The Writing Life

Writers on How They Think and Work

A COLLECTION

FROM THE

Washington Post Book World

EDITED AND

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

AND COMMENTARY BY

Marie Arana

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For Donald E. Graham,

A LOVER OF BOOKS

Anita Desai

In Anita Desai's reckoning, one and one do not make two. They make three, four even. In her logic, if you are a compound of two cultures, you are more likely fractured in myriad ways, launched on a lifetime of shapeshifts and in-betweens. It is a theme she has explored in numerous quietly lyrical, profoundly moving works, among them the short story collection *Diamond Dust* and the novels *Clear Light of Day*, *Baumgartner's Bombay* and, most recently, *Fasting, Feasting*. She is, to other hybrids like her, an enlightened voice in an increasingly variegated world.

Desai is the daughter of a Bengali and a German. Her mother and father met in the late '20s while he was studying in Berlin, doing graduate work in engineering. She, in turn, was a nursery schoolteacher, musical, independent-minded. When they married and returned to his native Bombay, it was quickly evident that she could not live in her husband's ancestral home as an Indian bride. "They all adored her, worshiped the ground she stepped on," says Desai, "but it was simply too different a life from anything she'd known in Germany." She needed space of her own.

They made their home in Old Delhi, neutral ground, just as India was entering a difficult phase of history. Desai's uncle, who was involved in the Freedom movement, was imprisoned by the English for his anti-colonial views. He died there, but not before he wove a rug with the family name—Mazumdar—emblazoned on it. Desai remembers it hanging in her family's drawing room as a silent, defiant banner against the British raj.

She was born in Mussoorie in 1937, the year Hitler was scheming to expand the Rome-Berlin axis by invading Austria. For the Mazumdar children, a German background became something to be ashamed of, something deliberately "subdued and invisible." It was a bad time to be a

German. She remembers her four older brothers and sisters being embarrassed by their mother's foreignness, her essential oddness. "They made her promise never to speak her own language in public. They insisted she dress in a sari. I think we were all adults before we truly acknowledged she was German." Even so, Desai was the only one of her siblings to eventually read and research German history.

She started writing when she was 6—stories, diary entries. "I became known as 'the writer in the family.' It was in writing that I felt intense and alive. I don't think I ever planned or wanted to do anything else." Although the family spoke Hindi, Desai was raised in British schools, and so her creations, even at that young age, were mostly in English.

It may be hard to imagine, what with the current boom of Indian writers who choose to write in English—Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Pankaj Mishra—but when Desai first decided to pursue publication after her graduation from Delhi University, there was not one Indian publisher willing to take the leap with her. She was forced to send her work to England, where, even as she raised a family of her own, she began to publish her stories.

In 1980, at 43, Desai published two novels, *Clear Light of Day* (about an Old Delhi family divided by its history and petty bitterness) and *In Custody* (about a teacher who sets out to interview a famous Urdu poet and learns that the man is nothing like the sage he imagined). Both were shortlisted for Britain's Booker Prize. Two years later, her book *The Village by the Sea* won the Guardian Award for children's fiction. In 1984, she left India for England to take up a visiting fellowship at Cambridge University. She has never returned. While in England, she wrote *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), a novel that allowed her to plumb Germany's past through its protagonist Hugo Baumgartner, a Jew who flees Nazi Germany for India, only to be imprisoned there.

In 1993, she took a position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she continues to teach writing. There she has produced two more novels, *Journey to Ithaca*, which allowed her to see India through

European eyes, and *Fasting, Feasting* (another Booker nominee), which allowed her to see America through Indian eyes. "But I could never really write about the United States," she says. "America has its own spokesmen." More to the point she feels adrift here, and returns often to Europe and India. "I've become one of those people who don't feel they belong anywhere," she adds. "I find myself traveling to Mexico now to write. Its clash of indigenous and Spanish cultures feels Indian in a way. It feels colonial, familiar, ancient. Not being a Spanish speaker, I'm thrown in with other misfits and stragglers." In other words: For the moment, for the particular novel she has in mind, and for entirely unexpected reasons, the place will anchor her awhile.

