

YOUNG MEN'S TALES

It's almost imperative to have a youngster playing a major role in your novel. Youngsters can do things, bring in excitement, violence, romance and adventure. Writers the world over have been using them for centuries. Besides, everyone's been young *some* time in life, so there's always some experience to draw on. As a young reader, it's a matter of time before you find some character that you relate to, and as an Indian, it's not surprising that for me, most these characters come from the minds of Indian authors.

R.K. Narayan's "Bachelor of Arts" traces the life of a young man, Chandran from his last year in college forward. Chandran is a student of History and the beginning of the novel is devoted to describing his classes and professors and carefree wanderings by the river before the fear of examinations so rudely butts in and gets worse with procrastination, laziness and uninvited students' activities before the end of the year arrives and it all boils over. Chandran graduates and promptly falls in love with a girl whom he can't marry. Heartbroken and angry with a world that seems to conspire against him, he runs away and becomes an ascetic, roaming around in rags for months before finally returning home, getting a job and marrying a different girl. He settles down to a life, that could lead nowhere but comfortably uneventful monotony. The End.

Narayan is a compulsive storyteller with a gift for painting pictures in the most exquisite detail. His style is characterized by a superb choice of adjective and masterful figures of speech that help create scenes, so vividly and unmistakably Indian.

In the novel, he spends considerable time detailing every thought in Chandran's mind. The novel's progression consists of event, followed by a series of emotional and therefore physical reactions that take Chandran, and the story from one place to another. And given Narayan's uncanny ability to spot telling details, in the course of the novel there are several occasions on which one can't help but smile wryly out of familiarity as Chandran goes through motions not too dissimilar to what one has seen.

What allows Narayan to achieve this is the fact that Chandran has been shown to be a very ordinary, unremarkable person. He attends classes, is judgmental about his professors, spends large amounts of time with friends that he takes for granted, is irritable with his parents' orthodoxy, smokes and enjoys going for the late show of movies, there is nothing in his manner to distinguish him from any other twenty one year old educated man around him. He is as much a truth of 2010 as of the 1930s in which the novel is set.

And the events leading to this everyday sort of person running away from home and taking up this absurd lifestyle as an ascetic serve to keep the reader's attention. Narayan writes in his foreword to "Malgudi Days" that his usual construction of a short story relies on the creation of a character and putting that character in a quandary of some sort. The "Bachelor Of Arts" is not too different from that structure. It's an utterly unremarkable young man, who turns into a complete mess before sorting his life out and settling down.

The flip side to the intricacy of Narayan's descriptions is that there's less room for the reader to use his imagination. Chandran, for all his traits may very easily be a friend or acquaintance, but it is harder to

put oneself in the shoes of the man. He's much more the sort of guy you know, much less the sort of guy you are, precisely because there's no room for the reader to bring shades of his own person to the character.

Ruskin Bond's "Room on the Roof" begins with an English boy in post independence Dehradun and the ending of the novel could well be the beginning of another with enough openings along the way for a dozen alternative courses to play out in the reader's head.

The novel revolves around one main character, Rusty, a seventeen year old boy. Rusty lives in a British colony outside the heart of Dehradun, under the care of a very strict guardian – his parents are dead. Rusty meets Somi, Ranbir and Suri on a cycle ride one day, plays Holi with them soon after, falls in love with their independence, rebels against his guardian's stuffiness and tyranny and runs away from home for good. He abandons his 'proper' upbringing to go live the dirt and exotic adventure of the bazaar.

He finds a job at the Kapoor residence tutoring their son Kishen. Mr. Kapoor is a boisterously friendly drunk, jovial but aging, with his best days firmly behind him. His wife, Meena is several years his junior and very beautiful. Rusty falls in love with her, and she turns to him for the attention that her husband doesn't provide. Soon Somi and Ranbir leave Dehradun leaving Rusty alone with Kishen and the rest of the Kapoor family with whom he develops a very strong bond. After the death of Meena in a car accident Rusty is heartbroken and Kishen is forced to go live with an aunt in Hardwar. Kishen promptly runs away from home and becomes a thief by the Ganges. Eventually Rusty meets him in Hardwar and the two return together to Dehradun, outcasts of society.

