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Sagramanda - A Novel of Near-Future India

THE BOOK

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> *...A MISSED OPPORTUNITY ...The novel is set in a huge city. It had to be huge to accommodate one hundred million people. It had everything: riches, big buildings, parks, plazas, modern technology, high tech public transport, multinational companies, crime, murder and the poor fallen by the wayside people who could not earn a living in this huge metropolis. People from all walks of life seeking opportunity were attracted to SAGRAMANDA and gathered here from all over India and beyond. A good 'venue' for a brilliant novel but sadly, I felt the author did not make full use of his capabilities nor the setting. I expected better from the author of well known works such as Alien and Star Trek...*

Sagramanda - A Novel of Near-Future India *by* Alan Dean Foster, Hard Cover, 6" x 9".
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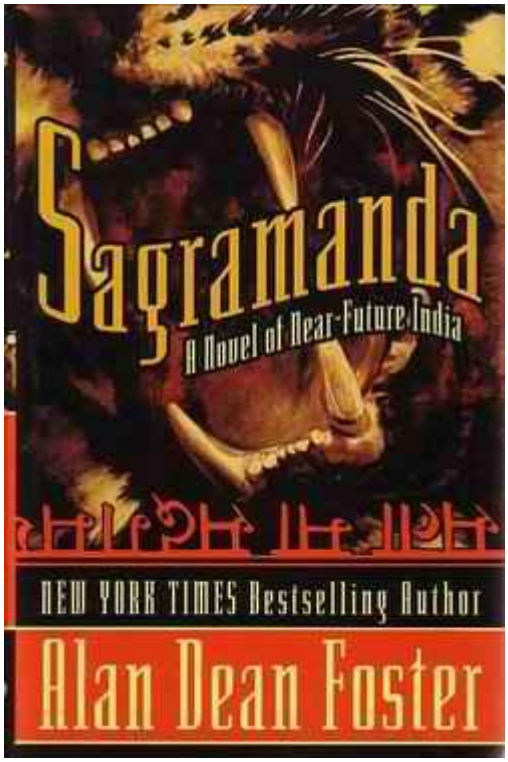

In *SAGRAMANDA*, Alan Dean Foster the well known and acclaimed author brings to life the story of a modern city of 100 million people. It is a novel of and for the 'next generation' set in - of all the places on earth - India. It is a place of opportunity. London, New York, LA, Delhi and Bombay put together and fast forwarded two or three generations onto the future.

The city had to be huge to accommodate one hundred million people. It was a city beyond comparison, A CITY LIKE NO OTHER. It had everything, riches, big buildings, parks, plazas, modern technology, high tech public transport, multinational companies, crime, murder and the poor fallen by the wayside people who could not earn a living in this huge metropolis. People from all walks of life seeking opportunity were attracted to SAGRAMANDA and gathered here from all over India and beyond. A good 'venue' for a brilliant novel but sadly, I felt the author did not make full use of his capabilities nor the setting. I expected better from the author of well known works such as Alien and Star Trek.

Who are the main characters of the novel? First and foremost I felt the city of SAGRAMANDA itself was the main character because the city was supposed to mould and govern its population to its likes and dislikes. In other words, it seemed to affect people in a fundamental way by its 'personality'.

So, what about the 'actors' who enter this stage?

Here again the author has left the reader to make the inference.

There is Taneer.

> *...Taneer, the clever research scientist was in hiding from his employer, a multinational company. He had stolen a secret discovery and the company had employed Chal Scheeman, a detective and hit man to find Taneer and abduct him. So Chal was searching for him in the big city. The plot is*

> *complicated by Taneer's father who is determined to kill Taneer for dishonouring and bringing shame on his traditional family by having a relationship with beautiful Dephali of the 'untouchable' class. He too was searching for Taneer up and down the great city...*

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Taneer ventures to employ Sanjey Ghosh, a lad from a remote village who had come to the city of opportunity and now owns a shop. Sanjey has links to the 'underworld' and agrees to act as the middle man in the negotiations to sell Taneer's secret for a fee of three percent of the thirty million asking price. On to this 'primed' stage enters the Goddess Kali worshipper and serial killer Jena - the mad foreigner, and of course one should not forget the man eating Tiger roaming the outskirts of the city and the forest. The usual Indian mixture!

Did I like the novel? It was OK, I suppose. It could have been much better. First and foremost it lacked depth and emotion. I could not readily sympathise nor empathise with any of the characters.

The author could have done more with almost all the characters, breathed more life into them and manipulated them so well that they actually came alive with raw emotions thus enabling the reader to experience the feelings as if he or she was in the same place or in the same situation. He had the opportunity to do so. Instead he adopted a rather documentary style of writing and in this respect he failed.

