

On Walking

R. K. Narayan, whose full name was Rasipuram Krishnaswami Ayyar Naranayanaswami (and who was advised by no less than Graham Greene to shorten it to R.K.Narayan) and whose most endearing character may well be the fictional town of Malgudi itself, needs no introduction to readers of South Asian fiction. The non-fiction piece next door is taken from *Salt & Sawdust: Stories and Table-Talk*, which Narayan said was a "new form of writing, without the compulsion of an argument or conclusion, on any theme and without too definite a form." Here the novelist is taking a walk through a Mysore which at times seems a combination of Dhaka and Malgudi.

I have been all my life a walker. I used to walk along the tree-shaded trunk road leading out of the city of Mysore, in every direction, on the roads leading to the forests of Bandipur or Karapur, from my home in Laxmipuram, or amble along the base of Chamundi Hill through rugged paths, reach Lalitha Mahal Palace on the East horizon and return home—after nearly five hours of walking, brooding, thinking and making plans for my future or my writing, usually on weekends or during those years when I failed in my exams and studied privately, without having to attend classes, for next year's chance (which I considered a blessed state as it left me in a state of unalloyed freedom).

My father, though a disciplinarian and a strict headmaster of our high school, did not mind what I did; he didn't have faith in the education system. He left me free to read whatever I liked out of the school library. Wander-ing about morning and evening, I felt intoxicated by the charms of nature. The air was clean and pure, avenue trees were in bloom. Evening I walked about two or three miles around the Kukara Halli Tank, listened to the soft splash of wavelets on the shore and watched the display of colours in the western sky. I do not mind repeating what I have said earlier in my essays, that the sunset in Mysore is unique and not seen anywhere else in the world.

I went around the tank and then sat on a bench on the bund. A little farther off on another bench, I could see Venkatappa, a distinguished artist of Mysore who arrived at about 4:30 in the afternoon every day and watched the sky all evening, well past dusk, and then rose to go. He wore a white dhoti and a coat over it, crowned with a turban; an umbrella was tucked under his arm in all seasons. He sought no company, was content to commune with the sky till the last splash of colour vanished.

He was a bachelor and a recluse, was dedicated to painting, a genius who sought no patrons or admirers, a totally self-contained man. He has left several water-colours, paintings which are to be seen at the Jagan Mohan Palace Gallery and at Bangalore. He had a few friends who were on visiting terms and who saw his pictures in progress and listened to his veena, as he was also devoted to his music. I am straying away from my original theme, which was walking, and which includes landscape, which in turn includes stars and the sky and

the lake and Venkatappa rapt in watching the wonderful spectacles. People knew him only at a distance, which he maintained all throughout his life. Though considered a recluse, it seems to me he was more hermit-like.

At sunset I too moved; cobras were said to crawl out of the crevices in the pile of rugged stone forming the bund. I walked to the market-place to jostle with the crowd. In all, morning and evening, I must have walked ten miles a day without reckoning any purpose in walking. I walked because I enjoyed it and had the leisure. While walking, my mind became active and helped my writing.

I kept up this pace for years wherever I happened to be—although nature was not the same everywhere as in Mysore. That charm and the abandon could not normally continue owing to new responsibilities and changing routine, but I continued my walking as a habit wherever I might be—until last year when I fell ill and had to stay in a hospital for a few weeks. When my condition improved, I was permitted to walk again in regulated doses. 'You may walk up to that cottage Number 24, with the nurse's help...' And then, 'Be sure to walk for ten minutes exactly, from your bedroom to the hall in your home.' As I progressed, I was permitted more time—thirty or forty minutes in the park. I have lost the habit of walking in the street, dodging the scooters and autorickshaws and the potholes and pitfalls so strictly preserved by the Corporation. Nowadays, I walk in the park near my home both in Madras and Mysore, arriving there in my car.

The park is a world in itself. Here you see a variety of motives in operation. The men who walk for athletic reasons, not a few, seem to be in training for the Olympics. Jogging, running with upraised arms or swinging them in windmill fashion, stopping in their tracks to bend down, stretch or kick imaginary balls, jumping high and low, with not a care for others in their path. For me these Human Windmills are a terror.

Those who are here on medical advice can be spotted from the style by which they carry themselves, pushing forward as if punishing themselves for all the years of stagnation and neglect. Some of them walk as if chased by a tiger, heaving, panting and perspiring. The doctor must have advised, 'Take a brisk walk, don't slouch or amble along.' And they practice an unaccustomed exercise. There is always a group of older men seated on



the bench on the lawn, perhaps *vanaprasthas*, talking of old times and current politics and comparing one another's health.

