

The Wrong Kind of Indian

Jey Tehya

Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing (Jan 1, 2017)

Softcover \$14.99 (326pp)

978-1-942545-47-7

This is a daring and earnest depiction of identity that crosses societal and cultural boundaries.

Jey Tehya's *The Wrong Kind of Indian* is a raw rendering of a woman's struggle to claim her identity in the midst of chaotic and ubiquitous negative voices.

Coming out of a highly dysfunctional childhood, Jennifer enters her thirties with plenty of baggage still dragging behind her. A hypercritical mother and a father with a propensity to disappear for days at a time contribute to Jennifer's ceaseless battles with relationships and with the demon of weight obsession.

As an unsure half-white, half-Cherokee woman, Jennifer must figure out how she fits into the world around her. Barhopping and clubbing eventually lead to an encounter with Chirag, a handsome Jain Indian whose mystique captivates Jennifer. Their relationship is rocky. Chirag stubbornly refuses to tell his parents in India about her, as Jennifer is "the wrong kind of Indian." And though Jennifer tries to escape her fixation on Chirag by entering into a serious relationship—and even traveling to Costa Rica—with the kindhearted Fernando, her life's journey will ultimately lead her to India.

Jennifer's character is revealed through alternating sections that concentrate on her present, and give space to her past in subchapters. Each subchapter episode is short but poignant, illuminating little by little the full depth and breadth of who she is. Jennifer is her own narrator, so the thoughts and feelings of others are conveyed secondhand or are absent entirely. Her tone and language are at turns honest and self-deprecating, especially when it comes to her body issues. Her bout with an eating disorder is rendered in unsettling, gut-wrenching detail, but her quest to overcome it is a redemptive relief.

Though limited by Jennifer's perspective, the rest of the cast are still strong and complex supporting characters. Chirag's conflicting feelings for Jennifer and his desire to please his family are subtle but detectable. The gradual withdrawal of an old friend from Jennifer's life is heartbreaking, though it may be in Jennifer's best interests in the long run. And Jennifer's alcoholic mother has her own corrupt relationship with body image.

The prose is polished without being florid, and especially in Costa Rica and India, teases the senses with beautiful, exotic details. Descriptions can also swing into the profane, as Jennifer wrestles with sexual and psychological issues, including a childhood episode with a dog that strikes disagreeably. However, all her darkness eventually gives way to the light of a fresh future.

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MEAGAN LOGSDON (November 16, 2016)

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