

MULTIMEDIA

Reviews



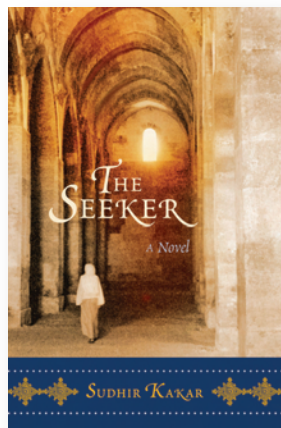
Kevin Itby

The Seeker

by Sudhir Kakar
(Trumpeter, 2008)

Reviewed by Vesela Simic

The Seeker tells the true story of Madeline Slade, a British admiral's daughter, who at 33 left her privileged life in England for the austerities of Gandhi's ashram in Ahmadabad, India, and the opportunity to become one of his most intimate disciples. Sudhir Kakar, a psychoanalyst and writer of critically acclaimed works of both fiction and nonfiction, skillfully blends imaginative narrative with historical fact to fill in the gaps of his



thorough research into the life Slade and Gandhi shared. Based on Slade's and Gandhi's autobiographies and letters (Gandhi wrote more letters to Slade than to anyone else), as well as diaries, interviews, and the reminiscences of others, *The Seeker* explores a world driven by longing and passion—expressed as spiritual devotion, political idealism, romance, and self-transcendence, and inevitably met by human limitation and complexity.

For Gandhi, “the development of a community of men and women who would adhere to the highest standards of nonviolence and truth and strive to achieve their greatest spiritual potential” was just as crucial as the attainment of India's political independence. The austerities of life at Gandhi's ashram included a regimented schedule of prayer, labor, more prayer, and studies in self-improvement, which began at 4:00 a.m. daily; vows of celibacy; and experiments in spare diets that aimed to extinguish, or at least diminish, aggressive flames of desire. What would impel a wealthy English woman to adopt such austerities, and so far from her native home? When Slade arrives at the ashram, Gandhi renames her Mira, after the sixteenth-century princess Mirabai. Mirabai dedicated herself to Lord Krishna and left her life of nobility to wander the land as a minstrel, composing mystical love songs to Krishna “that are still regarded as some of the finest in Hindi poetry.” And indeed, the similarity between Mirabai's love for Krishna and Madeline's (Mira's) love for Gandhi proves to be striking.

As the relationship between Gandhi and Mira unfolds, so do questions about love, self-realization, and the differences in spiritual expression between men and women—certainly the differences between Gandhi and Mira. Kakar relates incidents from Slade's childhood that show she had ecstatic, transformational experiences in nature. As a young woman, she is infatuated with Beethoven, whose music bridges the physical and spiritual realms for her. When she reads Romain Rolland's biography of Gandhi, Slade is finally introduced to her living god. Her close friendship with and service to Gandhi, however, are complicated by intimate tensions of love and physicality. When Mira defends her devotion to Gandhi, who chastises her for idolatry, she argues: “I am not as evolved as you are. I cannot relate to large entities like mankind or higher ideals except through

a person. My god has to be personal, alive, a palpable presence. He has to permeate my heart, mind, and body . . . If I have that, then there is no sacrifice I cannot make . . . no work, however difficult, that I cannot do.” But Gandhi steadfastly directs her otherwise: “You must not cling to me as in this body. The spirit without the body is ever with you . . . You come in daily touch with me by doing my work as if it was your own. And this can, must, and will outlast the existence of this physical body of mine . . . You have come to me not for me, but for my ideals in so far as I live them . . . It is now for you to work out those ideals and practice them to greater perfection than has been given to me to do.”

The Seeker is recommended reading as much for its study of human nature caught between ideal aspirations and lived realities as for its historical record. Gandhi’s ashram, for example, though led by the Mahatma himself, “was less a monastic community living a life of manual labor, silence, and prayer, than a noisy, often squabbling village.” “Like all such experiments, ultimately based on an illusion,” suggests one of the characters who studies Rousseau. Also, Gandhi and others in the book provide glimpses of individual struggles with sexuality and celibacy; in some instances, a vow of celibacy appears to be a kind of violence in itself. And more generally, the life of asceticism often borders disturbingly on a life of imprisonment: “Had Mira lived a life that had fulfilled her as a woman and as a person?” *The Seeker* leaves its reader with many questions—fittingly, perhaps, for at the core of Gandhi’s ethos was his abiding counsel that “individual conscience be the final arbiter of right action.”

VESELA SIMIC is the senior editor of Shift.

The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature

by Daniel J. Levitin
(Dutton, 2008)

Reviewed by Derk Richardson

In his second compelling exploration of the relationship between music and gray matter, Daniel Levitin—author of the best-selling *This Is Your Brain on Music*—argues that we have all had our wits indelibly affected by

the songs we sing and hear. A neuroscientist who focuses on musical perception and cognition, and a former professional musician and record producer, Levitin now digs into the evolutionary hardwiring of the brain and the way music, specifically songs with lyrics, “has been there to guide the development of human nature.” His grandest claims, that music is “a core element in our identity as a species” and that “music made societies and civilizations possible,” might seem self-evident to baby boomers for whom Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Motown, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, among countless others, provided the soundtrack to their lives. And while Levitin is a cultural product of that same era (he references Joni Mitchell, David Byrne, and Sting as acquaintances and primary sources), he sets his sights on every human generation that has walked the face of the Earth.

As Levitin noted in his previous book, some evolutionary scientists have dismissed music as an ultimately disposable “extra”; he counters that argument with his own, that natural selection has favored “musical brains” from the outset. It’s as if the brain, to quote the psychedelic comedy troupe Firesign Theater, were “waiting for the electrician or someone like him,” and the electrician turned out to be music, with six primary tools: songs of friendship, joy, comfort, knowledge, religion, and love. Levitin outlines how each category of song has contributed to the ability of humans to live together, sometimes in harmony, on the planet. “Synchronous, coordinated song and movement created the strongest bonds between early humans,” he writes in the chapter titled “Friendship,” and over time made political structure possible, eased tensions, and created a sense of “we.” Similarly, songs of joy facilitate “cooperative groups,” while comfort songs are crucial in mitigating sadness and alleviating grief. Songs of knowledge make it possible to encode valuable information in ways that are “more honest than spoken language.” Religious songs reinforce the sense of order for which seekers turn to spiritual rituals and ceremonies, and love songs embody nothing less than “the most important cornerstone of civilized society.” ➔

