

Maugham's the word

face-to-face Nawaid Anjum

INEZ BARANAY is an author with no fixed address — always on the move, always on a quest for a different experience. Born in Naples, Italy, to Hungarian parents, Inez, whose wanderlust has taken her to Dehra Dun for a short sojourn, presents a tribute to Somerset Maugham's 1944 novel, *The Razor's Edge*, in *With The Tiger*, published by HarperCollins.

Excerpts from an interview:

Q. *With The Tiger* is a retelling of Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. Was he an early influence?

A. I read Maugham first when still a teenager and from time to time would re-read something of his over the years. I suspect he was in some ways an influence. Many of the "English" writers I love spent a lot of time outside of Britain. Maugham travelled widely and always wrote evocatively of Asian lands, and he always had sympathy for those whom society shuns or condemns; he judged people by their character not their social standing. He was an eternal outsider, yet was able to move in many different worlds.

Q. Was it challenging to base the story in different zones of space and time, and yet retain the same narrative structure?

A. Yes, very. Once I set myself the formal challenge of keeping to the same struc-

ture that Maugham created for *The Razor's Edge*, I had to find my own reasons for the characters to experience analogous events, 60 years later and on another side of the world.

Q. Does the novel, in any way, process the personal, dipping into your own experiences in the country?

A. Inevitably to some extent. Creating fiction is a matter of blending personal experience, others' observed and reported experience, impressions gained from a wide range of reading, and the imagination. It is now impossible to isolate those strands in any given section.

I was never a teenage backpacker in India, like one of the novel's characters, Larry, was, but I have observed many of them in my many trips to the country, and read about them too. I never spent three years at an ashram, but short visits enable the fictive version of a much longer one. None of the characters' experiences is my own but my own experiences help me understand theirs.

Q. Is Larry's bohemian life, his wandering and searching, closer to your own experience?

A. The narrator of *With the Tiger* remarks somewhere that as a writer he understand Larry's way of life better than most of his other friends do. I feel similarly; although I did not lead a life quite like Larry's, I did go my own way so that I could



Inez Baranay

be a writer and have a life of independence and new experiences, rather than fit into a more conventional or prescribed idea of how one should live.

Q. Could you share your engagement with the spiritual India?

A. I find the word "spiritual" very problematic. So I would have to ask you in turn, what do you mean by it? So many things get involved in this vexatious term — religion, superstition, ritual, cultural practices. What are we really talking about here? I am wary of the idea that Indians

are more inherently spiritual than other people are, although certainly India has produced rich, influential, complex, ancient traditions of attention to metaphysical questions. It has been said that *The Razor's Edge* (first published in 1942) is the novel that began the popular craze for "spiritual India" and that's partly why I had to revisit it, take it apart and put it together again.

Q. You have also written essays and short stories. Is a novel more creatively satisfying?

A. A novel is a long-term commitment of great

involvement. You have a very intimate relationship with a novel that undergoes changes over time. It has its satisfactions but you can never achieve the perfection in a novel that a short form makes possible. They say a novel is more like a marriage while a short story is a brief affair. I think I would rather say that each form has different satisfactions. I hope to continue working in several forms.

Q. You have straddled between cities? Do you think travel helped you gain better perspectives on cultures and people?

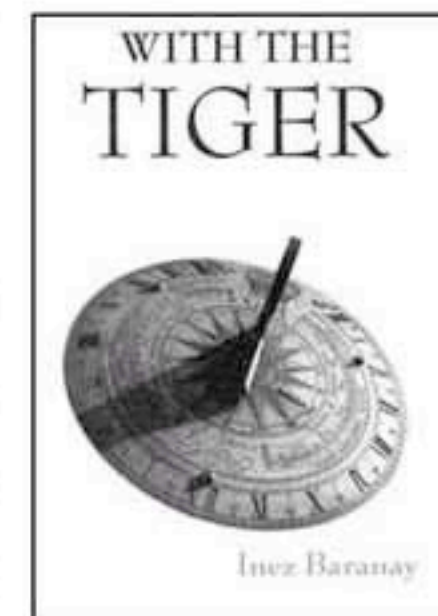
A. Travel gives us the opportunity to experience in so many ways, ways without end, that people and cultures are both very various and very similar. Of course, we can also travel in our minds through reading, viewing other art forms, and meeting people outside our usual circles. And some people can cover a lot of distances and not necessarily gain much new perspective.

Q. What is your idea of home? What do you make of the need to belong?

A. At present I have no permanent home or "base" as we more often say these days. When I say "I'm going home" I mean to the place I will sleep tonight. By now my friends are in many different countries and there are several places I love dearly and want to return to, increasingly meet more and more people who don't live in only one place; this is the way the world is now. If I can go to bed with a good book and a decent reading lamp beside me I feel at home.

As for belonging, I am not certain about this need. Maybe it is unevenly distributed among people, like musical ability or tallness. Increasingly, we have a sense of community with others that is not based on geographical nearness or ethnic sameness, but more on similar interests and world views. The wonderful new technology of the Internet makes possible community and friendship beyond all kinds of borders.

Q. You have always been reinventing your writing



WITH THE TIGER

By Inez Baranay
HarperCollins
pp. 305, Rs 295

to be a writer?

A. My writing is of the utmost importance to me; the need to write affects every aspect of my life and the decisions I make. Inevitably, a life of writing insists on the kinds of questions you suggest. Writing seriously certainly includes the search for self-knowledge and reveals what your values are. And yes, it requires a great deal of discipline if you want to produce writing for others to read.

Q. Do you feel Australian literature in English has come of age?

A. Australian literature has had a mainstream of mostly Anglo voices while the country's multicultural reality was only reflected when you added the more marginal small press literature to the picture. While on the one hand the safe commercial tastes of corporate publishing dominates, on the other hand independent small publishers keep springing up to ensure that a range of voices can be heard. I suppose a literature "comes of age" when it makes its way in the world and Australian writing is read everywhere now.

Q. Who are the Indian writers you admire?

A. Oh dear, this feels like an exam question. I don't know whether to include writers of Indian origin who don't live in India, like Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry. I remember reading Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1986 and being astonished by it; in a quite different way R.K. Narayan revealed another world. In later years, I admired Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Amit Chaudhuri.

with regard to themes, content and style. After *With The Tiger*, what next? What is keeping Baranay busy these days?

A. Something completely different (again): I am writing a memoir of a trip to European cities and a friendship associated with each city. I've been working on a couple of screenplays also — I love the collaborative process of film, while still needing the solitude of prose writing at other times. I will write a memoir of my many trips to India one day, and am thinking of new fiction.

Q. How do you respond to the tag of a "fringe writer"? How do you perceive the categorisation of literature? Should the only categorisation be "good" and "bad"?

A. Good or bad according to whom? Good or bad will be the least stable categories, I suspect. Why do people make categories? Libraries and bookshops need them but as you suggest readers make their own categories. We all have the books we love and the books we return to and the books we mean to read one day and the book we read at just the right moment.

Q. How important is your writing to you? Is there an underlying quest to define who you are and what you stand for? Does one need a certain kind of discipline