

Midday Interview/Clare Jay

1. Is the story in any way autobiographical?

I think some element of the author always goes into a book, and there will be threads of myself running through the novel, but only thin ones. The main lines of the book - teenaged daughter goes missing while backpacking in India, distraught mother flies out to search for her - are fictional. I went backpacking around India on different occasions so my travel diaries from those times certainly fed into the novel and helped me when I came to revisit a particular place during the writing. I wrote the novel not so much by turning inward to my own life experiences, but through drawing on vivid imaginings and the enormous empathy I felt for my characters.

2. How and when did you shape the story in your head?

The story kernel for *Breathing in Colour* emerged when I was in India. I'd go into backpacker cafés in places like Bangalore or Hampi and see 'Missing' posters on the walls and doors; the faces of young travellers like myself staring out at me, along with details of when and where they were last seen. I looked into their eyes and thought: What's your story? Where have you disappeared to, and will you ever be found? I imagined the awfulness of getting the news that your child has gone missing without trace in a far-off land. What would the mother do - would she weep, give up? Or would she set her jaw and go out looking for her daughter? This is how novel plots tend to arise for me: from a dramatic premise which interests me so much that it won't let go until I've decided to write about it, which is what happened with my forthcoming novel, *Dreamrunner*, about the effects of a violent sleep disorder on a loving family in Portugal.

3. Why write about India? What has fascinated you so much about India?

I first went to India for three months when I was twenty-one, and was blown away by the experiences I had there, from my first encounter with Sivananda yoga in an ashram in Rishikesh, to floating in a shakira on Dal lake in Kashmir, to seeing elephants ambling through the streets of Delhi in all their golden finery. India bombarded me with stimuli, turning each moment into a multi-sensory experience, and the memory of this came in handy when writing the synaesthesia sections of the novel. During that first trip to India, I remember hurtling along in a bus towards Dharamsala, the wheels skidding inches away from the sheer edge of a cliff, and I looked down in fright to the bleak sight of an upturned bus down there in the ravine. At some point during that long ride, I surpassed my fear of tumbling over the cliff, and something else kicked in which has stayed with me over the years: a lessening of the fear of death and a sense of trusting in my own destiny. I was touched by the warmth of the Indians I met at temples or in beauty spots; at one point I was even invited to join in

with wedding festivities! The generosity of spirit of so many people I encountered meant that India took a strong hold of my heart.

4. What is the one thing in the world that you think is unique to India and Indians?

For me, one aspect of India's uniqueness lies in the way that religion is part and parcel of everyday, public life - Hindu gods and goddesses swing in rickshaws to protect the driver; sacred cows wander the streets; people perform puja on river ghats; pilgrims walk along chanting. For visitors from places such as northern Europe, this is fascinating, it shows us that spirituality doesn't have to be a hidden thing, sequestered inside churches. Walking barefoot into the Sri Meenakshi temple in Madurai and being blessed by the temple elephant along with a lively crowd of other people, or observing religious activity on the Varanasi ghats, were some of the most special moments I experienced during my travels.

5. Why do you think many foreigners come to India to first lose themselves and then find themselves again?

Any foreign country provides a sense of anonymity, and India is used to backpackers and tolerant of them. I think some foreigners come to India to escape the shackles of their own culture and experience the freedom of reinventing themselves as they travel around, and India provides a particularly rich and inspiring setting for doing this. I did some research for the novel through the Missing Persons Bureau and discovered that a glut of backpackers have gone missing in the Kullu valley over the years. There were many theories to explain these disappearances. While some unfortunate individuals end up literally losing themselves forever, becoming the casualties of drugs or thieves, others consciously choose to slip through the net, opt out of society and create a new life and a new self, far from family pressures and expectations. India would seem to be an ideal place to do this.

6. The book is about a mother and her daughter. Why choose that relationship to focus on?

The mother-daughter bond is one of the strongest and most complicated relationships, and for that reason it's a fascinating one to explore. In *Breathing in Colour* I wanted to show the web of guilt and blame that can form when traumatic events within a family are not talked about. Alida and Mia have a deep love for each other but this love has been blotted out by the blackness of their shared past; a past which extends into their present and threatens to destroy their future relationship. I wanted to explore what happens when the past reaches boiling point; the point at which there can be no more pretending, no more ignoring what happened. The terrible event in Alida and Mia's past needs to be acknowledged, grieved over, and ultimately forgiven, and this book charts the physical and metaphorical journey towards that forgiveness.