

On a Whim and a Prayer

The Wandering, Intan Paramaditha (436pp, Harvill Secker)

Remember those Steve Jackson fighting fantasy books you had as a kid? 'If you want to kill the elf turn to page 17', 'if you want to go through the door go to page 27', etc. Well, Intan Paramaditha has written a grown up version. There are no elves or warriors, no dungeons or dragons to be found, but there is a very real Demon Lover who provides the narrator with a fantastic sex life for a while, and then gives her a pair of magic red shoes which can transport her anywhere in the world, with the proviso that she can never go home again.

It's a risk she is prepared to accept – she doesn't even bother reading the detailed contract Demon Lover provides – and soon we are on our way to JFK, about to leave the city after a prolonged, but forgotten, residency. By page 17 we are asked make a decision though, as the narrator has mislaid one of her magic shoes: fly off to Berlin or return to New York. I chose the latter and soon became embroiled in a variety of city relationships and encounters. I also had a diversion back to and foreword from a chapter about *The Wizard of Oz* and Dorothy's red shoes.

Soon, I am elsewhere, nowhere, somewhere. It's clear there are parts of the book I've missed; I will need to make another journey – this isn't a book that offers the same chapters in a different order each time, it offers totally different, though sometimes overlapping, stories. And some of these stories are about being what the author calls 'in between'. This novel's world is haunted, by the past, by politics, by what is left unsaid, what is desired, implied or experienced. Those who are not present often affect those who are, be that unobtainable subjects of our desire, or the way politicians and economists decide who might or might not live or consume.

This is a book about exploring and wandering, about experiencing the world through our narrator's eyes, but also from a world where ghosts are *almost* literal, where demons and desires, memories and what we have forgotten inhabit the cities, online networks and new places we visit or inhabit. Turning the pages we have decided, on a moment's whim, to visit next, we are suddenly somewhere new, suddenly thrust into unexpected situations and relationships. Only the red shoes and our narrator's weakening restlessness keep us shuffling or jetting along. Home is always out of reach, just like the end of the book. How many times must I start this book again? I don't know, but I am looking forward to it, every time.

Rupert Loydell