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Book Review: 'The Yellow Emperor's Cure'

The Yellow Emperor's Cure is the kind of book that sucks you in so completely that when you pause in the reading, you have blink and wait to drop back into the perfectly banal present.



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Updated: Jan 8, 2012, 08:00 AM IST

The Yellow Emperor's cure Author: Kunal Basu Publisher: Picador Pages: 325

Novelistic ambition is a tricky thing; it can be too slight, too grandiose or, worst of all, failed. Kunal Basu has none of these problems in his riveting new novel. *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* is the story of a Portuguese doctor – brilliant surgeon, lady killer, adventurer – who travels to China to find a cure for syphilis.

The novel sets itself multiple challenges: set at the turn of the 20th century, it seeks to evoke the China of a century ago; the field of medicine in two utterly different traditions a century ago; two unfamiliar cultures towards each other a century ago. Throw in the basic requirements of an engaging characters and storylines, and what you have is an alarming number of balls to juggle, high, and nails it.



We meet Dr Antonio Henriques Maria in an operating theatre in Lisbon at dawn, flirting with a nurse while extracting a bullet from a patient, irritated about having missed out on the night of wholesome lechery that precedes the feast of St Anthony. As he joins the parade in the afternoon, someone hands him a note that will change his life. His father lies ravaged by the disease known variously as French Disease, Spanish Itch, German Rash, and Polish Pox. In 1898, this is a death sentence. As Antonio's teacher says, "No one even believes in a cure for syphilis anymore.[...] In Naples they've built walls inside hospitals to separate the patients from the poxies, just as in Glasgow where the police have replaced doctors on the wards. In the lands of Calvin they've been left to die as punishment for their sins. The civilised world has simply given up."

There is plenty of quackery around, but it's up to real medical heretics to look outside the box. The germ of an idea – the fact that Chinese sailors seem to be free of syphilis – sends Dr Maria on an ocean voyage to China. Amid the pavilions and plum trees of the Dowager Empress's summer palace, he becomes the student of the Empress's personal physician, Dr Xu, and his mysterious assistant Fumi.

Over the next year, Antonio inhabits a strange world of invisible royalty, eunuchs, new food and new customs. He must overcome his impatience and his previous training to learn the secrets of the Nei-Ching, the ancient medical canon that teaches a doctor to diagnose a patient simply by listening to the pulse. He must replace sphygmograph and ophthalmoscope with a reading of the four seasons and the five elements, the twelve channels of the body and its eleven organs. In the process he learns Mandarin, falls in love, and finds himself as a doctor and as a human being.

Dr Maria's frustrations and achievements are set in the cauldron of the Boxer Rebellion, the cultural movement that rose from the ashes of the Opium Wars. Basu's characters— including a Jesuit priest, merchants, diplomats and spies at the Foreign Legation, a flamboyant manuscript collector, and Dr Maria himself – animate the larger historical context. Exhaustive research, from flora to costume to what might have appeared at the breakfast table, breathes life into the novel without pointlessly weighing it down.

Basu creates a whole and absorbing world rich with detail, and peopled with characters who, despite a fair level of suspense, refuse to deliver the perfect ending, and are therefore that much more believable.

If I have a quibble it is with the occasional slip in editing or proofreading. But *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* is the kind of book that sucks you in so completely that when you pause in the reading, you have to blink and wait to drop back into the perfectly banal present to notice that your breakfast, lunch or dinner is going cold at your elbow. Don't miss it. inbox@dnaindia.net

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