

Travelling Fiction

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Travelling north of Chiang Mai at the Thai-Burma border I stumbled upon my first novel – *The Opium Clerk*. At the end of a hard day's trekking, my guide had lent me a dog-eared paperback about heroin smuggling in the Golden Triangle, and as I turned the pages a sentence leapt out and caught my eye. It was about the opium trade in the 19th century, and how Kolkata – my hometown – had been at the centre of it all. This was a real surprise, and I promised to look it up to check if that was indeed true. Months later, sitting in a library in Canada – where I then lived – and thumbing through volumes of opium history, the plot of a novel revealed itself – a story about addicts, merchants, rebels, priests, pirates and clerks, stretching from India to China and Malaya.

The pattern has repeated itself many times over during the past decade. Happy 'travelling accidents' have spawned stories that I've turned into fiction. A chance encounter with a mad puppet player in Java led to *The Last Dalang*; the Tiananmen Square event which I witnessed firsthand prompted *Lotus-Dragon* – both included in *The Japanese Wife* collection. Yet, the relationship between my fiction and my travels is more complex than simply collecting and telling stories. Travel writing as a genre has never really appealed to me. But the very act of leaving home puts me in a state of daydreaming. Floating freely over land and sea, the mind indulges in storymaking, spurred by a telling image or overheard conversation; even a news report might spark an opening line, keep me in suspense as I wrestle to bring the story home.

The gift of travel, as I've come to realise, is this creative euphoria, not a call to depict destinations or even a journey. How else could I explain why I had dreamt up *The Accountant* – the story of a middle aged Delhi man who thinks he had designed the Taj Mahal in a past life as a Persian architect – while I was lazing by the Indian Ocean in Australia? Once conceived, I had to rush back to revisit The Taj, and add flesh to my imagination. Or for that matter my second novel, *The Miniaturist*, set in Mogul India, which I saw as moving images while on a trawl around Trafalgar Square on the night of millennium eve.

There've been times though, when I've travelled purely to research a story or to get the proper feel of a setting. Visits to Fatehpur Sikri while I was writing *The Miniaturist* weren't aimed at checking facts that historians have well documented but to fleet through the stone palaces born of the Emperor's whim, or hear the cry of a prisoner crushed under an elephant's foot; to see it through the eyes of visitors and residents in the 16th century. I wanted all that to seep into my pen; to be able to write the novel with the brush of a kitabkhana artist. The

elderly guide who accompanied me said he had come back from his grave just to walk me in Akbar's footsteps. It needed a lot more work though, to discover the setting where my story of Bihzad, the wayward genius would end. Cappadocia in Eastern Turkey was unknown to me although I had seen just such a place in my mind's eye – a land of caves full of birds' nests and strewn with rocks as if a hill had exploded turning arid its gentle slopes. Arriving at the Ihlara Valley on an overnight bus from Istanbul, I found the last scene of my novel waiting for me, and thanked my travellers' luck.

A journalist had complimented me once as I was reading from my novels at the Shanghai International Literary Festival, singling out the segment on Kuching, a setting for *The Opium Clerk*. She was from Borneo herself, and felt that it could only be written by a native. I, however, had never been to Kuching, avoiding it studiously as I didn't want my imagination of a 19th century colonial outpost to be contaminated by its 20th century avatar full of flashy shopping malls. I had wished to travel to Kuching only through the letters and diaries of those who arrived on clipper ships from the now lost ports of Canton, Malacca and Calcutta. The same was true for *The Pearlfisher* – a story about a young African woman searching for her Tamil grandfather who had travelled to Chad as a French Legionnaire and married her Arab mother. And strange as it may sound, I hadn't even visited the Sunderbans – home to the Indian husband of *The Japanese Wife*. Sometimes, one travels in one's mind, hoping to benefit from dubious imagination.

The persona of the author as an adventurer appeals to me, the likes of Hemingway, Mark Twain and Maugham – those who drew inspiration from the unfamiliar. The addiction of travel and fiction, in their purest form, are synonymous, providing the scope for great mischief – juxtaposing time and place, and blending the personal with the universal.

A young couple caught my eye at Singapore's Changi airport during a recent trip. Avoiding the empty chairs, they sat on a rolled out mat under an elevator shaft; seemed like peasants or construction workers, domestics even, who had travelled far from home, clearly out of place among flashy shops selling designer goods, bustling businessmen and tourists. I watched her bring out a Tiffin carrier and lay out a meal of *puri* and *achar* on earthen plates, as he drew a makeshift curtain with his wrapper around the two of them. The scene brought a lump to my throat as my eyes lit up at the prospect of yet another piece of travelling fiction.