



Storyteller's tale

NITIKA BAJPAYEE

In conversation with author Kunal Basu, we find out what it takes to be a multi-faceted writer...

Stories are often born unexpectedly in unlikely places, believes Kunal Basu, the author of much-acclaimed books *The Japanese Wife*, *Racists*, *The Miniaturist* and *The Opium Clerk*. Not a month after releasing his latest book, 'The Yellow Emperor's Cure', Basu looks back at the time when being an author was his cherished dream.

Believing that he is a commoner, he set out to pen down extraordinary lives of ordinary people. Not many would know that Basu started writing and publishing in Bangla first during his college years, and later switched to English. Poetry is something that came to him in the beginning and stories and novels followed.

We poked him to divulge details about the journey of being a writer, to which he said, "I had always known that writing was the only thing that mattered to me. In fact, I can't remember a time when writing was far from my mind. Life's challenges though, had held me back for some years before I could begin full-fledged work on my books. I never wanted to be a Sunday writer, someone for whom writing is just a hobby. I wanted it to be my lifeblood. There is no sensation comparable to holding the first copy of my new book in my hand – which inspires me to keep writing."



Kunal Basu is the author of *The Japanese Wife*, which is also made into a film by Bengali filmmaker Aparna Sen

Love for written words

Raised by a publisher father and an author mother in a bookish household in Kolkata, Basu was a precocious child, who eavesdropped regularly into their conversations on art, poetry, politics and literature. Sharing the anecdotes on his family, Basu quips, "Writing, art and drama were my early passions, but like many middle-class Indians of my vintage, I was waylaid into studying science in school and engineering at university, neither of which held any excitement for me."

Despite being raised in a family of literature lovers, Basu flew to the US to do masters in engineering. Talking about his education, Basu says, "Simply because I was a good student and had won a scholarship, I saw it as a free trip to see the world. More serious considerations finally took me to doctoral studies in management. Being a professor would be the least disruptive of my passion for writing, I reckoned, and it has been the working model for my life

thus far." Authors take stories from life and Basu is no different. His book *The Japanese Wife* is inspired from a story of an elderly Bengali man whom Basu met more than two decades ago, while he was traveling through a village. Sharing the tale, Basu said, "I knew nothing about the circumstances of their marriage, but this single unusual incident had stayed in my mind and came out as *The Japanese Wife*." Many don't know that Basu had actually started to research and write 'The Yellow Emperor's Cure' much before 'The Japanese Wife' was actually published and the film was released. Explaining how he managed to switch from one book to the other, Basu says, "I had completed my passage from one book to the other, and hence wasn't particularly distracted."

Tracing ethnicities

The story of Basu's latest book *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* came up while he was strolling in a museum of traditional Chinese medicine in Beijing. Talking about his tryst in Beijing, Basu

5 books of all times:

- The Mahabharata
- Crime and Punishment (Dostoevsky)
- Scarlet and Black (Stendhal)
- Love in the Times of Cholera (Marquez)
- Waiting for the Barbarians (J M Coetzee)

says, "As an inveterate traveller, my stories are often born through daydreaming. Penning down this book took me about a year to research the three dominant aspects of the novel – the history of syphilis, Chinese medicine, and the Boxer rebellion. But researching the details of specific scenes happened alongside the writing,

