

Invisible monster

A compromised zoologist in Pakistan

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Gabi Martínez

IN THE LAND OF GIANTS

Translated by Daniel Hahn

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In 1994, the Spanish zoologist Jordi Magraner stumbled across a curious trail of footprints in the snows of the Hindu Kush. As we learn in Gabi Martínez's book *In the Land of Giants*, they belonged to something that was "humanoid, but not human". Locals called it the *barmanu* (the sturdy one). Nomads in the mountains of Chitral – whom Martínez describes as "secretive horsemen with pseudo-Neanderthal faces" – had provided Magraner with eyewitness testimonies. The year before, in the steppes of Qinghai, China, the ethnologist Michel Peissel had discovered a species of small horse now known as the Riwoche Horse, at an altitude of 5,000 metres. The French newspaper *Libération* referred to it as the "Yeti's horse".

These discoveries opened up a realm of possibilities for Magraner, who had been sceptical about theories surrounding archaic wild men when he first arrived in Pakistan. His interest in the region had initially been roused by a pagan tribe of Indo-Europeans known as the Kalash – a community erroneously believed to have descended from Alexander the Great's minions. Having studied the ethnologist Jean-Yves Loude's book *Kalash: The last infidels of the Hindu Kush*, Magraner had developed a romanticized impression of the tribe, and when he finally came face to face with its people, he was disappointed. Magraner was to identify with the Kalash, however: like him, they were marginalized. Scientists refused to recognize or fund his quest for "invisible monsters" such as the *barmanu*, and prestigious archaeological journals showed little interest in publishing his articles. The Kalash, meanwhile, had locally been labelled infidels.

Raised in a ghetto in Valence, France, Magraner had been taught by his parents to appreciate nature while maintaining a sceptical distance from the Church. It becomes clear that the "Yeti-hunter", as he came to be known, was an odd character, and a man of extremes. He greeted each dawn with a pagan ritual, and visitors from Europe heard that he was "really old school . . . the kind that still gets into fights". Sometimes, when paranoia got the better of him, he would throw punches at his Pashtun attendants, apprentices or colleagues. Friends warned that he would not last long if he continued to mistreat the locals – particularly the Afghans. He adopted small boys as protégés, promising to make them

great, and if they refused to go to school, he would beat them. When they grew up and could no longer be controlled, he would move on to the next boy. Stories of paedophilia began to circulate.

Martínez breaks this news only gradually to the reader. He lets Magraner's friends speak for

describes him as a "repressed" homosexual. Abdul Khaleq, a friend from Chitral, recalls that an Afghan boy living with Magraner complained that he had "asked him for sex".

We also learn of Magraner's dangerous ambition to carve out an independent state that would include Gilgit, Chitral, Badakshan, Nuristan and Panjshir; his companions suspected that they were being watched by various intelligence agencies. There is an underlying sense throughout the book that the eyes of "invisible monsters" – be they curious locals or the ISI – are constantly on Magraner. En route to Afghanistan, he and one of his young protégés, Ainullah, were interrogated by men who claimed to be the police. It was

situations very well. His fifteen years in Pakistan coincided with the birth of the Taliban. He led a humanitarian mission to distribute aid in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley and established contact with the military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was struggling against the Taliban at the time.

Magraner's death in 2002, like the *barmanu*, is something of an enigma. It is reminiscent of the tragic demise of the British explorer George Hayward near the hamlet of Darkot in 1870. Like Hayward, Magraner met his end in the early hours of the morning, in a manner that was arguably as brutal; he was found at his blood-splattered desk with two stab wounds in his neck. According to the coroner, it was the work of "specialists – people who'd been trained". After the discovery of his body, Martínez's account turns into a whodunit, in which everyone – ranging from the CIA and the Taliban to alleged homosexual lovers – is a suspect. Playing the detective, Martínez finds that uncovering the truth in the mountain ranges of Chitral – where Magraner was buried, amid pagan pomp and ritual and in the presence of hundreds of Kalash people – can be an impossible, if not life-threatening, task. He is quick to catch on to the "hopeless and corrupt" nature of the Pakistani criminal justice system, which he describes as a "swamp".

In the Land of Giants, which has been translated from the Spanish by Daniel Hahn, contains numerous typos ("make thing worse"; "with plate of"; "air workers"); we repeatedly encounter the word "assailed" and an avalanche used as a metaphor to describe Magraner's feelings. Even so, the translation skilfully captures the eccentric nature of the prose, and Martínez's fascination comes through clearly. He learnt about Magraner through a purely coincidental meeting with a publisher, when he happened to show up at the very moment he was being considered for the job. Spellbound from the start, he probed deeper, consulting members of Magraner's family and the notebooks and letters he had left behind. Martínez's inability to speak or understand any of the local languages – unlike Magraner, who was fluent in Kalasha, Khowar and Urdu – may have limited his investigation, but his sensitive understanding of various situations and sensibilities does much to compensate for that – as does his determination. "Just like Jordi was seeking the Yeti," he writes, "so I am seeking Jordi."



Jordi Magraner, c.1995

themselves and reflect on sexual behaviour in South Asia. "In Afghan-Pakistani culture, it is . . . considered pretty normal to have sex with boys", explains Gyuri Fritsche, who was at the time a senior aid worker in Chitral: "if you're heterosexual and you want to sleep with a woman without being married to her, that could mean the end of your life and hers". Fritsche contends that Magraner was a paedophile, while his friend the novelist Erik L'Homme

no secret that the ISI also kept a close watch on the Alliance Française in Peshawar, where Magraner briefly served as Director. But there was a bigger giant on his tail: the massive debts he had accumulated. He lived lavishly among the Kalash, with servants, pets, horses and a jeep at his disposal, and got into brawls with those who demanded their dues.

According to L'Homme, Magraner didn't understand people, but he understood political