

'I wanted to

follow Maugham closely, but set it in a new time and place'

With *The Tiger* is Australian writer Inez Baranay's latest novel. Published by Harper Collins with India Today, it is an imitation of and a tribute to Somerset Maugham's 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge*. Maugham's characters — American and Europeans between the wars — return as Australians in the late 1970s. The writer talks to Swati Pal

The search for story is a story.
— Page 223, *With The Tiger*

When one reads the bottom line on the front jacket of *With The Tiger*, saying that it is a retelling of the Somerset Maugham classic *The Razor's Edge*, there is immediate curiosity to know why Baranay has chosen to retell this well-loved Maugham story, and how the retelling works. There are larger questions too that spring to mind: What is it that makes us want to retell, want to remix? In recent times we have witnessed a plethora of retellings, especially in Bollywood, and of course there has been ample debate on whether the original was better, whether it is a lack of imagination/talent that makes script writers and directors choose to remake, or whether a classic text opens up limitless possibilities and could be contested ... and bettered. Of course, there are no easy and conclusive answers to these questions. There are only opinions. What does Baranay have to say about this? She describes as a complex fate being an Australian, let alone an Australian writer. She discovered an empire-writes-back tinge to this project: An immigrant in a colonial culture appropriating a well-loved English text, and making Australian characters drive this story.



● Inez, congratulations. How do you think you've grown as a writer after your last novel? Tell me about your journey as a writer since *Neem Dreams*.

I think may be the normal idea of growth — or as I first thought it — is to think of it as a progression in a straight line that ascends but I don't think my growth is necessarily like that. I think my growth has been more like something that shoots out new branches and new roots in various directions and becomes more of a kind of complex, strangely shaped thing. I've continued to live and work and to do new things and in that sense I suppose growth is implied.

● Are there any moments that you feel have contributed to you as a writer in the recent past?

Every moment does. I must say one of the great moments was having my previous novel *Neem Dreams* accepted for publication in India and it being well-received in India. I could not have necessarily expected that. It was better than I dared to hope. Writing it, I wanted to immerse myself in Indian realities and I didn't know how much of that I had achieved till I got the kind of reception that I did. Other contributing things would include the fact that I've moved from place to place so often, though I didn't necessarily know that I wanted to do that.

● Tell us about the other things you are working on.

In the last couple of years, the one thing that happened to me that never happened before was that I did quite a bit of work on a new novel and then abandoned it. And then this interesting bit of luck which meant that I had to give up living in Australia 18 months ago, as I got accepted by the Binger Film Lab in Amsterdam to write a screenplay for *Neem Dreams*. That was really interesting and led to a desire to write more screenplays. Recently, I also dabbled a bit in seeing how I could turn *With The Tiger* into a screenplay as well. The other thing I am working on is some non-fiction. I am writing a memoir.

● Have you thought about whether you want to have some control over the production of the screenplay, or do you want to distance yourself from that?

Well, a lot will depend on who takes it on. With screenplays, I realise the truism that it's a collaborative form and it's really not in my hands alone. A lot will depend on the kind of contract I sign, but yes, I am prepared to let it go to the director or the creative team if that's what is desired or needed at that moment. With novels, you know that you control what goes into each page, but

with a screenplay you cannot decide alone anymore. The script is only a kind of blueprint for those who make the film.

● You've mentioned to me earlier that you have been labelled a 'transnational'. What do you make of it?