Young couples sitting in remote corners, in the shelter of bushes, conversing in whispers, their backs turned to the public. Day after day they sit there. I get very curious to know what they are saying. Of course, there must be an affirmation of each other's dedication, devotion. It can't go on repeated a thousand times day after day ad nauseam. They must have other things to talk about: their homes and parents or

the hurdles in their way.

I would give anything to understand them. I wish them well and success to their romance. I know the whispers will cease ultimately, once they become man and wife. You can't go on whispering all life. There will come a natural phase when you will shout at each other in the course of an argument or spend long pauses of silence, sitting in two chairs and staring ahead at a wall, a tree, with no subject left for conversation. All that could be said has been said, followed by an unmitigated, pregnant silence. A perfect attunement and communication of minds has been attained where speech is superfluous. In Kamban's Ramayana, when Rama and Sita are left alone after the wedding, they remain silent, having nothing to say. The poet explains, 'Those who were always together eternally as Vishnu and Lakshmi and separated only a moment ago have no need to talk.'

A couple come and part at the gate and move in opposite directions without uttering a word, reminding me of Byron's line: 'When we two parted in silence and tears.' Fresh young couples are however cheerful and relaxed, commenting on flowers and plants and smiling all through, especially if they have a toddler with them.

Students sit in little groups here and there. Cheerless and grim, anxiety writ large on their faces, desperately making up for wasted months. I sometimes enquire what they are studying and what their hopes are. They do not seem to mind the disturbance. Sometimes I ask to see the book in their hands. They are always glad to be interrupted. Last week I looked through a book that they were trying to 'mug up'. It was a bazaar 'guide' to English prose for B.A. Leafing through I found my name listed in the contents with two stories included. The stories were paraphrased, annotated in Tamil and summarized in English.

Two thousand words of my composition reduced to twenty words expertly, with definitions of 'difficult' phrases and possible questions and answers. The young men, the examinees, found this tabloid presentation more clear-headed and acceptable than the original. With these, they might also attain a First Class in English. I wondered for a moment if I should declare my authorship of the two stories, but I returned the glorious guide to them and passed on, not being sure if they could bear to see a live author and also because I was not sure I could answer if they questioned me on my stories, as they were likely to be more up-to-date with the subject.

There's Something To Be Said For Complaining...

MARK PEERADINA

There's something to be said for whining. Sometimes it can bring you the goodies. The other day, feeling listless and bored, with iron filings creeping into the soul, I mentioned to a friend that I had not read anything genuinely funny in some time.

She frowned and then handed me *The Lecturer's Tale* by James Hynes. 'Try this,' she said. 'I think you won't be disappointed.'

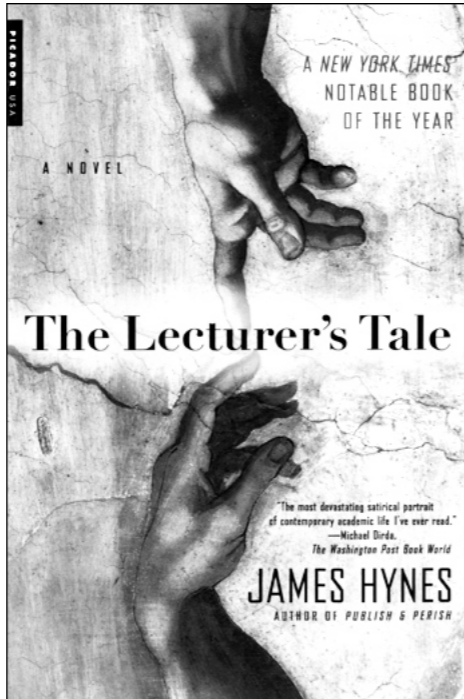
I did. And I wasn't. She hadn't been lying. The book was that rare thing: the genuinely funny Academic novel of manners.

The Lecturer's Tale—written about three years back—is not just a literary thriller but a literary theory thriller. It is where Stephen King meets Camille Paglia via Woody Allen: a suspenseful, brilliant, and blackly comic novel of intellectual shenanigans in one of America's Ivy League universities.

