REVIEW

"Not Native": Murali Kamma debuts with a short story collection — A Review

by Andrea Färber

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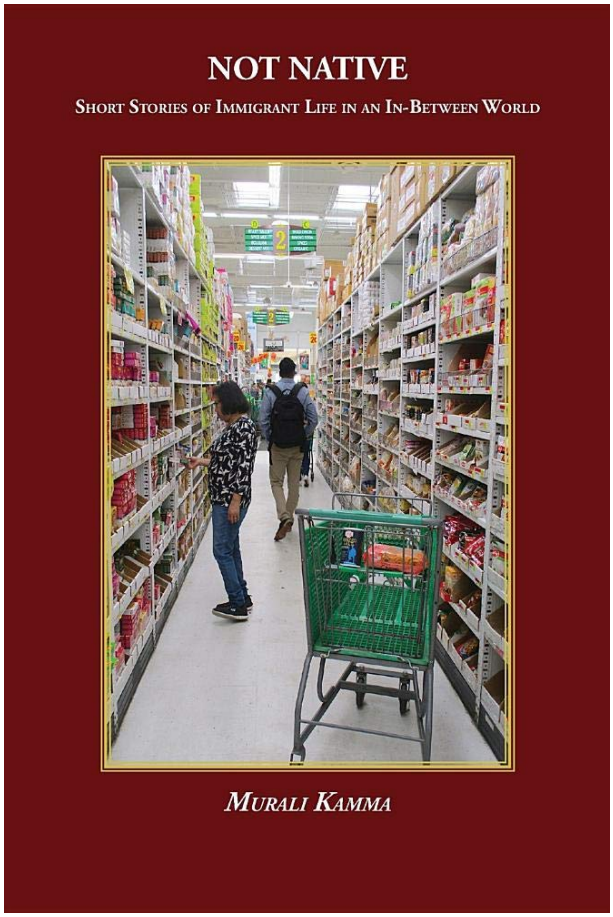

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Short stories are a fickle thing: Within a limited number of words, the writer has to introduce the character, draw in the reader with an intriguing plot and hopefully tie up the end of the story with a neat bow that leaves a lasting impression.

Quite frankly, it's a difficult task to write a short story well enough to elicit the same reaction from me as a novel, in which I gasp at a turning point one hundred pages into the plot, familiar with the setting and attached to the characters. Murali Kamma, with his first published short story collection *Not Native: Short Stories of Immigrant Life in an In-Between World*, managed to trigger just that reaction, more than once.

Between India and the USA

As the title of the collection already suggests, the twenty short stories focus on episodes of the lives of people straddling the culture gap between India and the US, and the question of where they belong. Kamma, a now naturalized US citizen born in India, approaches this question in each of the stories differently: sometimes with humour as an immigrant dresses up as Uncle Sam to advertise apartments in the streets of L.A., and at other times in all seriousness, tackling topics such as illegal immigration. In his stories, Kamma successfully manages to questions the idea of belonging to one place only, and depicts the struggle of trying to figure out what home truly means.

Set in both the US and India, his short stories impress with intriguing plots and captivating descriptions of both countries: The bustling streets of metropolitan India are set in contrast to suburbs and the idea of the American dream. With each new story, Kamma manages to capture the emotions of the characters and the feelings of a place in such a detailed way that I as a reader, unfamiliar with both cultures except for movies, can vividly picture what is going on.

Murali Kamma, managing editor of Khabar Magazine and author of "Not Native"

Hold your breath

I'm not one to pick favorites, but if you asked me which of these stories I liked the most, I would easily say "The Visitor and the Neighbor". Each story conveys a different depiction of what it means to be Indian, or American, or caught somewhere in the middle — except for maybe "What Sid Knew", which stands out by not fitting in and making me question how exactly it relates to the other stories — but "The Visitor and the Neighbor" excels. It's about two elderly men — Prasad who is visiting his son's family

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living in the United States, and Ethan Cooper, an old man and widower — who start to bond over different types of music they like. Ethan, who is a fan of classical music, introduces Prasad to Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. The author, by interweaving the description of the musical piece throughout the story, manages to raise the tension in such a way that I was actually holding my breath toward the story's end. Without giving too much away to not ruin the intense experience of reading this story for the first time, I think Kamma shows the many similarities and differences between Ethan and Prasad perfectly. One feels locked in at a suburban home, the other in his entire life, but no matter how different they and their cultures are, they both are of common grounds. Their old age makes death a relevant topic of this short story as well because death does not discriminate; no matter where you're from.

All in all, *Not Native* is an interesting read that tackles the question of belonging from many different angles and offers a lot of food for thought. Its short stories make it an easy and quick read on a busy day. Kamma's talent to write expositions that immediately draw you into each story and endings that linger at the back of your mind long after you've finished reading make for a book that I can only highly recommend. It left just as much of a lasting impression on my mind as many of the novels I've read — and those needed at least twenty pages to make me invested into them in the first place.

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