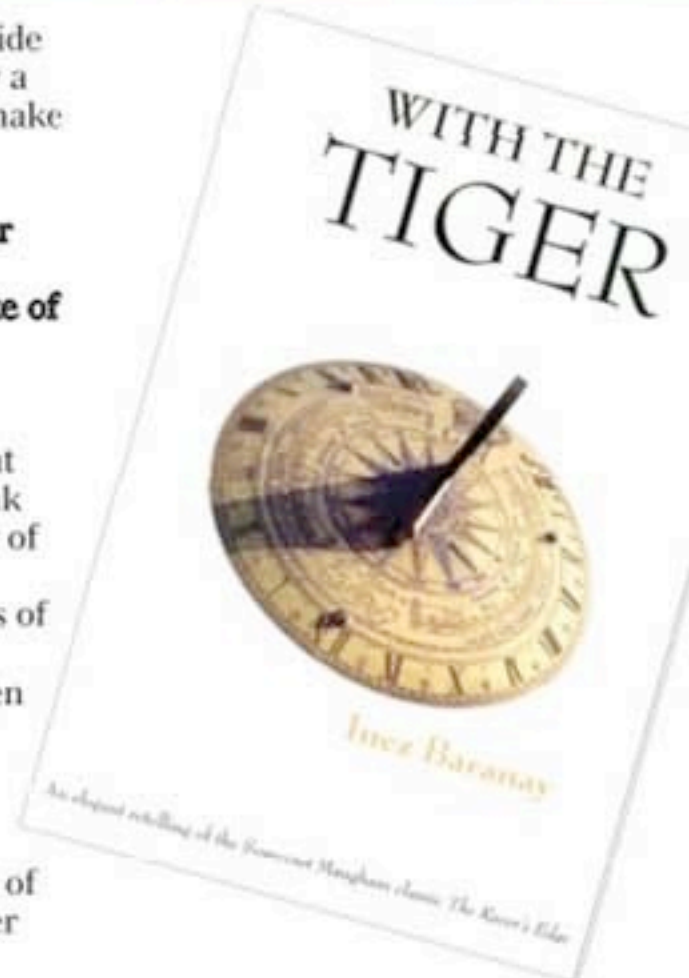
I suppose labels are sometimes needed to describe what kind of books it is that a writer writes, but they are essentially absurd. I think this label at best reflects a reality of today to describe me and many other writers from different parts of the world who are born in one place, grow up in another and then live in several other places for some time, and these realities feed our work. And so our sense of identity and community become far less based on notions of nationality and geography. I prefer the idea of cosmopolitanism.

● Are there any writers with whom you feel a certain sense of kinship?

Oh, that's a really difficult and classic question and I feel bad when I am asked this and later feel I should have mentioned this or the other author as well. You know there's a sense of kinship whenever you are engaged with a certain book and you really like it. At that moment, you feel a sense of kinship with the author because while reading you are also writing the book in a sense with the author. And there are so many authors with whom one can feel that sense of kinship. These are shifting things, there are a number of authors you want to return to ... for me the mark of a great book is one you return to. There are many authors I admire ... Indian authors as well but the one name that comes immediately to mind is Amitav Ghosh. I remember the effect of his earlier books and I see how he has grown as a writer. And there was a novel I really enjoyed ages ago by Upamanyu Chatterjee called *English, August*. I thought the film was a good adaptation of the novel as well.

● Tell us how the idea for *With The Tiger* germinated.

One thing that became very clear to me once I completed *Neem Dreams* was that I hadn't finished with India or that India hadn't finished with me. One aspect I hadn't touched while writing *Neem Dreams* was the spiritual quest that is often linked with India. I once read a very influential book by John Brunton called *A Search In Secret India*, which made me wonder how a modern Sri Maharshi Ramana would be. I discovered that Ramana was also the real life basis for the fictional saint whom Larry, the central character in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, meets and finds some kind of peace or answer with. When I started work on my novel I realised that structurally I



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wanted to follow Maugham very closely, that I wanted to use the same constellation of characters, the same events and so on. Only, I wanted to set it in a new time and place, so I had to work out the parameters for that.

● What did you feel about the obvious reactions to a retelling? And what made you do a retelling?
Oh, I was quite prepared for it, and really, one has to take that in one's

stride. I had to really work on staying close to the original novel as well as taking it to a different place and time and really making it mine. Some people tried to tell me that I shouldn't be working on such a well-loved tale as there were bound to be comparisons and that sort of thing. But it became an idea that got its hold on me and would not let go. I had first read *The Razor's Edge* as a teenager and I feel that everyone should read it as a teenager, but this is a novel that one can keep going back to at different moments in life and it always has something new to say. I had a desire to know Larry more. Larry does remain a mystery in some ways, but *With The Tiger* makes that more explicit.

● Why the title? I mean, one can understand Maugham's title ... what about yours?