Right from the beginning, Bond sets Rusty up as the outsider, the boy who doesn't belong anywhere. As a consequence, every single thing that he does is new to him and lends a sense of adventure to the whole novel. Right from the moment he rebels against his guardian and spends his first night in the bazaar, everything in the novel is new to the protagonist and Bond carries this thrill of discovery brilliantly forward to the reader. Add to that, the author's ability to write very touching passages and the novel as a whole takes on a much more emotional nature than Narayan's "Bachelor of Arts".

Rusty, from start to finish is an outsider to society. He's a white boy in a brown country, born and raised in a culture which he despises, and eventually abandons with nobody to call his own. And through the contrast Rusty presents to the other boys in the novel, Bond manages to describe the bazaar and all its sights and sounds to the user, in detail. He does this, not as a narrative of Rusty's thoughts, but through conversations and encounters with the other characters of the novel which leaves a lot of little holes for the reader to fill in.

The novel is deliberately of a very romantic nature, what with runnings away, illicit affairs, real live thieves and all... Bond enhances it all by leaving several sentences and ideas floating. He doesn't bother to explain all the details in the novel, preferring to let the ideas stew in the reader's mind, to be pieced together in his imagination. As a result, the novel, as with much of Bond's writing, tends to linger on in the reader's mind long after the text of the book has passed.

The story ends with Rusty and Kishen's return to Dehra, and a sense of wonder about what happens next.

Kushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" is a brilliant book. Unlike the above two novels, it does not revolve around a central character, it's more the description of a period of time, culminating in an event. It's set in the village of Mano Majra on the India - Pakistan border, starting in the summer of 1947 and gives an account of how this peaceful, sleepy little village is torn apart in a matter of days by the partition of the country and the ensuing communal massacres. The book manages to describe to the reader the extremely delicate, yet surprisingly harmonious social structure that prevailed in the villages on the border and how overnight, people went from a life of virtually mind numbing inactive monotony to the biggest humanitarian crisis of the twentieth century.

There are two young men who play a significant role in the novel, Juggut Singh, the dacoit and Iqbal Singh, the social worker.

Iqbal is a member of the "People's Party of India" and has been sent by his party to the village to do social work. He's a city bred, Europe educated young man who's character has been constructed to serve as a foil to all the other people we see in the novel. His ideas are modern, western, scientific, his speech is urban, he carries his own food, refusing to eat local produce, even his name, Iqbal, is one that is common to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, a tiny little fortress, protecting him from all religious stereotypes. For an overwhelming majority of the novel, he does not reveal his last name and insists he doesn't belong to any religion. It's only in one drunken and very telling soliloquy at the end of the novel, that he admits he's a Sikh, when in the face of the horror of communal massacre, all his intellectual beliefs collapse into a heap of rubble.

Iqbal's character serves two purposes. The first, it exposes the huge gulf that existed between the urban bourgeoisie and the common folk in the villages, in terms of their thoughts, beliefs, priorities and values. And by extension, it reveals the gap between the politicians at the centre and vast majority of the people of India and Pakistan. Probably the most powerful lines of the novel are in a conversation between Iqbal and a couple of villagers.

' "... What is all this about Pakistan and Hindustan?"

"..Why did the British leave?"

Iqbal did not know how to answer simple questions like these.'

This conversation, in all its simplicity drives home one of the most profound points of the novel, which is, how helpless the authorities were, to deal with the issues that faced them.

Through the story, the author manages to reveal, in fiction, truths that no work of sociology or history can, he actually manages to put a human face to the tragedy. The most remarkable part of this book stems from the effectiveness with which the author conveys the philosophies of the people of the area. In a literary sense, this is probably the most difficult part of the novel to construct, to get the reader to relate to the characters of the novel from a set of values so different from his own.

This leads to the second purpose of Iqbal's character, this one a more literary matter. Introducing a character like Iqbal, allows the writer to spend a considerable amount of time showing to the user, aspects of life at Mano Majra that he would otherwise not have been able to. Several details, that would ordinarily just have been taken for granted, or ignored are put forward very openly to the reader through the conversations Iqbal has with some of the villagers. Their fatalistic approach to life, their priorities of loyalty, the way they treated other religions and their fellow villagers, their politics, how they behaved with the *babus* and the educated, all those unspoken rules and the cultural etiquette that is inherent to the background in which the novel is set. Without a character like Iqbal, it would have been extremely difficult for the author to have presented these without sounding terribly artificial. And it is in the presentation of these that the foundation for the brilliance of the novel lies. Without it, the book would just have been another assembly of all the rhetoric that one is used to hearing in describing the partition of India.

