford Public Library.