

## The Wish Maker

By Sethi Ali  
(Penguin)

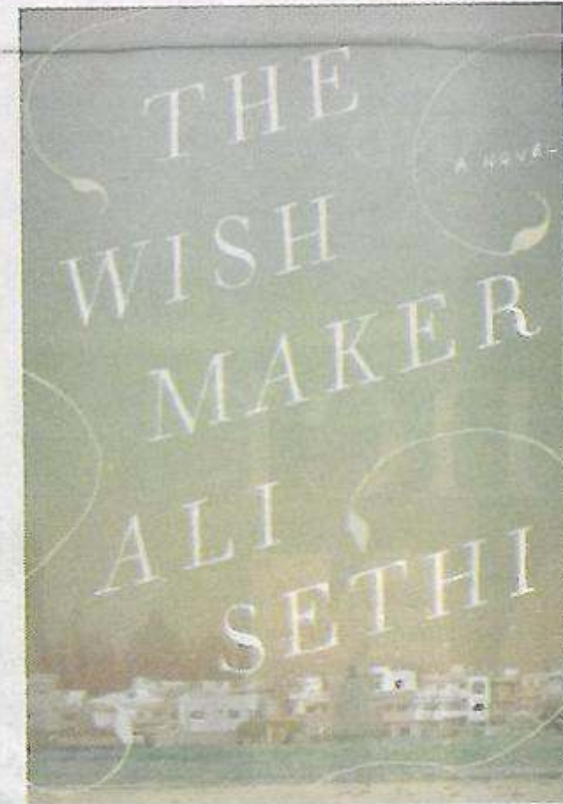
**T**he *Wish Maker*, as we are helpfully informed on the cover, is "a novel", putting to bed fears you might be hefting "a volume" or even "a tome". Over 406 pages, it recounts the life of twenty-something Zaki Shirazi, born and raised in middle-class Lahore together with his cousin Samar Api, his grandmother Daadi and political activist mother Zakia (his father having tragically died in an aeroplane crash before his birth).

Written from a decidedly literary angle, this book displays an often beautiful use of language and a realistic portrayal of dialogue, both of which make for a promising start. What it increasingly fails to deliver, as the page numbers rise up and the reader's patience wears down, is a plot that hooks and sympathetic characters to play it out. The central relationship, between Samar Api and Zaki, tends to be spoiled by the latter's excessive frivolousness; she displays a level of empty-headedness that prevents the reader from feeling much empathy with her, even as her mother hauls her out to burka-beclad rural Pakistan to try to mend her boy-chasing, tarot-reading ways. At the other end of the spectrum, while we get the impression that Zaki's political activism has formed her into a person of remarkable

endurance, we don't get a very clear sense of what precisely motivates her, and one of the plot's stronger points – Zaki's growing sense of disillusion with Benazir Bhutto's corruption, having once been one of her strongest supporters – never really comes to a head.

Thus, we are left with a sort of panoramic Pakistani version of *War and Peace* that largely takes a miss on emotional impact and larger thematic issues. Far from the gripping story "set against the turbulent world of modern Pakistan" that we are promised, the reader is left with an impression of a Pakistan that is a lot safer and a lot duller than one would be inclined to believe. This is a pity, because it eclipses the high standard of writing, as well as the at times very nuanced version of unfolding events – for example, the gradual disintegration of a protest into police brutality; the influential sway of fundamentalists held by virtue of their very real moral integrity; and the fact that (surprise, surprise), in the "Land of the Pure", people get drunk and watch porn, too.

So, while *The Wish Maker* is mediocre, hopefully Sethi Ali will figure out where he is going and treat us to something more powerful next time around.



Roslyn Fuller is the author of political thriller ISAK. More information about the Canadian, her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at [www.irishwriters-exchange.com](http://www.irishwriters-exchange.com)