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Fast forwarding Mr Maugham

Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, The Razor's Edge by W Somerset Maugham, a novel published in 1942, is said to have begun the craze for 'Spiritual India.'

Nishanth S Coontoor

Posted On Tuesday, April 07, 2009 at 08:19:35 PM

Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, The Razor's Edge by W Somerset Maugham, a novel published in 1942, is said to have begun the craze for 'Spiritual India.' Taking it forward today is Inez Baranay's latest installment With The Tiger, which she says is a "sixty-years-later re-telling" of the original work. "The story remains centered on a young man "seeker" Larry Darrell who refuses the opportunities and privileges offered to him. It is about the choices he makes, and the implications it has on others including his fiancée Isabel," says Inez straight from Dehradun where she is enjoying her holiday.

You have many interesting characters particularly the gay playwright named after Maugham. Can you tell us about them?

The narrator of The Razor's Edge is a Mr Maugham, clearly to be identified with the author. I call my narrator Will Maugham and Will tells us more about himself in my version. He is an "out" gay playwright and other characters in With The Tiger are also gay or fluid in their preferences. This reflects their own contemporary reality and is a kind of comment on the closetedness of Maugham and his work. It wasn't until late in life that Maugham was open about his homosexuality and he can only hint at it in his characters, even the very camp Elliott Templeton. In my version the characters are Australians; in Maugham's they were Americans in Europe.

Could you elaborate on the 'Life changing experiences' that your character undergoes in India?

Larry, the central character, first went to India as a teenage backpacker. There his best friend died in an accident. From that time Larry is determined to find some kind of answer to the mystery of chance and death. He keeps investigating the answers others have found that could give meaning to this death.

Your earlier novels like Neem Dreams, like this one too, have an Indian connection. Is there any particular reason behind this desi connection?

I'd already travelled to India a couple of times when the idea for Neem Dreams came, and researching and writing that novel meant many more travels to India. I met all kinds of people, and eventually did some teaching work here. Friendships keep bringing me back to India and it was inevitable I would write another novel with an Indian theme.

With The Tiger is about a financial and political scandal in the late 1980s, an issue that many readers can relate to today. Are you hoping the reader takes back something?

That should be up to the reader to decide. There is the level of enjoying a story where you want to know more about these people and their relationships and what happens, and there is the level of asking questions about values and meaning.

A review that I read recently said — 'Australian literature in English is here to stay. It has come of age in patterns similar to Indian writing in English.' Please comment.

I think the point here is that both Australia and India have created a distinctive English language literature in which they assert their own specific versions of English and their own experiences. English language is capable of many variations and it has been a long time since there was a one central authority on "correct" English. When I was growing up in Australia, Britain was still regarded as an authority in these matters. Now it seems to me that the most enjoyable and interesting literature comes from voices freed from such constriction, speaking and writing in a myriad of accents and cadences.

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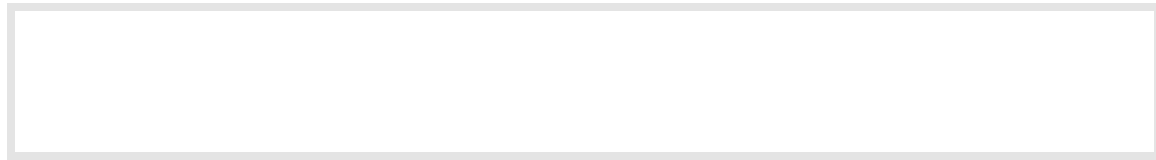
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