

SHORT TAKES

EAST BAY
EXPRESS 6/92

Her fate—with Lennie as witness and unwitting Judas—gives the novel its power. Through lame Lennie's account, Sidhwa evokes the keening of a country—rent, cracked, and betrayed.

—Nancy Coggeshall

CRACKING INDIA

By Bapsi Sidhwa
Milkweed Editions (1991),
\$18.95

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* is her third, and by far most ambitious. In it she juxtaposes rollicking sensuality and ribald humor against the backdrop of Partition, narrating through the voice of an eight-year-old girl.

Lennie grapples with lameness and growing up in Lahore's long-assimilated Parsi community as 1947 draws near. Freed from school by the polio that crippled her, she moves in a compressed world of wide,

clean, orderly streets, surrounded by a well-to-do and colorful family. After operations to correct her limp, she stays with her childless godmother, who lives with "Oldhusband" and "Slavesister." At the home of "Electricaunt," Lennie's adenoidal cousin teaches her everything she "needs to know" about gullibility, electric shock, and male genitals.

Lennie's most beloved companion, however, is Ayah, her eighteen-year-old Hindu nanny. Ayah possesses "chocolate chemistry"; she takes Lennie to the park and there, in the shadow of Queen Victoria's statue, Ayah holds court for her many suitors. At the park, Lennie observes the cultural mosaic that was India before the "most terrible exchange of population known to history."

But the impending political conflict taints Lennie's world. A contretemps between the Anglo Inspector General of the police and a Sikh erupts at a dinner party her parents host for neighbors. Tension builds among Ayah's admirers. In the city, riots ensue, and Lennie watches the fires build.

Although Lennie narrates, *Cracking India* is Ayah's story.