

The Guide (1958) (Narayan)

Story Most critics regard *The Guide* as R K Narayan's best novel. It is both a parody of Indian culture and a poignant love story. Its hero is the guide of the title, who begins by running a bookstall on a railway station platform. Having memorised useless information from book about the local sights, he is able to pass himself off as a guide to innocent tourists. One of his clients is an archaeologist, Marco, whose bored wife, Rosie, wants to realise her dream as a dancer. Rosie leaves her husband and takes up with Raju, causing him to break off relations with his mother. Raju becomes Rosie's manager, successfully arranging for her to perform at more and more venues, all the time pocketing much of the money. Eventually, he is arrested and put in prison for fraud and forgery, but on his release he is mistaken for a holy saint by a villager. His reputation, seemingly but not entirely without his contrivance, grows and grows until he becomes known all over India, attracting film crews, even from Hollywood, when he undertakes a fast in order to bring the rains and end a drought that has plagued local people. But no plot summary can tell the story of this novel, with its shift in narration, doubling back in time and layer upon layer of irony.

Characters

Raju Raju, the 'guide' of the title, is the main character, a shifty charlatan, who is nevertheless not without sympathy. Although self-centred and deceitful, in the end he appears to have transformed into a religious saint.

Gaffur Gaffur is a local taxi driver whom Raju befriends and uses to transport his clients on their tourist travels. As an older man, Gaffur acts as a surrogate father to Raju, a moral conscience, giving him sound advice, which Raju ignore.

Marco Marco is an archaeologist whom Raju takes around to see the temples and caves in the area. He is completely self-absorbed in his work and makes important academic discoveries, but he ignores his wife, who falls in love with Raju and leaves him. Marco gets angry but in the end acts honourably toward his unfaithful wife and shares his property with her.

Rosie Rosie is Marco's wife and later Raju's lover. IN contrast to Marco's cerebral activity, she is pure physical, a dancer who revels in the cobra snake dance she sees in a local grove. She dedicates herself to her profession as a dancer and becomes famous. In the end she leaves Raju and returns to her husband.

Velan Velan is a goatherd, an illiterate peasant who symbolises the common man. He plays a key role in that he discovers Raju hiding in a cave and believes that he is a religious ascetic. Even Raju's claim that he is not a holy man serves to convince Velan because genuine holy men are self-effacing.

Themes

Gullibility The overriding theme of the novel is gullibility, the tendency of people to believe what they want to believe. People believe Raju is a guide when he is really a con-man. Rosie believes she is a great dancer, when she is very ordinary. Velan believes Raju is a holy man when he is actually just hiding in a cave.

Love A second theme is the impossibility of unselfish love. Marco loves his work more than his wife. Rosie loves her dance more than anything. Raju, of course, loves nothing except money. Neither couple (Marco-Rosie; Raju-Rosie) has the balance that, Narayan suggests, is essential for a loving relationship.