

# First novel by Bissoondath exposes brutality of society

*A Casual Brutality*  
by Neil Bissoondath  
Macmillan

review by Moira Coulter

Neil Bissoondath's first novel, *A Casual Brutality* is, as the title suggests, not intended for reading curled up in a rocking chair beside a fireplace with a cup of hot chocolate near at hand. Read this book sitting at full attention with one eye on the words on the page and the other on the world around you.

Such a defensive reading stance doesn't mean that *A Casual Brutality* is filled with scene after scene of blood and gore terrifying you into double-checking the bolts on your door and having nightmares for weeks afterwards. While this novel does contain a few episodes of violence, they are all carefully understated, purposely designed to comment on human nature. And it is the lessons to be learned about living in a brutal society that forces you to examine yourself and to wonder how close Bissoondath's fictionalized society is to our real one. Your conclusions may terrify you.

The story is told in first person narrative through the character of Raj Ramsingh, a Toronto doctor who returns to his native land, Casaquemada, with his wife Jan and their newborn son Rohan. He comes back to an island that has been transformed from a subsistence, agrarian economy supported by the production of sugar canes to an oil-based one that has made many islanders very rich. The money has not brought contentment, though. The poor have become poorer, the crime

rates have skyrocketed and a dying government leader has made politics very unstable and daily life insecure.

These abrupt, negative changes to the island influence Raj's life, despite his attempts to remain impassive and neutral. Raj had returned to the island to give medical help as a repayment to the island of his youth. But, during his three year stay, as he comes in contact with a former belligerent classmate turned into a brutal policeman, and witnesses the collapse of his extended family through ill-health or through a lust for power and money, he re-examines his own altruistic motives. Repulsed by the violence and disinterested in the reasons for it, Raj realizes that his reasons for coming are rooted in greed; he wanted a share of the island's wealth. Through his own self-interested desires, he has contributed to the social restlessness that results in violent upheaval and to the move from tolerance to barely veiled hostility in his own family. He, too, is guilty of a casual brutality.

Bissoondath relates this story with control and a sensitive awareness of how to pace the reader. He uses the flashback technique, building a richly textured picture of a man and his society, a picture somewhat unsettling as we see the clash of the past and present and the possible reverberations it will have into the future.

All the characters are realistic and fully developed, an accomplishment in itself since Bissoondath must give these characters individual identities through the subjective first-person viewpoint.

One minor criticism concerns Bissoondath's bluntness. Rather than demonstrating how the island's sudden prosperity

# A Casual Brutality

A NOVEL BY

Neil Bissoondath



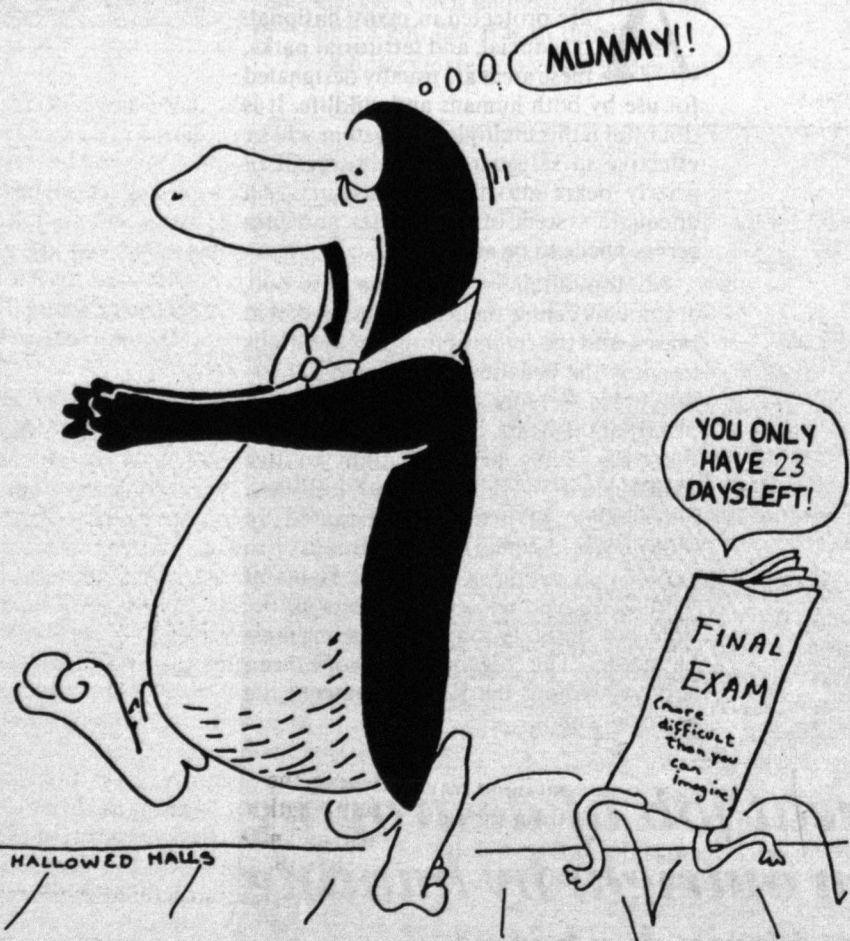
had an adverse impact, he puts the words into the mouth of Raj's uncle, Grappler. Also, rather than letting the reader discover how unsatisfactory Raj's marriage to Jan is, he openly tells us that their relationship "was this way from the beginning: misun-

derstanding, miscalculation, miscarriage, mistrust."

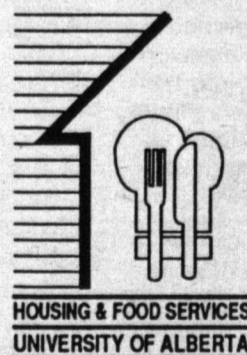
Despite this lack of subtlety, Bissoondath has written with complete mastery to show how casually brutality is committed.

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