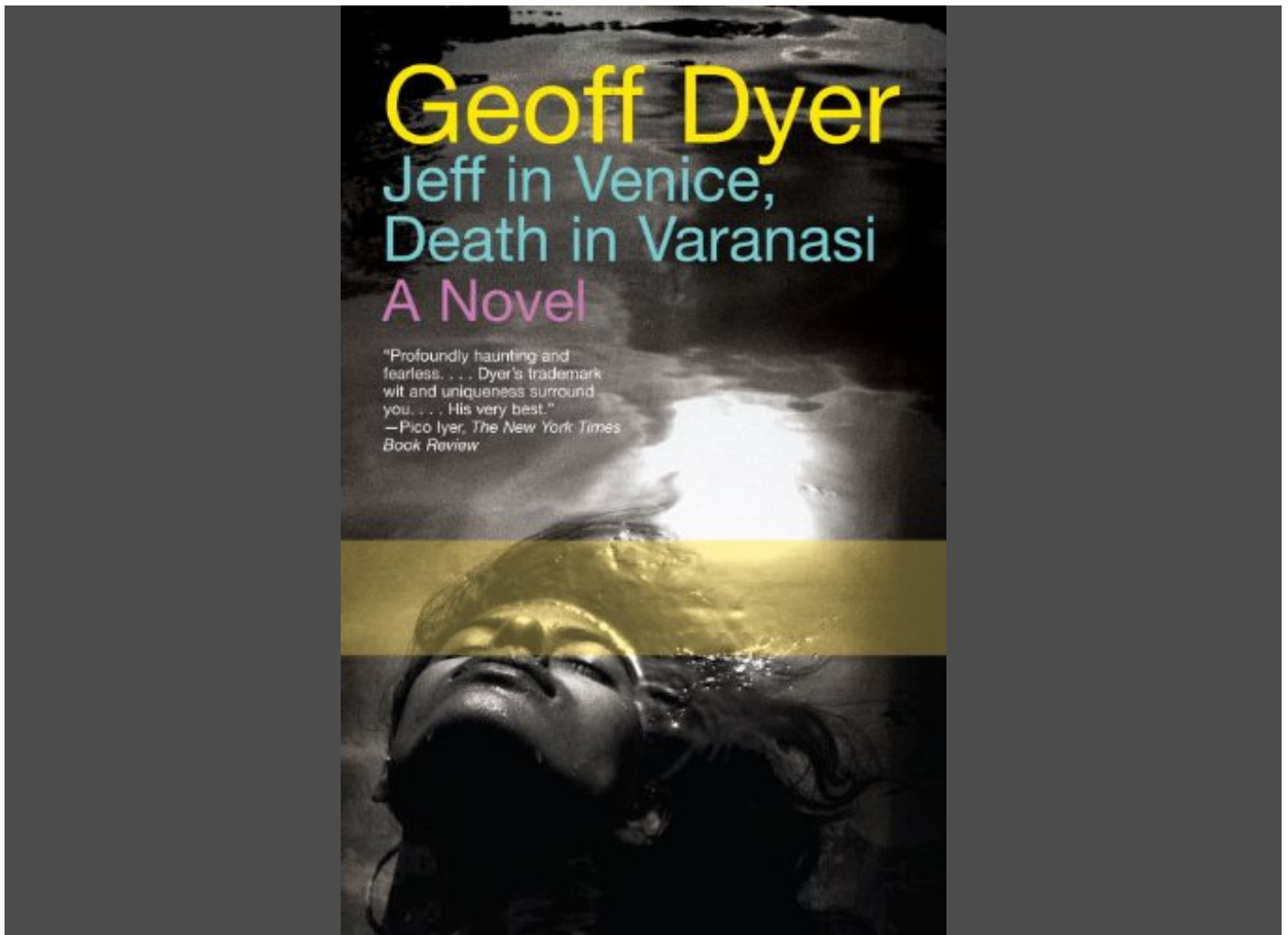


PDF | Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi: A Novel

by Geoff Dyer



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A *New York Times* Notable Book

A Best Book of the Year: *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Slate.com*, and *Time*

In Venice, at the Biennale, a jaded, bellini-swigging journalist named Jeff Atman meets a beautiful woman and they embark on a passionate affair.

In Varanasi, an unnamed journalist (who may or may not be Jeff) joins thousands of pilgrims on the banks of the holy Ganges. He intends to stay for a few days but ends up remaining for months.

