

Where all the magic happens

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Porochista Khakpour
THE LAST ILLUSION
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Zal isn't just a victim, but a mythic sufferer of almost boundless pathos. Born a "sickly yellow-white thing" to a mother who abhors him, confined to a wire cage as a "horror child" and "White Demon", kept unclothed, unloved, and untended in his northern Iranian village, the young protagonist of this admirable if imperfect second novel by the Iranian-American writer Porochista Khakpour seems hideously doomed from the start. With prying neighbours' eyes and voices held at bay, Zal eventually loses all human contact apart from the cold ministrations of his "crazy bird lady" mother. He atrophies into a feral non-verbal "Bird Boy" who can only chirp, tweet, flap his elbows, peck at seeds, and squat in his own droppings.

Soon help arrives. On the cusp of the millennium, Zal is spirited away to New York by an adoptive parent who seems to offer, a little too providentially, just what the teenager needs. Anthony Hendricks is not only a child psychologist and researcher of feral children, but his own fatherless, forlorn, deliciously strange childhood – he learnt to cook at the age of five, and read Shakespeare at seven – seems to leave him uniquely suited to help his young charge.

Set in the jittery years of 1999 to 2001, the narrative rarely allows Zal to alight upon anything resembling terra firma. Much of the story movingly traces his gradual humanization in New York City, and Khakpour proves an ardent chronicler of his and the Big Apple's idiosyncrasies. But she forces matters a bit too. Zal's wildness drops too readily away, while his naivety and need to connect with others prompt him to fall in with a cast of somewhat contrived eccentrics who may help him emotionally, but who fail us fictionally.

There's the wholly unlikeable illusionist Bran Silber, for instance, busily planning his latest and greatest trick, called Fall of the Towers. Since we know what's coming on 9/11, the dramatic irony surrounding the vain Silber gets chokingly thick. This doesn't deter Zal, of course, who grows obsessed (and not persuasively) by the notion that Silber knows how to fly. Zal seeks him out at his grand "Silbertorium" warehouse in Brooklyn, of course, "where all the magic happens, baby", a phrase (implausibly) spray-painted in gold outside the entrance.

In a more engaging romantic storyline, Zal also falls for the endearing Asiya McDonald, a panic-prone anorexic and sort-of clairvoyant with a trust fund and an interest in fashioning art from, of all things, dead birds. (And to pile peculiarity on kink, we're soon also introduced to Asiya's younger sister, Willa, a 500-pound, bed-bound pink beauty in a lace housedress whom Zal thinks is "the most beautiful person he has ever seen".) Zal and Asiya's budding relationship turns out to be an interesting intersection of New York "outsiders" in a book with no real insiders. For the first time in his life, Zal feels a "certain coloring in of himself – a hologram being filled in to flesh; a ghost suddenly acquiring corporeality".

A lesser author might have continued to tread the terrain of the immigrant family experience that worked powerfully in

Khakpour's well-regarded debut, *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007). *The Last Illusion* pushes beyond the identity and assimilation narrative and explores lives more settled in America but just as alienated. In trading a Los Angeles setting for New York, and a biological family for a selected one, Khakpour explores her evolving, Iranian-American mythology on a much wider canvas.

As with her last novel, avian and sky imagery remain important motifs of creative liberation and peril. When Zal and Asiya visit the Windows on the World restaurant on the 106th floor of the World Trade Center for a date, the author confects a masterly set piece. Zal gazes out into a "perfect black sky" and sees, far below:

"... light upon light upon light, networks of Christmas-light-like incandescence netted New York and Brooklyn and some of New Jersey, and who knew what more. He felt like he could indeed see the whole world, that it was actually a window on the world. He felt like he was perched on a narrow branch and that with just the slightest inclination he could be up and away, into the dark everlasting heavens above New York."

If *The Last Illusion* illustrates, both thematically and, as fiction, technically, how extraordinary and offbeat characters carry unique risks, more mundane problems of prose also deserve mention. The words "freak" and "crazy" appear, tellingly, far too often – more than sixty times, between them. Less would be more.

Khakpour also has a tendency to heap hyphenated adjectives on innocent nouns, and to use, too often, the trope of lists. When Zal first meets Willa, for example, we're subjected to a tedious and long catalogue of five theories of why Zal found Willa so beautiful. Because we know so little about Willa at this juncture, we simply don't care. The list gets wearying, like a novelist's notes, not a novel.

In the end, *The Last Illusion* does feel like a transitional work, but one still worthy of interest and respect. If it comes across as the effort of an author recalibrating her artistic bearings, it also holds enough lyrical richness and ingenious observation of a singular historical moment to make us eager to see where Khakpour flies next.