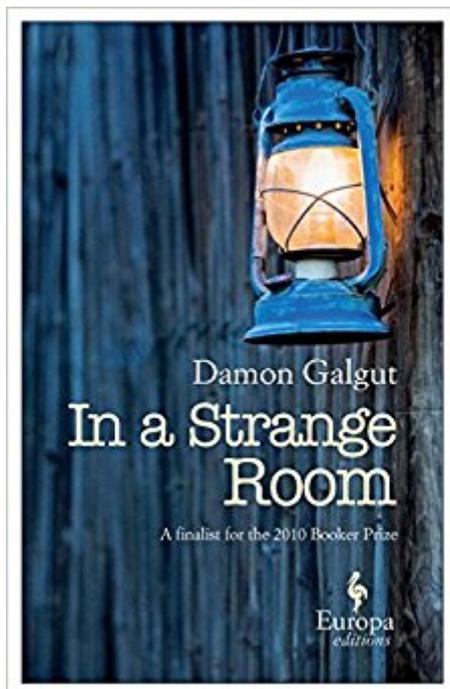


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In A Strange Room



Synopsis

A finalist for the 2010 Man Booker Prize In this newest novel from South African writer Damon Galgut, a young loner travels across eastern Africa, Europe, and India. Unsure what he's after, and reluctant to return home, he follows the paths of travelers he meets along the way. Treated as a lover, a follower, a guardian, each new encounter-with an enigmatic stranger, a group of careless backpackers, a woman on the verge-leads him closer to confronting his own identity. Traversing the quiet of wilderness and the frenzy of border crossings, every new direction is tinged with surmounting mourning, as he is propelled toward a tragic conclusion. In a Strange Room is a brilliant, stylish novel of anger and compassion, longing and thwarted desire, and a hauntingly beautiful evocation of life on the road. First published in The Paris Review in three parts, one of which was selected for a National Magazine Award, and another for the O. Henry Prize, In a Strange Room was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In a Strange Room is a curious book to describe. It could well be described as both a novel or three stories/novellas. The narrator is the same throughout the stories, and they're heavily connected through theme. None of the other characters or events transcend their sections, but it still felt like a novel to me. Regardless of its structural semantics, it's ultimately the tale of a South African man who travels the world (Africa, Europe and India) forming bonds with his fellow wanderers. Galgut's writing captured me from the beginning of this novel. When he writes dialogue, he doesn't use

quotation marks. Instead, he adds a blank line in between each speaker. He doesn't use question marks either, which brings a poignancy and nuance to many of the conversational statements that can work as both questions and statements. Using quotation marks and question marks yields fewer meanings, but Galgut avoids them and creates a concise prose with the beautiful vagueness of poetry. He often uses commas to string together multiple sentences. His commandeering of punctuation was as mesmerizing as the musings of his characters: "Myth always has some fact in it. And what is the face here. I don't know, this place exists, for a long time people thought it didn't, that's a fact to start with." Galgut seems to play with the reader too. The narrator jumps between first-person and third-person and offers glimpses of the future. Initially, I couldn't tell if the narrator was the main character. Galgut revealed it by jumping between first and third-person narrative within the same sentence, a trick he used several times. This switching alters the story in its own way as well. The reader and the narrator feel closer to the story at some times than others.

You will know whether you like this book or not within about 5 pages. I read it because it's on the Man Booker longlist, and I'm glad I persevered, though it is way outside my comfort zone. It's a stripped-down narrative told in first- and third-person (and sometimes even second), often within the same sentence: "he" becomes "I" and can occasionally even be the all-encompassing "you." And this main character is named Damon, like the author. If you can get past that, it actually pays off. We follow Damon, a South African from Capetown, through 3 widely-spaced journeys -- Greece, Africa, and India -- and get the impression that the time between these journeys is also spent traveling, continuously pulling up stakes, putting things in storage, bunking with friends, etc. You just have to put aside thoughts of how this man manages to make a living (trust fund?), what inspired him to travel in the first place, whether or not he's ever had a romantic relationship, and how he manages to have friends everywhere despite demonstrating real problems making human connections. In fact, this last issue you can't put aside. It's probably the heart of the entire novel, though I notice that other reviewers have focused on other issues. In the first of the 3 sections, he becomes the traveling companion of a ghastly German named Reiner. There are vague sexual overtones to initiate the relationship, but these quickly give way to Reiner's competitive and controlling nature, which eventually drive the narrator to part company with him on a remote mountain in Africa.

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