(Laughs.) Oh well, it was hard to come up with a title and finally a friend suggested this and the publisher liked it. There are several stories of spiritual quest that involve a tiger. I heard a story once that when you meditate deeply and are really absorbed in it, a tiger could come and sit right next to you and not harm you. That seemed to describe Larry's achievement in some way: he went on his own path, and regardless of what his closest circle of friends had to say about it, immersed himself in his quest. Now of course it seems strange that there's another book called *The White Tiger* that's in the news.

● Have you encountered anyone like Larry yourself?

Oh yes. Especially when I was younger, and later among my young students. There was always this one person who refused to follow the beaten path, who turned down what seemed to others good opportunities, and who stuck on to his or her choice despite everyone trying to convince them otherwise.

● But isn't it a rather romantic and idealised notion, following your own path? I mean, yes, Larry is a charismatic person, but the way he goes about trying to save lives, it's almost Christ-like ...

Oh yes, Larry is an intrinsically romantic figure, very very romantic and enigmatic. Partly that is his appeal, and partly what you are talking about is a flaw in the original depiction of this character. There are things about Larry that are not dwelt upon adequately. In my novel, the narrator points those out when he talks about the periods of Larry's life about which you know nothing; he chooses to reveal only certain bits and even after he speaks for hours, you still feel you don't know him enough, you don't see the periods of

doubt and disillusion that are necessarily a part of a developing life.

● Yes, I know your narrator is a more critical one. I also noticed you were more sympathetic than Maugham is towards some things, say for example, your characterisation of Gray ...

Well, actually it's Maugham himself who taught me a lot about being kind to people, and I picked up what he said about Gray not being the kind of person with whom you would like to spend five minutes conversing with, but who was pleasant company in a group and essentially not a bad man. I felt the same way about how Maugham treated Elliot — I mean, yes, Elliot was a snob and that's really a terrible thing for anyone to be, yet Maugham is generous towards Elliot.

● And what about the way Maugham looks at other characters. How do you feel about them?

Isabel can be so manipulative and justify her manipulateness, the way she sabotages Larry's marrying Sophie, on the pretext that she was doing it for Larry's good. And yes, that's a bit of a stereotype, I mean, the vengeful woman, but sometimes I wonder, however frightening they may be, aren't these aspects based on realities? Also, in *The Razor's Edge* it is only hinted that Elliot is gay; in *With The Tiger* the narrator as well as Elliott and some other characters are explicitly gay and Larry's preferences are fluid. This is because my novel comes out of its own time and realities and is also a kind of comment on the closetedness of Maugham's life and writings.

● To go back to Larry, you do realise that the aspect is a bit problematic ... the spirituality bit, I mean. A lot of your readers would be urban educated people living in metros and for them, the idea of the *varnas*, for example, the concept of renunciation, would be a bookish fact, far removed from everyday reality.

Perhaps that has got to do with the fact that spirituality somehow seems to be embedded in religiosity. In my own world I do see people who at least are attracted to the idea of a life more like Larry's even if they don't want to live it themselves. I wanted Larry's quest to steer clear of religion. He tries to seek his answer through various paths, various sources of knowledge. My novel ends with him giving away all his income to some project in India. Maugham suggests that Larry may well have become a taxi driver in New York. I suggest at the end that Larry would go on seeking — and he is still young when the novel ends — he will go on being intensely curious about the answers people find satisfying to the mysteries of death and chance. Whether or how he would find whatever he was looking for is left to the imagination.

● Why the Buddhism?

(Giggling.) Well, I do not treat Buddhism itself but the fashionableness, the trendiness of calling yourself a Buddhist. Elliot followed the fashion of the moment. Maugham's novel is set in the years 1919-1939; mine in the 20 years from 1979. Maugham's Elliot becomes a devout Roman Catholic. And the time when my novel is set, in Australia you heard a lot of people say they were not religious, but that they were Buddhists. That Buddhism was a philosophy, not a religion. Yet I observe that Buddhism in effect works like other religions with its beliefs, its paraphernalia and its rituals.

● A last question. What were the most challenging or moving bits in the retelling?

Oh gosh, all of it! Well, Elliot's death was one such thing as was Sophie's, but all of it was so difficult once I committed myself to the characters and structure of Maugham's original. That was the formal challenge I set myself, while I had to also make my novel true to its own time and place. I had to find my own compelling reason why the given events happened, why the latter-day versions of those characters acted as they did.