



Life in death

ERADICATION: A FABLE

By Jonathan Miles
Pan, ₹499

A story about death is always a story about life. The two are inseparable, each only legible through the other, the same question asked twice.

In *Eradication*, Adi is a former school teacher, a grieving father, a man whose marriage dissolved alongside his son; he is a man introduced as a killer, a man on a mission. But subversion is the novella's chief plot, moral ambiguity its close ally, and even its non-linearity has a linearity — a cinematic, twisting-turning story methodically unpeeling itself.

He's here to save an island, Santa Flora, fictional and Pacific, has been eaten alive — goats, brought by humans, having stripped the flora thoroughly. Adi has been despatched to fix this. The NGO wants to save the island. Adi wants to save the island. But does nature care?

Miles is not content with one story. The novel holds several simultaneously, and the island holds them all. *Eradication* is nature-writing replete and alive with similes — a sunrise "gorgeous and streaky like some big-budget advertisement for divinity," waves brushing up "like the untroubled breaths of a slumbering giant". But it is also eco-fiction about an island drowning in plastic, picked clean by shark finners, and the greatest invasive species of them all — humans. It is a tragicomedy about a man playing at Crusoe and failing, gloriously.

And it is also a book of those earliest sounds humans made, that fumbling toward consonance, the hum beneath the noise, what we name music. "A clarinet could do more than honk and squeak, Adi realised, it could scream and whisper and laugh and weep and slither and growl and stammer and wail. It could say things."

And so, *Eradication* is, finally, a novella about a man coming to terms with himself, inwardly and outwardly. There are no simple answers. There are no simple answers, that only the sea, the silence, that tardy of business of staying alive. And death: in the goats he kills, in the son he lost, in the plastic choking the reef, in the implicit knowledge of nature outlasting every misadventure carried in its name. But it's also a book of life, of our very existence. Life continues, layered and contradictory and occasionally gorgeous, the grinding of teeth giving way, gradually, to something that might be bird song.

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