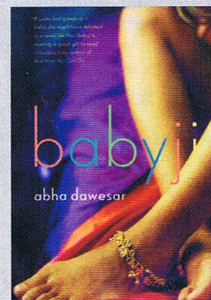


ABHA DAWESAR



Abha Dawesar: Jerry Bauer

BABYJI



There's a sexual revolution underway in India, says novelist Abha Dawesar, and she's happy to be part of it. "Young boys and girls who were never allowed to before are dating, and that's changing the landscape of the nation," she says. Gay stories,

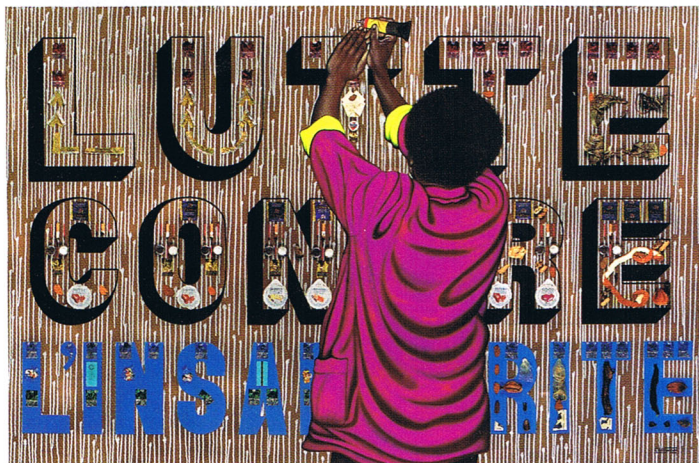
too, are finding their way into Indian culture: this year alone, two Bollywood movies, *Girlfriend* and *No Men Allowed*, depicted lesbian relationships on the big screen. And then there's Dawesar's fiction, which can perhaps best be described as racy stuff with an IQ — good reading for anyone who finds girl-on-girl action and particle physics equally arousing.

Babyji, her just-published second novel, tells of Anamika, a teenage girl in Delhi who has affairs with three different women at the same time. While she embarks on this odyssey of sexual exploration, Anamika also maintains perfect grades in math and physics and teaches one of her lovers — a lower caste servant — to read. It's the 1980s, and India is undergoing a period of social unrest due to a controversial affirmative action policy. As Anamika begins to experiment sexually, she must also take sides on the political issues of the day.

Dawesar remembers growing up in Delhi during the period described in the novel: "Students set fire to themselves in protest, schools were closed, there was quite a bit of violence." Ironically, Indians became more aware of caste, not less, and many disillusioned young people left the country. Dawesar was one: she studied political philosophy at Harvard, then worked on Wall Street for several years before quitting to write full-time.

Her first novel, *Miniplanner*, takes place in New York and follows André, a bisexual financial analyst, from boardroom to bedroom as he has affairs simultaneously with his boss and the boss's wife. There's plenty of sex, gay and straight, all written with down-to-earth candor. Naturally, the novel caused a stir in India, where it was published as *The Three of Us*. "Some people welcomed it as a breath of fresh air, others had a very hard time with it," says Dawesar. Most Indian writers tend to avoid the subject of sex, she says, as "they're just not comfortable with it".

Ultimately, in Dawesar's work, sexual freedom becomes a metaphor for other kinds of freedom: emotional, social, economic. It's what you might expect from a writer who describes herself as "a global citizen with ties...to New York, Paris, and New Delhi." SARAH COLEMAN



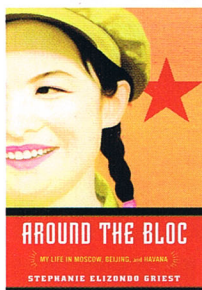
J'aime Chéri Samba

Congolese painter Chéri Samba isn't burdened with a small ego. "Samba is like no one else," he tells interviewer André Magnin. "I could name Michelangelo...I think I have that kind of talent in me." Whether this is outrageous arrogance or healthy self-confidence is a decision readers can make as they look through the monograph *J'aime Chéri Samba* (Thames & Hudson).

