

Review from *The Globe and Mail*, May 24, 1997

Immigrant blunders way through new land

HOMER IN FLIGHT

Saturday, May 24, 1997

Review by NEIL BISSOONDATH

By Rabindranath Maharaj

Goose Lane, 300 pages

ALONG with his possessions, every immigrant packs psychic baggage that is equal parts hope and fear: hope that this adventure will play out as fantasized, fear that it will not; hope that is in great part fantasy of the life to come—the nature and ways of the new land are after all unknown—and fears of the obstacles to be faced from both without and within. It is no wonder that the immigrant drama, a situation fraught with intangibles, continues to inspire rich and distinguished fiction.

We can now add the novel *Homer in Flight*, by Trinidad-born Rabindranath Maharaj. It's the story of Homerwad Santokie, who flees Trinidad for the promise of Canada, a land not as golden as he had imagined.

This is a novel of great strengths, conventional in structure but written with a true feel for the language: Within a few pages I knew I was in the hands of a real writer. Its greatest strength, though, is Maharaj's insistence on the personal. Homer's is an adventure of missteps through a society that remains undecipherable. How easy it would be to blame the society, but despite moments of gloom and bitterness, he never falls into that trap.

Like so many immigrants, he constructs an interior life defined by the walls of his apartment, with television his most persistent lens on the world. He quickly takes to making judgments on "Canadian" society, even though all he has seen is suburban Toronto. In addition, he lies with a facility he sees as just part of his "light-hearted approach to life," but which hints at the tissue of escapist fantasy with which he seeks to avoid despair. Not *joie de vivre*, then, but *joie de mentir*: a response to fear.

All of this lends a rugged authenticity to the portrait. Homer remains himself through all his travails, a man of sturdy individuality who combines determination with a touching frailty.

The dialogue is particularly well done. At times I recognized voices with a clarity so painful I found myself wincing. Yet there also is a great deal of pointed humour that gives the story a sharp satirical edge. A novel, then, of many pleasures.

Homer, throughout, is indeed in flight—from his parents, from Trinidad, from the crumbling of his fantasy and most of all from himself. In the end, although he remains in flight, he succeeds, as another character tells him, in dropping his final anchor. It is the promise of a new beginning. The victory is small in the rubble of missteps—but in the immigrant drama no victory is insignificant.

Rabindranath Maharaj is a talented and confident writer who has produced a work of unsparing vision and compassion that stays true to the people who inhabit it, for good and for bad. *Homer in Flight* is a riveting portrait of the immigrant tragedy, of people "forever trapped between two worlds, afraid to call either home, dancing in the dark." It is a novel that deserves a wide audience.

Neil Bissoondath presently resides in Quebec City. He has just completed a new novel, The Worlds Within Her.