Juggut Singh is the hero of the novel. He's easily the novel's most colourful character with his rages and romance. He's shown, early in the novel to be having an affair with the Imam's daughter, the concession, one accepts as being essential to spice things up a touch. He's convinced his *budmaashi* is a matter of fate, a legacy inherited from his father and grandfather, and one that he makes no attempt to alter.

In fact, throughout the story, he's extremely comfortable with his life as a sequence of crime and arrests. His notoriety, emotional instability, audacity and sheer physical size give him all the qualities he needs to be the star of the show. Again, he is a hero constructed from all the traits that are valued by people of the region. In one scene, he flops effortlessly between meek servitude in his manner to Iqbal to a violent rage, nearly killing a rival dacoit with his bare hands, in a matter of seconds.

Iqbal and Jugga are both arrested in connection with the murder of the village's moneylender and detained even after their innocence is evident on some impromptu charges trumped up by the authorities. The time Iqbal and Jugga spend sharing a jail cell provide some of the most entertaining scenes of the novel.

Jugga's apparent detachment with all mundane matters ends when it comes to Nooro, his lover. In the end, he sacrifices his life, saving a train full of Muslim refugees from slaughter so Nooro can live.

Ultimately, his is the character that actually gives this work the status of a novel. The entire storyline of the book is built around him. And it's ironic that it is left to a man condemned by all as an incorrigible *budmaash*, in the end to save a train full of refugees. Not the politician, not the police, not the district magistrate; the dacoit.

Satyajit Ray does not win too many points for originality when it comes to Pradosh C. Mitter, his amateur detective from the "Feluda" series of detective stories for children. Feluda is a character who comes with so many of the stereotypes associated with the genre of writing, he's unmarried, a smoker, loves sweets, travels a lot, is infuriatingly intelligent, very vain of his intelligence and is always right in the end. Add to that his awestruck teenage companion Topshe and the picture is complete. The story is even narrated by Topshe, if any further hints at Mr. Holmes or Monsieur Poirot were needed.

However, to dismiss the character and with it the series on the back of this alone would be a little premature. These are stories that were written primarily with the intention of giving Indian children their own “super sleuth”, a character whose tales of adventure they could follow with excitement. This was never meant to be a literary masterpiece.

Creating a character like Feluda comes with several pitfalls. The fact that he fits into the stereotype, restricts the writer quite severely. There are no surprises left, everyone knows what he is up to, what kind of character he is creating. Creating a younger, Indian version of any number of western detectives is somewhat akin to playing a game of poker in which everyone else at the table knows your hand. You’re never going to win too much money at the best of times, and the only way you can even survive is if your cards are actually that damn good. The fact that the Feluda stories are so readable despite their obvious lack of originality is a tribute to the fact that they are very well written keeping their audience in mind. For a kid, Feluda’s stories do succeed in being quite addictive in nature. Even today, to me, revisiting them does not seem too bad an idea.

No discussion on youth characters in Indian literature in English can be complete today without a mention of Chetan Bhagat’s “Five Point Someone”.

The book is a story of the lives of three friends who meet at IIT Delhi, and it traces their four years of fun and academic mediocrity at the institute. Ryan’s a rich, brilliant, good looking, irresponsible brat who is too lazy and too rebellious to actually put his talent to any use in the conventional sense of the word. Alok’s from a lower middle class family and had to abandon his dream of becoming an artist when his father became bedridden after injuring himself. He gives up being the ‘good boy’ after coming to IIT, seeing in his friends an opportunity to escape the miseries of his life. Hari was brought up in military household and he chooses this style of life because, he’s a bit of a drifter and Ryan was the first person he clung to - admittedly not the best decision of his life.

Hari is the one narrating the bulk of the novel, with little interludes from the other two. The book has its fair share of romance, with Hari being involved with his HOD’s daughter, action, when the three of them attempt to steal a question paper and drama with Alok attempting suicide and failing. The less said about the book in a literary sense, the better, but unmistakable amidst the bells and whistles is the fact that this, better than most other novels has what it takes to grab the public’s attention and sell itself in huge numbers. And this is exactly what it’s done. It’s blunt, straight, makes no attempt at literary excellence and has its story and characters constructed with the precise intention of getting people to read it as easily and enjoyably as possible and it succeeds. More than most of its rivals, it attracts the attention of a class of people that dwells on little, abridges much and considers Lady Gaga its biggest youth icon.