Born in 1956 in rural Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Samba has a personality that's as outsized as his talent. That much is clear from the photographs at the front of the book, which show the artist modeling various hipster outfits (as a member of the Congo's Society of Partygoers and Elegant People, he's required to be well-dressed at all times). In his paintings, Samba uses his self-portrait as a jumping-off point to examine issues of race, politics, and sex. In "The World's Gone Crazy", the artist depicts himself as a diplomat sitting next to a giant globe while a malnourished child looks hopefully up at him; in "Ordinary Politicians" he surrounds himself with cash and guns. A more light-hearted piece, "What Solution for Men?" shows a worried Samba looking on at a world being taken over by women of all colors and ages.

Michelangelo? Not quite. But don't write him off. In "The Secret of the Little Fish that Got Big", Samba paints himself as a giant, bloated fish. Fame might have swelled his head, too, but it's hard to resist an artist whose verve and passion for life radiate from every brushstroke he makes. SARAH COLEMAN

Around the Bloc



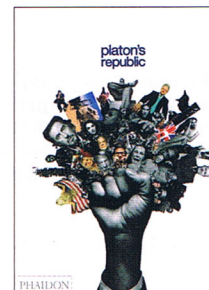
Some people travel to learn about different cultures, others to discover themselves. Stephanie Elizondo Griest does plenty of both in *Around The Bloc* (Villard), her lively debut memoir about living in three "red" countries: China, Russia, and Cuba. At the outset, Griest candidly admits that her wanderlust was motivated by an impulse to get out of suburban Corpus Christi before she ended up "washed up at 25...getting plastered in the Taco Bell parking lot for fun." Escape came in the form of a Russian language class at the University of

Texas, where she fraternized with Eastern European exchange students and lived in a vegetarian commune. Bitten by the socialist bug, Griest began her travels soon after graduating.

A natural storyteller, Griest makes an excellent guide to the Communist and post-Communist countries she visits. This girl is game: she volunteers at a Moscow orphanage, uncovers a burgeoning gay subculture in Beijing, and bellydances with rumba queens in Havana. She also finds strange contradictions: in China, for instance, while her colleagues at a state-controlled paper aren't allowed even to mention human rights, she and a friend visit "dissident" artists who make fortunes selling paintings of suffering peasants to Hong Kong businessmen.

Traveling is also about putting one's life and culture in perspective: Griest concludes that there are eerie similarities between her host countries and the US (the Patriot Act, anyone?) and that she should embrace, not reject, her Mexican heritage. "I should have gotten to know my own block before digging up someone else's," she muses. But plenty of readers will be glad she didn't. SARAH COLEMAN

Platon's Republic



Chances are, you've already seen his most famous portrait, the celebrated "crotch shot" of Bill Clinton that graced the cover of *Esquire* magazine in December, 2000. Photographed from the floor below Clinton, the portrait featured the outgoing Prez with legs akimbo, an impish grin on his face. It was the subject of media gossip for weeks.

Finding unexpected angles has become a specialty for Platon, a young British star of portrait photography. His first book, the playfully titled *Platon's Republic* (Phaidon), is alive with the kind of vitality and freshness that's often missing in the static world of celebrity portraiture. When not shooting public figures from low angles, Platon likes to use distinctive back lighting, so that celebrities from Ted Kennedy to Keanu Reeves are bathed in a halo of white light, enhancing their status as icons. Pamela Anderson gets a different, though equally reverent treatment: she's shown naked, draped in an American flag — an image that was used as an official USO poster.

Platon's Republic also features some documentary work, including some vivid depictions of neo-Nazi skinheads from North Carolina. But Platon's real genius lies in celebrity portraiture, where he's able to shed the received wisdom about a public figure and create striking, singular images. Curious souls will enjoy the photographer's scrapbook at the back of the book, in which Platon admires Scorsese's "high energy" and describes how a sporting Pam Anderson passed up a rack of designer gowns in favor of the 25-cent flag he'd bought in a corner store that morning. SARAH COLEMAN