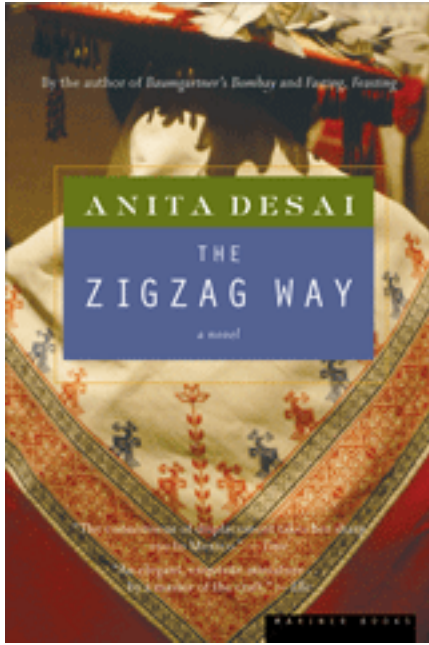


## A Reader's Guide



# The Zigzag Way

by Anita Desai

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"Long before Jhumpa Lahiri . . . long before Monica Ali . . . another novelist was offering us exquisitely detailed portraits of bodies in transit . . . In *The Zigzag Way*, the connoisseur of displacement takes her sharp eye to Mexico." — Pico Iyer, *Time*

### About the Book

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In *The Zigzag Way*, the critically acclaimed novelist Anita Desai deftly explores cultural fault lines in an evocative story of expatriates and travelers adrift in a foreign land. When Harvard grad student Eric travels abroad to Mexico, he finds himself steeped in his own ancestry and lost in an inscrutable culture he cannot penetrate. On his quest to discover the history of his Cornish grandfather, a former miner in the Sierra Madre, Eric stumbles upon the mysterious and influential Doña Vera, a hacienda baroness whose philanthropic deeds are legendary but whose past is suspect. The stories of Eric, his grandparents, and Doña Vera intertwine to create scenic and explosive prose that explores the meaning of memory, the power of home, and the bonds between the dead and the living.

"Over more than two decades, Anita Desai has produced a series of books notable for their intelligence, restraint, exotic settings, juxtaposition of unlikely characters, and elegant prose . . . *The Zigzag Way* exhibits all these gifts in abundance . . . sensual, vivid, frightening, and almost unbearably suspenseful." — *Boston Globe*

"Written with charm and ferocity. Anita Desai packs worlds into pages, but keeps her eye close to the private, painful, funny humanity of her characters." — Louise Erdrich

## About the Author

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**Anita Desai** is the critically acclaimed author of many works of fiction, three of which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her body of work includes *Fasting, Feasting; Baumgartner's Bombay; Clear Light of Day;* and *Diamond Dust*, among others. A professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she now lives in New York.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Zigzag Way* for every reader.

1. At one point, Desai writes of Eric, "Had he not always been the misfit? It was his role." Do you think of Eric as a misfit? How would you best characterize him?
2. Early in the novel, Eric wonders if "memories and nostalgia had to be abandoned, like excess baggage," if one is to complete the process of emigration and start a new beginning in a new world. Do you agree with this sentiment? What role do memories play in the novel, especially to Eric and to Vera?
3. Eric realizes that for the most part, he "studied history and collected data without any sense that it was essential." Is history essential, as Eric seems to imply? What effect does it have on the characters in the novel?
4. What effect do the dead have on the living in the novel (especially Ramon on Vera and Betty on Eric)? What do you think of these bonds?
5. Eric criticizes himself for continually allowing himself to "be led by autocratic people with strong opinions," and he admits that he has "submitted to the spell of a woman." What role do strong women such as Vera, Em, and even Betty, play in Eric's life? Do they control him? Is he similar to Paul in this regard?
6. Whether it was the students or anyone else coming to her hacienda, Vera says she "despised all equally." What do you think is the source of Vera's bitterness? How have the contradictions in Vera's life (she detests the miners who took the Huichol's land, but she herself is linked to the Nazis) shaped her? Have they ruined her?
7. The novel is littered with images and instances of sin, guilt, forgiveness, and sacrifice. While in the cathedral, Eric feels guilt and sin gathering for "refuge and to live on." At another point, Andre says it is not enough to forgive yourself for your sins; you must sacrifice and serve to earn it. Do you agree with this statement? What does the novel ultimately say about these ideas?
8. The Hacienda de la Soledad at times seems like another character in the novel. It is referred to as a "graveyard of history" and a place from which "there was no escape." What role does the hacienda play in the story? What do you think it means to Vera?

- 9.** The Huichol Indians remain a mystery for most of the novel, and none of the characters seem to be able to understand them. Even Vera, who opens her hacienda to the Huichol, never speaks to them. How did Vera's relationship with the Huichol evolve? Was there ever a point when she understood them?
- 10.** Vera describes the "silence" of the land in Mexico several times, and at one point she says "silence and invisibility were her life's lessons." Em also talks about silence and isolation, and he tells Eric he will discover new information once he is alone. What role does silence and a lack of communication play in the novel? Do you think isolation helps the characters find what they're searching for?
- 11.** Vera is described as a "mythical figure" several times during the novel, and there are several references to fairy tales and other magical occurrences. What role do you think magic and mysticism play in the story?
- 12.** In many ways Eric remains as much a mystery at the end of the novel as at the beginning. Why do you think this is? What do we learn about Eric over the course of the story?
- 13.** During the raids, Betty says that "something had been exposed — the stupidity of their presence here." Can anyone truly be content in a land where he or she is an outsider, or is the unhappiness of Vera, and to a lesser extent Paul and Eric, the result of a flaw limited to those characters?
- 14.** Paul is essentially born on the road, while his parents flee from one life in Mexico to another in America. As a result, he can't form a relationship with his father and later feels "engulfed" and "lost" among his wife's family. Vera too fled Europe. How does the lack of homeland influence have on these characters, who do not have places they can return to or a past they can draw upon?

## For Further Reading

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The following titles may be of interest to readers of *The Zigzag Way*:

- [Fasting, Feasting](#) by [Anita Desai](#)  
[Baumgartner's Bombay](#) by [Anita Desai](#)  
[Diamond Dust](#) by [Anita Desai](#)  
[The Clear Light of Day](#) by [Anita Desai](#)  
[The Namesake](#) by [Jhumpa Lahiri](#)  
[Story-Wallah](#) by [Shyam Selvadurai](#) (Ed.)