M. A.

Bicultural, Adrift, and Wandering

BY ANITA DESAI

For the sake of simplicity, I like to say that I was born in India at a time when it was a meeting place for two cultures, Indian and British. But the truth is that "Indian" and "British" are merely umbrella terms, for these were split into an infinitely larger number of spokes and panels that came together to form not an elegant object but a conveniently usable one.

In my home in Old Delhi, a rambling old bungalow weighed down with bougainvillea, of the kind the British built all across their empire in Asia, we listened to my mother sing us German lullabies and play Schubert on her piano (always out of tune because warped by Delhi's ferocious temperatures) while my siblings and I spoke

Hindi to each other and our neighbors, a Hindi that was actually mixed with Urdu to form—conveniently, usably—the hybrid Hindustani. We bicycled to school past the Nicholson Gardens and the British cemetery, where many stalwarts of the British Empire—and their more frail offspring—were buried.

At Queen Mary's High School for Girls, we sang hymns (curious, when one thinks of it, that the mild English missionaries who taught us so enjoyed hearing assemblies of a hundred or more girls, Hindu and Muslim every one of them, lustily and unthinkingly bellow *Onward Christian Soldiers*) and played rounders and badminton. In the evening we went for walks to the Quidsia Gardens, where at twilight we played hide-and-seek amid the tombs of emperors and empresses of the Moghul Empire moldering among the palm trees, or to the Jumuna river, where at twilight the bells of the temples along the river bank clanged and banged while we played in the sands till dark. We came home and read for the hundredth time old comic books like *Beano*, *Superman* and *Captain Marvel* that we had bought with our pocket money in the arcades of Connaught Circus, or listened to my mother tell us one of Grimm's fairly tales or heard my father talk of his childhood among the rivers and rice fields of Bengal, so far to the east and in the past as to be quite mythical.

So for me the European section of the umbrella had panels made up of both colonial Britain and the more distant, less physical world of my mother's prewar Germany while the Indian section had stripes that were Hindu—festivals, dress, food—and also Muslim—other festivals, other foods and dress. Was this ridiculous, this object we held over our head, fashioned by our motley ancestors? Was it schizophrenic?

We gave it little thought and got on with our lives. Its pied, patchwork structure seemed to us quite commonplace, normal. Turned upside down, we could use it to sail into wider seas, experience different worlds. And England, when I first visited it, did seem almost like

an extension of that colonial outpost. One knew what to expect—daffodils blowing on a hill, red letterboxes and double-decker omnibuses, fish and chips shops, small dark pubs and bowler hats—and there they all were. I realized to what an extent English literature had prepared me for the English section of the Empire. Its familiarity was comforting and made the passage to the West seem easy.

Surely, I thought, to travel farther West, to the United States, would not prove any more difficult. But this is where I was brought up short, made to stop and reconsider. I had read and loved its literature, too; I had read as much Faulkner and Steinbeck and Hemingway as I had Dickens and Wordsworth and D. H. Lawrence. True, but I had not heard them—and the sounds of the American language proved foreign. I found it hard to understand what was said to me and, equally disconcerting, people seemed to find it hard to understand me. Also, I found that I laughed at things others considered serious and that they spoke at length of matters I would not think of divulging in company. I was a foreigner. I observed other foreigners—of a younger generation, brought up not on literature but on the current currency of movies and pop music, who on arrival jumped in feet first, laughing with confidence, and bobbed up fully baptized, first-generation Americans.

But I was too old, my joints too stiff, my jaw too stubborn. It was a chastening experience to find oneself, at my age, a beginner, a callow student (if a "mature" one). I studied once again Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, DeLillo's *White Noise*, Updike's classics of suburbia. I prowled the streets, looking through big picture windows at lighted interiors. The sounds of lawn mowers, of boom boxes in passing cars, the smoke and smells of summer barbecues were items I studied anxiously for clues. But a glass pane separated us; I found myself trying to lip-read, puzzled.

Every few months I returned to India. It was comforting to put my feet into slippers again, dress in old soft cotton clothes, know what

everyone was saying, or leaving unsaid, or thinking. But I could also see that that American experience had interposed between us, created an unease. Here too I was on the outside now and looking in. So much had happened while I was away, so much that I had not experienced or participated in, and I no longer had the right to comment. And while some things remain unchanged, stood still—the family, the circle of friends, the way of life—so much else had changed or was in flux—the economy, the media, digital technology and, above all, the politics of the time. Fluid, volatile, powerful—they were carrying everyone in their tide, except me. I was not a part of it and did not understand it.

