

**Cover Versions, or  
The Razor's Edge: An Imitation**

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When I first stayed at the Ramana ashram in Tiruvanamallai in southern India I began to wonder if my next novel could contain a contemporary version of the celebrated mystic after whom the retreat is named. Sri Ramana Maharshi, who died in 1950, became particularly famous after being discovered by yoga sceptic turned disciple John Brunton who published *A Search in Secret India* in 1934.

These days, how would it be? A kid growing up in today's India who suddenly becomes what they call a fully realised being? He could well become a cult figure with followers and visitors from all over the planet.

India is a kind of global shorthand for that kind of thing, though I had largely kept it out of my first novel set in India, *Neem Dreams*. But by the time Indian critics were appreciating the refusal of this cliché, I was already obsessed with including it in my next novel.

At the ashram I also read that Ramana was the basis for the Indian saint described by the central character Larry in Somerset Maugham's widely popular minor classic *The Razor's Edge* (1944).

Maugham visited the Indian saint in 1938 and it took him a while to produce a brief, uneasy and partial account. He had to give this guru to a fictional character to make any sense of him. *The Razor's Edge's* central character, Larry, turns his back on the bourgeois life to become what we would now call a seeker, a drop-out. The novel is partly about the effect of this on a close circle of friends. Larry finally finds peace with the Indian saint.

I had first read *The Razor's Edge* as a teenager; there is an endearing teenager-ish thing about it for me still. As I read *The Razor's Edge* again, I discovered that my novel, *With The Tiger* would be a rewriting of Maugham's novel, using exactly his structure and exactly his constellation

of characters, only they live 60 years later, and are Australians rather than Americans in Europe. It is a complex fate being an Australian. Let alone an Australian writer. I discover an empire-writes-back tinge to this project: an immigrant in a colonial culture appropriating a well beloved, well spoken for English text, making Australian characters drive this story.

Jean Rhys wrote the story of *Jane Eyre's* Caribbean-born mad first Mrs Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and didn't need Edward Said to do it. Will Self appropriated the beloved novel by our own saint to write *Dorian: An Imitation*, setting Dorian Grey's demonic eternal youth in a decadent and plague-threatened version of 1990s gay London. *The Wind Done Gone* is Alice Randall's re-telling of the American classic from a slave's point of view, and before it could be published there was legal action over alleged "unabated piracy". Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* acknowledges its explicit debt to E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* is suffused with Henry James.

And literary appropriations have a long history.

Or is there a new genre, an effect of the wealth and accumulation of literature, its evolving inclusiveness? Maybe a genre related to film re-makes, song cover versions and fan fiction? In general of course originals remain preferred to copies and adaptations. At best, however, allusions, loans, thefts, developments, re-interpretations and recreations of existing texts are a valuable part of the web of literature and, while providing separate pleasures, lead us back to the originals.

Mostly they're more allusive than my project of finding an equivalent for each chapter of *The Razor's Edge*, and of telling an equivalent social history of twenty years, through an equivalent dynamics of a group of people who know each other well.

The biggest difference my novel offers is to bring Larry to India much earlier; his various travels there over twenty years explore the various ways a contemporary Westerner experiences or engages with India.

Another challenge was to find a contemporary equivalent for Larry's choice at the novel's end. Maugham sent him off to

New York to drive taxis and practice Eastern spirituality avant la lettre, and so in effect to meet the Beat poets, invent the counter-culture and make Australian schoolgirls swoon.

These days a very different answer is needed even though, as Larry says, there are more questions than answers. The original Larry's quest was to find meaning for a senseless death but my Larry's question becomes, what should I do? In effect, he joins the movement to make poverty history.

Dear old Somerset Maugham said a writer should use and write whatever they pleased. I felt that he enjoyed watching the creation of my Maugham-inspired narrating character, out of the closet since a youthful migration to freedom in Sydney, acclaimed for his popular plays full of explicitly gay characters, who appreciates living in his own era.