Their journey—as only the irrepressibly entertaining Geoff Dyer could conjure—makes for an uproarious, fiendishly inventive novel of Italy and India, longing and lust, and the prospect of neurotic enlightenment.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Amazon.com Review

Book Description

A wildly original novel (what else would we expect from this fearless and funny writer?) that explores the underbelly

of erotic fulfillment and spiritual yearning.

Every two years the international art world descends on Venice for the opening of the Biennale. Among them is Jeff Atman—a jaded, dissolutely resolute journalist—whose dedication to the cause of Bellini-fueled party-going is only intermittently disturbed by the obligation to file a story. When he meets Laura, he is rejuvenated, ecstatic. Their romance blossoms quickly but is it destined to disappear just as rapidly?

Every day thousands of pilgrims head to the banks of the Ganges at Varanasi, the holiest Hindu city in India. Among their number is a narrator who may or may not be the Atman previously seen in Venice. Intending to visit only for a few days he ends up staying for months, and finds—or should that be loses?—a hitherto unexamined idea of himself, *theself*. In a romance he can only observe, he sees a reflection of the kind of pleasures that, willingly or not, he has renounced. In the process, two ancient and watery cities become versions of each other. Could two stories, in two different cities, actually be one and the same story?

Nothing Geoff Dyer has written before is as wonderfully unbridled, as dead-on in evocation of place, longing, and the possibility of neurotic enlightenment, as irrepressibly entertaining as *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*.

About the Author

Geoff Dyer is the author of three previous novels and five nonfiction books, including *But Beautiful*, which was awarded the Somerset Maugham Prize, and *Out of Sheer Rage*, which was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. The winner of a Lannan Literary Award, the International Center of Photography's 2006 Infinity Award for writing on photography (for *The Ongoing Moment*), and the American Academy of Arts and Letters' E. M. Forster Award, Dyer lives in London.

Questions for Geoff Dyer

Q: What is this book about?

A: At the risk of being cowardly, I'll take refuge behind a line from one of Kerouac's letters: "It's my contention that a man who can sweat fantastically for the flesh is also capable of sweating fantastically for the spirit." (See also answer to question 4.)

Q: Is it a modern twist on *Death in Venice*? If not, what's up with the title?

A: Yes, the first part is a version of the Mann novella--the opening sentence is ripped straight out of the opening line of the original--but mine operates at a far lower cultural level. His protagonist is a world-famous composer, mine is a hack journalist. And whereas in the Mann, Aschenbach's obsession with the young boy, Tadzio, is tied up with some quest for ideal beauty, in my book the romance with Laura is very carnal and hedonistic--though that could itself be said to represent some kind of ideal.

Q: Why Venice and Varanasi?

A: They're actually very similar: both are water-based, old, with crumbling palaces facing onto either the Grand Canal or the Ganges with alleys and narrow streets leading off into darkness and sudden oases of brilliant light. And both, in their ways, are pilgrimage sites. I'm not the first person to be struck by the similarities. There are quite a few



occasions in his *Indian Journals* when Ginsberg is so stoned walking by the Ganges that he thinks he's in Venice, strolling along the Grand Canal!

Q: Are the two parts of the book, two stories in two different cities, or are they the same story? How are they linked? One early reviewer claimed that the protagonist in each story wasn't the same person, but two people--is it the same person or not?

A: Well, these are huge questions and this, in fact, is what the book is about. By asking questions like these the reader is hopefully confronted by several more, about what kind of unity the book has, about the ways in which a novel might be capable of generating an aesthetic unity of experience that is not narrative-driven. Regarding the person in each part, I'll opt for what governments call the N.C.N.D. response, neither confirming nor denying. It is never made clear whether the un-named narrator in Varanasi is the same as the protagonist in Venice. And although sequentially it comes afterwards, there is nothing in the book to suggest that part 2 comes chronologically after part 1. I actually wanted to subtitle the book "A Diptych" but was dissuaded by my handlers. I didn't mind: it so obviously *is* a diptych there's no need to call it one!

Q: You've clearly spent a lot of time in Venice and Varanasi. Have any of Jeff's adventures happened to you?

A: Yes, I've been to three biennales and spent a big chunk of time in Varanasi. As I've said elsewhere, I like writing stuff that's only an inch from life but all the art--and, for me, all the fun--is in that inch.

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