

Bird

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The Age

Sophie Cunningham's first novel, *Geography*, was well-received and short-listed for a literary prize; the plaudit "best-seller" is invoked on the cover of her latest, *Bird*.

The exact meaning of this favourite expression of blurb-writers is as elastic as the previously rigid line segregating fiction from non-fiction has lately proved. Cunningham, a professional editor as well as novelist, has in workmanlike fashion prefaced her book with a clarifying note - although three of her characters were inspired by real people (two Tibetan lamas and a Russian woman called Zina Rachevsky), they are here thoroughly fictionalised, while all the other characters are invented.

So we've got that out of the way. Or have we? Isn't the narrator Az (short for Ana-Sofia) an editor? Well, yes, she is, but her job, unlike her author's, is incidentally the *raison d'être* of the novel.

In New York, a power black-out presages for a brief, panic-stricken hour, a repeat of September 11. Afterwards, Az can put off no longer finding out as much as she can about her long-lost mother, an almost legendary Russian Jew called Anna Davidoff.

How on earth had Anna come to die as a Buddhist nun at the age of 43, alone in a cave in the Himalayas? And, even for the sake of becoming a "realised being", how could she have abandoned five-year old Az, leaving Anna's best friend Eleanor to care for the child along with her own daughter Marilyn, supporting the three of them on the meagre profits of an Indian cafe in San Francisco?

Az's quest becomes the essence of what is an intensely feminine book, not just by reason of the gender of the central characters, but because the structure is strikingly circular rather than linear.

Az spirals around several hazy mother-images until the piecemeal picture she painstakingly builds up becomes vital, brightly coloured and almost whole. Once she has wrung all she can out of her own sketchy, half-understood memories, she clamours for those of her mother's friends, lovers and teachers, looking for clues to Anna's existence in other phases and places.

Eleanor, who first met a teenage Anna in a dance class and did not lose touch until her friend embraced her Buddhist isolation, describes her as a volatile, statuesque blonde beauty who carelessly turned the head of every man who saw her. Anna could have had any or all of those besotted males.

But Nick, the only one she really wanted, her unique, true love for reasons we discover later, was already married. They spent time together only spasmodically.

Equally crucial to Az's search is the monk Lama Dorje Rinpoche.

As a boy in Darjeeling, long before he became a lama, Rinpoche found himself sharing his teacher, Lama Gyatsho, with this exotic American woman who looked like a movie star, had a lovely little daughter, was married to a homosexual man - and insisted she wanted a guru.

For a while, the two monks and Anna's swarm of visiting American friends fraternise incongruously, but in the end, despite blowing cigarette smoke in the face of two CIA agents

("very disrespectful" says the Lama, poker-faced), Anna's wish to become a nun is formalised, and Eleanor sent for.

The journey to India and the search for a lost mother become the source of many further spiritual and emotional revelations, notably Az's understanding of herself, and a sympathetic introduction to many aspects of Buddhist teaching, ranging from the beguiling to the way-out.

The great technical accomplishment of the novel, however, is Cunningham's infallible ventriloquising of every individual voice contributing to Anna or Az's story. Lama Rinpoche is particularly winning, but no less vivid is Anna's brave mother, or her various male adorers, recalled by Eleanor, interviewed by Az.

In one extraordinary late chapter, Anna speaks for herself, describing her childhood, and we are suddenly removed from the dusty heat of the sub-continent to the deathly cold of the siege of Leningrad, where mere survival was a miracle. Except in the tricky matter of the transliteration from Russian, Cunningham never puts a foot wrong in relating a fabulous story, as unpredictable as it is convincing, as thoughtful as it is absorbing.

This story was found at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/06/16/1213468314046.html>