How can one write of a scene one does not know and does not understand? One may write of one's bewilderment, but that has its limitations. And there was a new generation there to describe the scene, whose material it rightfully was. So I retreated—but where to? Having grown up in a cradle, a hammock woven out of the worlds my parents made, I found I had outgrown it, it no longer fit. I withdrew, feeling like a turtle that had shed its shell, or a crab without its carapace.

Hardly a subject for melodrama, let alone tragedy. I had no disaster to display. I was not a boat person struggling through the oceans to wade onto inhospitable shores. Far from it: I could go and come as I pleased. But even a traveler needs a shelter, and a writer a subject.

At times, one tends to think of one's experience as unique; at others, one looks to those who have gone before one, for their tracks, the maps they drew. There are writers, after all, who have found the new worlds they explored more rich, more complex, more challenging than the ones they fled from or abandoned. E. M. Forster's greatest book was the one he wrote about India, Henry James's greatest books were his European ones, Nabokov's masterpiece was American. I needed to learn, but their power was impossibly distant from my abilities; America made me feel incapable, incompetent. If I tried

to make a call from a public phone booth or handled a tray in a cafeteria or attempted to fill my car with gas, all my fingers turned to thumbs, I dropped coins and forks, felt foolish and apologetic.

For some years I had had Joseph Brodsky as a neighbor and been struck by how he had recreated for himself, under New England's firs and spruces, the kind of dacha he might have acquired had he remained in Russia, down to the low beams, the sagging bookshelves, the smoky cobwebs. Next door I never even made an attempt at recreating an Indian bungalow. (As a child, when I was asked what I wanted "to be," I would reply, "a gypsy.") It is interesting that Brodsky chose as his final resting place Venice, that island in a lagoon where continents wash into each other, creating a confluence that belongs more to poetry, to art, than humdrum reality. I understand that wish—to have the wash and flow of waters as one's final home.

Place had been of an importance as basic to me as soil is to a plant, but once you have torn up your roots, you become a piece of driftwood. It is tides, and currents, that become your fluid, uncertain home. Every once in a while you find a shelf to pull yourself onto, a shore on which to catch your breath. Perhaps only momentarily, but these intervals take on a certain brilliant vividness, like a scene lit up by a flash of lightning. As a foreigner, you cannot participate, you only contemplate. Not knowing the language, you cannot converse, only listen. What appears to be a most passive phase of existence becomes one of intense and heightened response—although that may not make itself apparent till long after, when you find yourself turning it into words on paper.

How much isolation, even if willful isolation, can a writer bear? But one is rarely alone, even in so lonely an endeavor. Inevitably one comes across fellow misfits, and learns of the complicated lives of other professional strangers and foreigners. Some may become friends, others most certainly not. But all have stories to tell, and through them one lives many lives. What does a writer do, after all,

but sing, with Brodsky: "So if only in our lifetime, let us be various!" ("Anno Domini" from *A Part of Speech*, 1980).

One meets this company of travelers not only in the flesh but just as often on the printed page, which is what I did when I read, in a German translation, the lines of the Czech writer Jiri Kratochvil in his *Inmitten der Nacht Gesang* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996. Original: *Uprostered Nocai Zpe'ev*, Brno: Atlantis, 1992):

> *Alle sind wir Emigranten. . . . Emigranten aus dem Reich Gottes, und alle laufen wir weiss der Teufel wohin, während Gott die Schäferhunde Seiner Gottlichen Absichten hinter uns herjagt, uns die Stacheldraht-Barrikaden Seiner Gnade in den Weg stellt und aus der Maschinenpistole Seiner Gottlichen Liebe auf uns schiesst.**

May 28, 2000

*Translation from the German: "We are all emigrants. . . . Emigrants from the Kingdom of Heaven, and we all run the devil knows where, while God sets the hounds of His Godly will on us, blocks our way with the barbed wire barricades of His grace, and shoots at us with the machine guns of His Godly love."