Since finishing *The Lecturer's Tale* I have done some homework on Hynes. As well as caught up with the two other books of the same genre: *Moo* by Jane Smiley and David

Lodge's *Thinks*. The way writers go skewering academia, you'd think there was something undeniably dubious and funny about academic life. And out of these three books, one gets the distinct feeling that it is Hynes who relishes skewering academia the most, and has done it with more inventiveness than the other two. His is the more sly, and therefore funnier, account of cultural studies, literary theory and star systems. The title of his first novel was *Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror* (!) — where there was enough satirical edge and accuracy to have the reader laughing knowingly even before cracking open the covers of the book. It is three horrific, hilarious novellas about university life, where "Derrida rules and love is a complicated ideological position."

In *The Lecturer's Tale*, if I may be allowed to speak the speech, Hynes zeroed in on a site worthy of intervention: the culture wars currently raging on American campuses (and perhaps on a few Indian campuses as well?). And which show no signs of abating. Literary theory, post-modernism, gender studies, political correctness, queer theory, post-



colonial interventions and radical scholars vs. Literature, Dead White Male Authors, Passed-Over White Professors, Lecturers who get a little too friendly with their students and Creative Writers, i.e. prize-winning, alcoholic novelists and poets.

It tells the story of Nelson Humboldt, trapped between the ideological faction-fighting of the

English Department. The Canon Men on one side, and everybody else on the other. Since Nelson's a lowly adjunct professor he discovers that neither side will have him. Worse, as a fair-minded, weak liberal caught between the Canon conservatives and the literary theory radicals, he can't but appreciate the merits of both positions: legs on both sides, the fence coming right up the middle.

Growing up, Nelson falls in love with classics and sets off to college to major in Lit. Once there, Nelson is lost: he can't understand the hostility reserved for the Canon. "An innocent and self-evident remark he had made in class about Conrad's jumbled chronologies raised snorts of derision from his classmates. A severe young woman from the Indian subcontinent addressed Nelson without looking at him, telling him painfully, in a posh imperial accent that Conrad's

racism was the starting point for any discussion of his work. 'Read Edward Said,' she added, in a curt postcolonial sotto voce.' Sharpened by such confrontations, Nelson eventually morphs into a less naive English lecturer, but still can't understand his colleagues "who had begun to surf the tide of post-modernism, happily so, since it allowed them to ditch their mediocre dissertations on Milton and Pound and do cutting edge work on Ally McBeal, the X-Men, Star Trek: The New Generation and the complete works of David. E. Kelly."

But all this changes when his index finger, injured in a freak accident, suddenly gives him the power to make others do what he wants them to do— all he has to do is touch them with that finger. The "Midas/Prospero of Academia" now has the power to influence the outcome of the battle being waged in the English department. He'd also like to do some good in the bargain... like getting on the tenure-track.

This is where Hynes parts company with David Lodge and Jane Smiley, for not content with writing a novel of academic manners, he turns this into a gothic horror novel about a Faustian pact with the Devil.

The characters arrayed on both sides of the divide are impeccably drawn and lampooned. The novel's wicked tone and knowiness is best conveyed by looking at its cast of characters.

The chairperson of the department, Anthony Pescecano, "with his Armani suits, silk ties and Italian shoes, physical workouts and foul mouth resembled a mafia boss and he knew it". He saw himself as "the Michael Corleone of literary theory, the Tony Soprano of pedagogy". Victoria Victorinix, the department's tenured full prof and its best-known lesbian, has "survived three or four paradigm shifts in literary theory". African-American Lester Antilles, the heftiest of the lot in post-colonial studies refused to do his Ph.D. as a protest against the "objectifying colonialist gaze on native subjects". In practice, this meant he refused to teach or attend seminars or publish. And for this "demanding and theoretically sophisticated subaltern intervention in the dominant discourse, he was given an endowed chair and a bigger salary than the president of the United States."

Professor Stephen Michael Stephen, the school's token

African-American appointment, is popular with students because his classes consist only of seeing movies like "Khartoum", "The Sand Pebbles", "55 Days At Peking" and "Lawrence of Arabia" which were used to "introduce his students to issues of race, imperialism and post-colonial theory." The Serb Marko Kraljevic, the department's premier theorist, sees himself as an "intellectual samurai, the Toshiro Mifune of cultural studies." The radical graduate student, Gillian (doing her dissertation on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer") who "has dispensed with her patriarchal surname, in the spirit of such foremothers as Roseanne, Cher and Madonna. She had a military buzz cut, wore a tank-top T-shirt, a denim mini-skirt, torn fishnet stockings, and black, steel-toed Doc Martens. She looked like Irma La Douce played by Arnold Schwarzenegger."