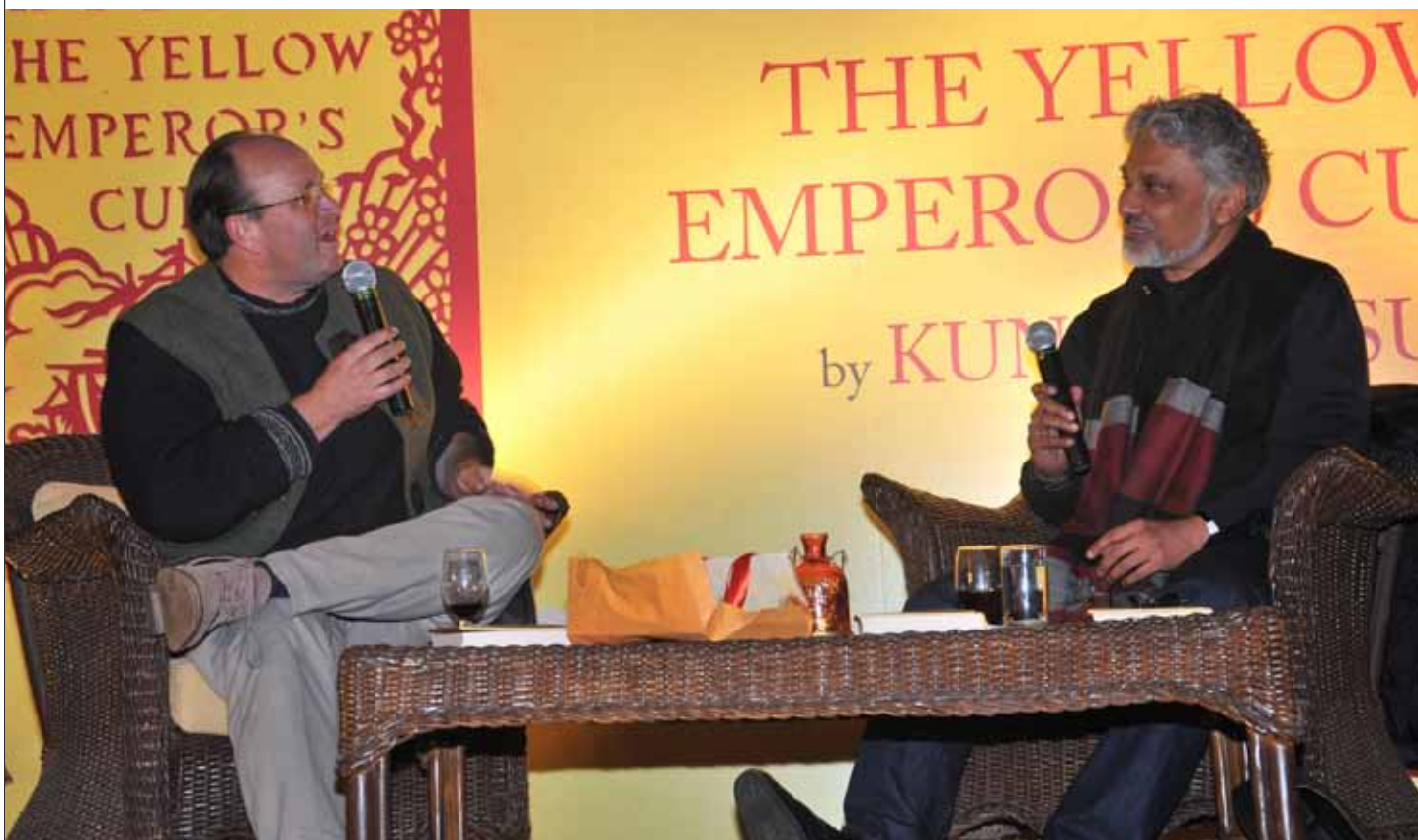
and stretched over two years." Visualising characters is an important part of writing a book. For Basu, it is important to catch a glimpse of prime characters, while the plot is still unfolding. When asked if Basu actually was able to see his characters live, he said, "Fortunately, I was able to 'see' a young Portuguese doctor in my mind's eye as I strolled in the Beijing museum. I saw him inside a pavilion of the Summer Place taking lessons from a Chinese woman, his teacher, who

ing, terracotta and metal sculptures from many parts of the world count as serious pastimes that have survived many decades of my life."

Spreading wings

When asked who is the real Kunal, a writer, a philosopher, just a common man with common ideas, Basu said, "I am still searching for the real Kunal, but he's most likely to be an author given that I spend a great many of my waking

his known world, and gives him deep joy in its contemplation. Talking about spirituality, he said, "I have a deep excitement for the unknowable. It informs my sensibilities towards daily events. And I still draw my inspiration from the great ancients – Eastern and Occidental." Lhasa, Bali and Yogyakarta in Indonesia, Laos and Cambodia, Samarkand, Morocco, Fatehpur Sikri, Cappadocia in Turkey, and South Africa are some of Basu's favourite destinations.



Author William Dalrymple (Left) gets candid with Kunal Basu, the author of *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* at the latter's book launch function

would in time become his lover. Researching the period and the key themes lent substance to these characters later on, but their initial impressions served as significant starting points."

As a literature lover and film buff, Basu has too many favourites to name. He is an ardent fan of Dostoevsky (along with the other great Russian authors), Dickens, Zola and Stendhal, Bankimchandra and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as modern day masters such as Marquez and Coetzee. "I am fond of films by Bergman, Ray, Ritwick Ghatak, Kurosawa, Luis Bunuel, and many more," he said adding, "Photography, documenting and collecting traditional crafts such as masks, wood carvings, handloom weav-

hours at my desk, writing." It is interesting to know that Basu lives in the world of his stories, and immerse himself completely once he starts working on a novel: eat what his characters would've eaten, listen to their music, travel to places they'd have lived in – enter their skin and become one of them.

"Once a novel is finished, I make my getaway quickly to enter yet another world, for the story that I'd be writing next. While no grand philosophy drives my writing, the common ingredient that's hard to miss is compassion for the lives of common people," he says. For Basu, it isn't important to name or define this quest as 'spiritualism', except that it stands outside

There are many more yet unvisited such as, San Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, Iran, Myanmar, the Hindukush, and Lahore.

Now that Basu is out with his latest book, he is not in a mood to pause. He is writing a novel set in contemporary Kolkata. "This will be a departure for me, after four historical novels. It also means turning my pen towards the city I had grown up in and discovering the strange among the familiar," he concludes with a message for our readers. "Your indulgence alone makes it possible for authors to create their imaginary worlds, having us travel to destinations far and beyond," Basu signs off. ●●