

## Khyber Pass

They say that no secret stays hidden forever. *Khyber Pass* is Shahzad Rizvi's exploration of the dark side of human nature, the secrets we keep and how they affect our history. Set during the political turmoil of the Cold War period, the story is part spy fiction—where the lives of the characters inevitably collide—and part heart-warming love story. It is told from a number of perspectives, while contrasts between the characters are used to advance the plot and allow the audience to put the puzzle together and solve the many mysteries in the story.

At the center of the novel are two couples who present stark contrasts. The two women are Karen, a high official in the US government, and Manushka, a Soviet spy. Karen is overweight and shy, while her counterpart Manushka is beautiful and knows what she wants. But though it may seem that Karen is less appealing and powerful, she is successful and intelligent, and in fact breaks through the “glass ceiling” barriers that hold women back professionally. Manushka plays up to men in order to get what she wants. Her particular assignment in the novel is the seduction of the Pakistani general that the Soviets have selected for their next puppet: “the awkward bedroom maneuvers were paving the way for the able maneuvers of the Soviet military machine.” This contrast is reflective of the author's affection for women and his appreciation of their many capabilities, as well as his dislike of stereotyping.

There are also similarities and contrasts between the men: Pierre, Karen's lover, and General Khan, the Pakistani general. While Pierre is attractive and charming, described as having a “strange, handsome face”, the General is awkward: “In dealing with women, I am very clumsy, I never learned to pursue,” he explains to Manushka. While Pierre is running from something and lives a life of lies, and General Khan is one of the most powerful men in Pakistan —“When the limousine of General Bezar Khan, Chairman of the Committee of Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Pakistani military, pulled up to the main entrance, the whole embassy staff came out to accord him a welcome fit for a head of state”—in both cases their vanity and desire to exert authority lead them to believe they are above being fooled. Which, of course, they are not.

Rizvi does something interesting when he shows Pierre and Manushka as parents and lovers as well as spies. He depicts a side of his characters that is often overlooked in political dramas or spy novellas showing his “bad guys” as human beings: “‘It is so good to be united with my family,’ Pierre cried out, hugging the child, the clasping the woman in his arms. ‘How I have missed you!’”

The title of the book is apt. The Khyber Pass, set between Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been used for the transportation of gear and weapons in countless conflicts over the years. The name conjures up the mysterious nature of the area, a place where our understanding of good and evil are inverted, questionable, or sometimes, very wrong.

Tone is an important element in the story that is established through literary devices from classic spy fiction and mysteries. Like most spy fiction, *Khyber Pass* features two sides pitted against each other, whose actions could threaten the peace between two countries. In the case of *Khyber Pass*, it is the KGB on the Soviet side, and the American FBI and CIA on the other, but it is the safety of the people of Pakistan that is threatened. There is also the classic hide-and-seek,

in this case detective McDermit pursuing Pierre around the Washington area and trying to get to the bottom of his activities and motives.

Detective McDermit plays an integral character in the novel and is essential in establishing the story's tone. He is an anti-hero reminiscent of other strong male characters in detective fiction. He fixates on jobs, quantifies his success as a man by his ability to put away criminals, cannot form a connection with women, avoids interaction with people and always works alone. "He had failed to establish any stable rapport with a member of the opposite sex. The culprit, he decided, was now obvious: his work." At the end of the novel, however, there is the possibility of a happy ending, with the hope that something could develop between him and Karen, who has also been romantically disappointed.

Khyber Pass is about more than politics, intrigue and espionage. It explores how people want to believe the best of others, even when there is ample evidence of deceit and double-dealing. The author seems to say that influential men and women throughout history have changed the face of the world, but like all of us, they have their secrets.