On the other side of the faction are: Mort Weisman who compares Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* to a Molotov cocktail landing in academia. "Jacques the Ripper, Weisman called the new critical superstar, pleased at his own joke." Timothy Coogan, a fifty-year-

old, alcoholic, prize-winning poet teaching creative writing with a reputation for playing around with his female students. "But because the creative writing faculty were not expected to be as evolved as real scholars, he had managed to escape sexual harassment proceedings". He can't see what poetry has to do with phallogocentrism. Then there is the Canadian Lady Novelist whose name nobody can remember. "She was reputed to be like Margaret Atwood, only nicer."

Anybody who has spent some time in the Eng. Lit Dept. of an American university will find that Hynes knows his Lit theory well enough to parody it. He caricatures both sides and shows us why both may have gone too far in defending their ideologies. If you are an academic (or an academic dropout like me), whether you are in an American campus or South Asian one, this send-up of the groves of academe will have you grinning in recognition.

I wish I had laid my hands on this book a little earlier.

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Book Review

A Pakistani author writes a novel of 1971

Noor, Sorayya Khan, Penguin, pp.223, Rs. 250.

RAKSHANDA JALIL

Sorayya Khan's *Noor* is a remarkable novel for the simple reason that it breaks the long tacit silence among Pakistanis of all hues to speak of the horrors of what they saw and did in East Pakistan. Some like Intezar Husain and Faiz Ahmad Faiz have alluded to that bloodstained legacy of shame, but there has been no attempt so far to flesh out the bare bones of that long-buried nightmare. Ali, a young Pakistani soldier, brings home Sajida, a girl of "fiveandsix" who has lost her family in a cyclone and is found wandering about a Dhaka street, and raises her as his own daughter. Sajida marries, grows roots in Pakistani soil, has children, one of them being Noor, a child so special and different and gifted that she has access to secrets yet to be revealed and to memories her mother and Ali have buried. Born with Down's Syndrome, Noor begins to paint the most astonishing pictures from her very first birthday. In the blue of her infant drawings there is the blue of the Bay of Bengal, that relentless body of water that rose up in an angry tidal wave and swept away her mother's childhood. Noor's unerring drawings bring the past back for Sajida: the cyclone, the sea full of fish, the fishboats plying the seas and the shores of what was once East Pakistan and has since become Bangladesh. Wrapped like a snake in a tree high above

the swirling waters, young Sajida had survived near rotting fish in torn nets when the rest of her family had perished. In a series of chilling portraits, Noor brings the past back with an exactitude that is both fearful and astonishing. She draws uprooted trees, shattered boats and the unrelenting monsoon rains. But she also details the atrocities too unimaginable and inhuman committed in the name of nationalism: the senseless killings of millions, the rivers red with blood, the bloated corpses with tied hands floating like paper boats down the river and the graffiti in a now-forgotten script written on a wall: *Joi Bangla*. Noor draws what Sajida has forgotten and what Ali has barred and bolted in the drawers of his memory. Her drawings reveal a "connection" — not severed, merely buried — with Sajida's past, with Ali's compliance in those acts of unmitigated barbarism. Ali, so good, so noble, so ordinary, is the average Pakistani who is plagued by memories that rise up "like stench". The novel moves inexorably towards its final cathartic question: "What was it like? There?" and in the answer lances a long festering wound.

From The Hindu, May 2004

R. K. Laxman (for Rasipuram Krishnaswami Laxman) is India's most celebrated cartoonist— uncommon creator of the common man. While still at the Maharaja's College, Mysore, studying politics, economics and philosophy, he began to illustrate his elder brother R K Narayan's stories in *The Hindu* newspaper. After graduation Laxman went to Delhi to find a job as cartoonist. *The Hindustan Times* told him he was too young. So Laxman joined *The Free Press Journal* in Bombay, where he found himself seated next to another cartoonist who was furiously drawing a bird in a cage. His name was Bal Thackeray. One day the *Journal's* proprietor banned him from making fun of communists. So the twenty-three-year old Laxman left, caught a Victoria, and walked into the *The Times of India* office. From that day "I had a table and a room to myself, which I have used ever since."

From The Best Of Laxman: the common man at large; Penguin Books India, 2004.



This time also let us promise them schools, shelter, employment, etc. Last elections we promised these and won!