I do not think my review will be complete if I do not compare and contrast *SAGRAMANDA* with works by other authors of recent times. Arthur Hailey 'selected' similar 'venues' to *SAGRAMANDA* in his classic novels *Airport*, *Hotel* and *Final Diagnosis* bringing his characters to life with great skill and imagination. By the end of an Arthur Hailey novel one could relate well to each and every player and almost feel their emotions. He was an expert in making several parallel individual stories merge and diverge and thread through the length of a novel.

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The other impression I got when reading Sagaramanda was that Alan Dean Foster did not seem to 'know' India very well to make the happenings more realistic. I am sorry to say this but there are some authors, who in relatively recent times, have brought India and its people to life in their writings. Firstly, I need to mention Arundhati Roy and her Booker Prize winner *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*. *JEWEL IN THE CROWN* by Paul Scott and the Colonial *BHOWANI JUNCTION* by John Masters are masterpieces. One might say that it is unfair to compare these two books with *SAGRAMANDA* because they deal with a different era i.e. the middle of the last century and during the struggle for independence. But these other authors wrote with such passion and emotion that

the tension of the situation was almost palpable throughout the pages. Then there was Jim Corbett who brought life into dead Tigers in *MY INDIA* and *MAN-EATERS OF KUMAON*, but then Jim Corbett wrote about his personal experiences.

Foster had the opportunity to explore and explain the scientific and research science aspect of the story more. The idea of the hydrogen producing weeds was a good one. The setting is in the future which gives a lot of artistic license! The author however seems to have missed this opportunity. To give an example, how about Taneer's research which leads him to the discovery of a plant enzyme which could split the water molecule into two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. He did so by altering the DNA code of the plant's genes. This theme could have been exploited better.

> *...Alan Dean Foster is a novelist of great calibre and is an experienced and acclaimed writer. According to his official website, he is a traveller who has visited far away places and lived in many parts of the world. He is the author of many books of fiction and non-fiction...*

Remember John Wyndham and *THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS*? A weed like no other? - A fantastic claim.

The strongest point of the story is the idea itself.

A novel about a futuristic society in a huge modern city and its happenings, with technological devices and gadgetry is a very good idea. But, how did Taneer's father enter his flat which had all the modern security devices? No explanation is given as to how such a security system could be breached by an ordinary villager.

Alan Dean Foster is a novelist of great calibre and is an experienced and acclaimed writer. According to his official website, he is a traveller who has visited far away places and lived in many parts of the world. He is the author of many books of fiction and non-fiction.

In conclusion, *SAGRAMANDA* is OK but it is a very ordinary and a rather slow-paced novel. If it had more depth and speed it would make a masterpiece.



-Ranji Fernando
Ranji Fernando is a doctor physician settled in Britain. She is a bibliophile, social commentator, and reviewer of books. She enjoys reading and in particular books from the Indian sub-continent ranging from Rudyard Kipling to Arundhati Roy.
Born in 1949 in Sri Lanka, she migrated to Britain at an early age and now resides in Devon, England. She has travelled to India a number of times and knows India like the back of her hand. Here in this picture, she is seen with her husband Gyan, who is a pathologist and a travelcoholic.
Ranji has been associated with this journal as a book reviewer right from its inception. One of the first books she reviewed for this journal can be accessed by clicking here.

View this book on Amazon

Rejoinder by Alan Dean Foster

Alan Dean Foster, the author of this book sent this journal the following rejoinder after going through this review:
Hi Anil;

Win some, lose some.

Had I perhaps done more of what this reviewer said, the book would have been three times as big...and I don't think a U.S. publisher would have bought it. Plenty of good reviews in the U.S., though. For your interest, I attach some of them.

I'll tell you a story about reviews....

When I was just getting started, I had written a short story (Silent Songs in Stone). Harlan Ellison was editing the first Dangerous Visions anthology and I submitted it to him. He said, "I love the ending, but the story itself is shit". So I rewrote it several times to try to satisfy him, but never did.

I was working hard to finish my first novel and could not rework the story any further. So I sent it to John W. Campbell at Analog, who had published my first story. I got a letter back from Campbell declaring, "The story is great, but I hate the ending".

Very valuable lesson. Two giants in the field loved and hated exactly opposite things about exactly the same story! That's why reviews, as long as they are at least mixed, never trouble me.

Best as always,
Alan

Other reviews of *Sagramanda*

Sci-Fi Weekly
Blog Critics Magazine

Technovelgy.com - where science meets fiction

Bella online - The voice of women

Blogbharti - Voices from the Indian blogosphere

Fantastic Fiction

Entertainment weekly's EW.com

-Editor-in-Chief