

Deven (Desai's novel *In Custody*)**Dreamer**

Character Although Deven teaches at a college, he is more a poet, or a would-be-poet, than a professor. While 'slaving' away at his teaching, he still cherishes dreams of being an artist and finds his wife, Sarla, is 'too prosaic.' Weak and self-aggrandising, Deven blames his poetic failure on her. His fantasy of himself feeds into and is fed by his (and others') romantic picture of the faded glory of Urdu poetry. Urdu, the court language of the great Mughals, is the perfect safe haven for his own unrealistic dreams and expectations for himself. His fantasies also leave him vulnerable, and he is manipulated by almost every other character in the novel. Nevertheless, no can gainsay his dedication to the cause of Urdu language and poetry. He is determined to record the voice of the greatest living Urdu poet for posterity (and Deven's own reputation). Deven is the custodian of Urdu poetry.

Activities Deven spends six days a week in the classroom, lecturing, marking papers and (trying) to counsel students. At home, when he isn't trying to compose poems, he argues with his wife. On his only off day (Sunday), he makes the long journey to Delhi to interview a famous Urdu poet.

Illustrative moments

Dreamer When Deven first visits the poet's house, he encounters dirt and dereliction, but his dream of Urdu poetry lifts him above that unpleasant reality. Looking at the house from the outside, he concedes that the ground floors look uninviting, but then hears the poet's voice coming from the upper floor. Looking up, Deven thinks, 'surely that is the abode of my god, the domain of beauty and imagination.'

Irresponsible Deven's dreams render him incapable of responsibility, in his job and in his marriage. In one telling scene, he is about to board a bus once more to Delhi when he sees a student and is reminded that he is neglecting his professional duties. The author captures this perfectly: 'In the moment that they stared at each other with mutual shock, a verse of Nur's fell into Deven's mind as casually as a discarded bus ticket:

Night ends, dawn breaks, and sorrow reappears,
Addressing us in the morning light with a cock's shrill crow.'

Determined Despite his impractical idealism, Deven has the redeeming feature of resolute determination. It may be a dream, but he will pursue it, whatever the financial and emotional cost. This is expressed in the closing paragraphs of book. He has failed, and the sun is setting on some scrubland where he is walking, but he remains committed to his original goal: 'He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure.'

Sensitive Deven also has the sensitivity to appreciate poetry, as the author makes clear in this moving description of him in the first few pages: Deven saw that poems 'could distance events and emotions, place them where perspective made it possible to view things clearly and calmly. He realized that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. That was what Nur's verse did--placed frightening and inexplicable experiences like time and death at a point where they could be seen and studied, in safety.'