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BIOGRAPHY

J.G. Farrell (1935–1979) was raised in England and Ireland. He is most famous novels as the author of the Empire Trilogy, which chronicle conflicts in the British Empire: *Troubles* (1970), set in Ireland after the First World War, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), and *The Singapore Grip* (1978), set in Singapore during the Second World War. In the summer of 1979, Farrell was fishing in stormy weather near his home on the Irish coast when he was struck by a wave and drowned.

Winner of the Booker Prize

THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR

by J.G. Farrell

Introduction by Pankaj Mishra

\$15.95 US / \$21.00 CAN

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“The magnificent passages of action in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, its gallery of characters, its unashamedly detailed and fascinating dissertations on cholera, gunnery, phrenology, the prodigal inventiveness of its no doubt also well-documented scenes should satisfy the most exacting and voracious reader. For a novel to be witty is one thing, to tell a good story is another, to be serious is yet another, but to be all three is surely enough to make it a masterpiece.”

—John Spurling, *New Statesman*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* is both a gripping tale of the siege of a remote British outpost during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and a fascinating, and blisteringly comic novel of ideas. Farrell’s picture of the British Empire in crisis raises questions with a bearing on contemporary conflicts between East and West.

In 1857, Indian soldiers in the British army—known as sepoy—rebelled against their colonial overlords, and serious conflict broke out in the northern half of the subcontinent. In Farrell’s novel, the British inhabitants of the fictional town of Krishnapur ignore rumors of unrest only to find themselves under siege by the rebels. Trapped in a dwindling number of buildings, subject to repeated attack, and suffering both from sickness and the oppressive heat of summer, the British community soon finds itself under threat from within, too, as the simple certainties of superiority and invulnerability that have sustained them and the British Empire begin to crumble. Farrell’s characters, from the local priest and doctor to the young men and women who have come east to make their fortune or marry, are shown responding to this challenge in unexpected ways. Especially interesting and sympathetic is the character of Mr Hopkins, the administrative head, or Collector, of Krishnapur. In him, Farrell offers an unforgettable picture of a decent man enduring the death of his ideals.

With its many memorable characters, riveting battle scenes, and tragicomic appreciation of the ironies of history, this masterful novel—winner of the Booker Prize in 1973—will keep readers on the edge of their seats.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does the Collector idealize the Great Exhibition? What ideals does it embody? How does the authorial voice serve to put into perspective the Collector’s sanguine faith in these ideals? What final verdict on the Great Exhibition do the events of the novel leave us with?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Troubles

J. G. Farrell
(introduction by John Banville)

The Singapore Grip

J. G. Farrell
(introduction by Derek Mahon)

The Root and the Flower

L. P. Myers
(introduction by Penelope Fitzgerald)

The Towers of Trebizond

Rose Macaulay
(introduction by Jan Morris)

English, August

Upamanyu Chatterjee
(introduction by Akhil Sharma)

Love in a Fallen City

Eileen Chang
(introduction by Karen Kingsbury)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Jose Saramago, *Blindness*

E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*,

Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*,

Paul Scott, *The Jewel in the Crown*,

Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*,

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

2. How are women—both individually and as a group—characterized? How do the men see them? In the last days of the siege, two of the women have become integral to the survival of the community: Lucy Hughes has proven herself to be skilled at making rifle cartridges and Louise Dunstaple works tirelessly to help Dr. McNab in the hospital. How do these actions change your perception of each of them? Have the women changed significantly, or now, at the end, have we simply been offered a different view of them?

3. Farrell's novel is richly sensory. How does he use sensory details—particularly auditory and olfactory details—to create atmosphere and build tension? Choose several passages that you felt were especially vivid and explain why.

4. The British compound acts as a petri dish, in which prevailing ideas about class, race, sex, and religion are enacted within a small, closed community. Given the events that unfold, what conclusions can be drawn about the state of the larger society? Give examples of how Victorian social hierarchies are acted out amongst the besieged community.

5. How does George Fleury evolve as the novel progresses? Why does he become more appealing to Louise Dunstaple—whom he later marries—when before the siege she had no interest in him at all? Compare Fleury and Louise's brother, Harry. Why is Fleury often in opposition to so many people in Krishnapur, especially Hari, the Collector, and the Padre?

6. The novel's humor springs from the mocking and ironic portrayal of its characters. Describe the tone of *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Are the characters nuanced individuals, or are they types? Does the novel's irony and humor diminish our ability to feel sympathy for them?

7. How would you characterize Lieutenant Cutter? What qualities of the British in India does he typify?

8. Characters in Farrell's novel often remain stubbornly committed to their beliefs, even in spite of convincing evidence to the contrary. Discuss the argument about cholera treatment between Dr. Dunstaple and Dr. McNab. Why is Dr. Dunstaple so unwilling to reconsider his point of view? What arguments are ultimately compelling to the community and why is this alarming? What broader inferences about British society in India can be drawn from the argument between the two men?

9. "The Collector was astonished by how little the Prime Minister had changed during his month of captivity...The siege had simply made no impression on him whatsoever" [p. 226]. Why has the siege had such little effect on the Prime Minister? Why has it had a greater impact on Hari?

10. Do you think that Hari is a convincing character? What ideas and values of European culture does he cherish? Why did he and Fleury not see eye to eye when the latter visited the Maharajah's palace? Why, even in spite of his humiliating imprisonment, does Hari remain fond of the Collector?

11. Many years after the siege, the Collector, a former avid proponent of the arts, says, "Culture is a sham. It's a cosmetic painted on life by rich people to conceal its ugliness" [p. 343]. How and why have the Collector's ideas changed so radically? What are his final thoughts on leaving India and how has he come to them.