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Balance of Fragile Things by Olivia Chadha

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Rain, Rain, Go Away

***Balance of Fragile Things* by OLIVIA CHADHA**

Ashland Creek Press, 2012 \$17.95

Reviewed by **NICOLE BARTLEY**

The Balance of Fragile Things by Olivia Chadha asks its readers, “What would you do?”

What would you do if an estranged family member needed your help, if your children were distant and secretive, if your business was failing, if everyone became chronically ill, if your lifestyle was threatened by bullies, and if you were thrust into a position you didn't want? The multicultural Singh family must answer these questions, each during his or her personal chapters. No one is where they want to be. Paul's gas station is losing business because the upstate New York town's prolonged and delayed meddling with a giant sinkhole blocks his entrance. When his father, Papaji, visits from Punjab for a medical procedure, Paul must face their abusive pasts. Paul's Latvian wife, Maija, has limited psychic abilities that can't see her family's troubles, only suggestions about her neighbors. His son, Vic, is being physically bullied at school and would rather spend time alone locating butterflies. His daughter, Isabella, is forced to become the lead in her school's play after her best friend is diagnosed with leukemia and moves to a distant city for treatment. And his mother-in-law, Oma, is the final addition to a small household when she moves in because of failing eyesight. Weaving between all of them is the saturating, shrouding, constant rain.

Early in the book, Isabella thinks, “Humans leave permanent stains on the

spaces they use” (37). In addition to her ruminating on the nature of her neighborhood, this line is also a poignant metaphor for the novel's underlying cause of conflict. Every problem is man-made, and the characters can merely struggle through attempts to survive. Vic exactly touches upon this subject in his blog, *On the Wing*, when he notes: “We worry neither for the small things nor the large things but rather the *now* things” (1). People in this town, except for the very self-aware Singh family, only see what's immediately in front of them. When a mysterious illness affects the town, most people don't consider its cause. Instead, they only want to know how to fix it. For a while, the Singh family is no different until, gradually, their perception shifts to protection and prevention. Here again, rain enters the fray.

When Vic is forced to avoid the school bully, Joe, and his cronies' destructive trapeze through a nearby park, he accidentally discovers an abandoned mine. His immediate response to Joe is to find sanctuary, and the mine enables him to burrow into himself by providing endless shafts slick with ground water. Only when his last resort is encroached upon is he forced to mature, find a preventative solution to his problems, and emerge as one of his damaged butterflies. In a parallel fashion, his father descends into the sinkhole, past layers of concrete, brick, and soil—the town's tangible history—to test the seeping ground water. That water, whether falling from the sky or spreading on the floor, connects the family to each other and their neighbors. And only when everyone suffers from a mysterious epidemic do they experience a taste of collectivity. Because readers can connect details that the characters

keep separate from each other, the resulting dramatic irony carries them to the end, just to see how it all comes together.

In addition to the metaphors from subtle plot points, Chadha lectures to her readers via Vic's blog. Most of the grandiose statements about nature, patience, connectivity, observation, and respect come from these sections. But she also uses them to introduce pockets of slow, gliding narration to illuminate dreamlike moments that temporarily fill readers with wonder until they splash back onto the cold, sodden ground. Through Vic and his butterflies, Chadha writes:

They are the fairies in our world, pixies in the human realm. Their stained-glass windows so brilliant and whimsical we can't help but remember that this is what matters. You hold your breath and forget where you were rushing off to mere moments before. They are the sirens of the world we used to live in, the one we could live in. (115)

Throughout the majority of this gray story, Vic's butterflies are the only moments of color. And often, they are pinned to shadowboxes, deformed in the wild, or mere words from research. When he discovers one, it is already dead. Bright moments are, indeed, rare and usually followed by deep shadows. Even his father, Paul, recognizes his depressing surroundings and wonders if, at some point, things had been better. His journey to find answers to the sinkhole takes him to the local Historical Society, a building that looks to be misplaced in time. Here, Paul ponders:

The Historical Society, housed within a whitewashed Victorian house, was the only structure around that looked as though it contained life. Paul thought if he could pretend it was the nineteenth century and look away from the industrial ugliness, perhaps he could find beauty in his surroundings. He wondered if this town had been a Pleasantville when it was first settled. Or if it had always been just a scab on the earth's surface, a blacktop Band-Aid suffocating the grass. (78)

Eventually, the Singhs unite into a functioning, cohesive family. They manage small victories until the final moments of severe conflict. This occurs in the last few chapters, which causes the ending to arrive suddenly. Events occur on the extreme ends of the possibilities spectrum. One consequence snowballs into another—the sickness spreads—and leaves characters in a mad scramble. It is as if Chadha, after a flashy display of what could go wrong, jabs at the final chapters and asks, "If you don't want to acknowledge the first two problems, then how about this one?" And if you acknowledge it, what would you do?

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