



Nandita Puri reads out an extract from *The Unsung Hero*, her biography of husband Om

THERE IS A CONTROVERSY ON THAT THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S £10,000 GRANT TO THE FEST COULD HAVE BEEN PUT TO BETTER USE. LIKE PROMOTING LITERACY IN SCOTLAND

getting some visas due to "public order offences". Mme Ramotswwe would have put two and two together.

The format of the festival is pretty simple, and that's what makes it work. The Diggi Palace Hotel, which is the fest venue, has four different areas which function as venues — the Durbar Hall, the Baithak, the Mughal Tent and the Front Lawns, the latter reserved for the high volume events. There's normally a moderator in conversation with one or more authors, with the moderator very often being an author. The conversations are either about a particular genre; say 'travel writing' or 'conspiracy theories', or the author's books. Else it becomes a combination of book readings and discussions. The authors, for the most part, are smart and funny, and it doesn't take much to set them off.

The moderator / interviewer plays an important role, and they are a varied lot; there are some who have a set of questions that they need to run through, and there are others who know what they want to ask and also use the conversation as a base to probe deeper. I felt sorry for Thomas Keneally last year as journalist Sunil Sethi appeared to be plain irritating. Tunku Varadarajan in conversation with Anne Applebaum, writer with *The Washington Post* and *Slate*, and author of *Gulag: A History*, does a good job of gently nudging Applebaum, and getting her to talk about the book and the research that went into it.

In these and other conversations, you realise the amount and depth of research that has gone into the writings of the authors, especially the non-fiction ones. This is not something that has been tossed off over a lazy couple of months in Martha's Vineyard. Lawrence Wright, author of *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda* and

WORDWISE

Writing tales

Pigs named after books, a case for Mme Ramotswwe and other excitements at the fifth Jaipur Literature Festival

By Vikram Achanta

→ DELHI FOG NOTWITHSTANDING, a night on the bus notwithstanding, I'm here in Jaipur. I'm not here to understand the art of the novel. I'm here to be amidst a bunch of smart, funny and creative people in conversation with each other and to be inspired to write a book, so that I can mingle as one of them. As King Louie warbles in Louis Armstrong's baritone to Mowgli, "I wan'na be like you". This is my second year at the Jaipur Literature Festival, and I'm a little more accustomed to seeing a host of famous people from all over the world moving around on a 24/7 basis. Last year, when I arrived for what turned out to be an engaging and funny chat between William Dalrymple and Pico Iyer, a short bird-like figure popped up in front of me. "Vikram Seth!" I said to myself, as he was joined by his mother and sister. I can't find the words to describe what went through

me; something like what I felt when I read *The Golden Gate* or saw the opening scene of the *Matrix*.

This year, I'm at the inaugural session and Dalrymple strides in carrying a shawl. Dalrymple and Namita Gokhale are the two directors of the festival, and Sanjoy Roy of Teamwork Films, the producer. This is the fifth year of the festival, and it owes its format to two contrasting visions, which continue to drive the direction it has taken. One is Gokhale's who believes that writing in Indian languages remains unrepresented and low profile and wants the festival to help correct that imbalance, the other is Dalrymple's, who for years saw IWE (Indian Writers in English) at festivals around the globe, but not in India. They've blended these two themes with a host of international authors from around the world. And best of all, attendance for all events is free.

The drumbeats outside are mounting prior to the opening address, as

is the crowd, and soon the Durbar Hall is packed. Gokhale spots Gulzar standing in the middle of the hall and refuses to continue till he comes and takes a seat.

That's the great thing about a democracy. I remember in 2009 Vikram Seth came in to attend a session, and was standing in a corner at the back of the hall until an overwhelmed fan gave him a seat. In China, you'd probably have been taken out and shot for not giving up your seat.

From an adjunct to the Jaipur Virasat Festival, conceived by Faith Singh, the literary fest has taken on a life of its own with the 2010 avatar having 200+ authors from every part of the globe and an expected 40,000 visitors. The range of partners and sponsors for the festival is mind-boggling — everyone from the American Centre to Merrill Lynch to the Government of Scotland. There's a controversy in Scotland right now about the fact that the Scottish government has given a grant of £10,000 to the Jaipur Literature Festival and that it could have been better spent on promoting literacy in Scotland. "What did you spend the money on Will?" says Sandy (urf Sir Alexander McCall Smith). "Your hotel room!" pat comes the answer.

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and African-American history scholar and writer Henry Louis Gates Jr. were supposed to kick off the proceedings on the front lawns, but as Dalrymple told us later, there had been an issue in



the route to 9/11, is clearly irritated with a questioner who wants to know why the mainstream media dismisses alternate theories or explanations to extraordinary events like 9/11. Wright says that he wished that those with these theories spent the time and effort to research and justify their alternate takes on reality, rather than criticise the efforts of a group of people who are researching what they put out. The questioner walks out.

What's also good is that each session lasts for precisely one hour, with the last 10-15 minutes reserved for audience questions, which keeps it tight. The audience too is a high-quality, multi-cultural one. Whether it's Javed Akhtar standing up and questioning Steve Coll, author of *The Bin Ladens* on whether he doesn't think that the root of Islamic extremism is the inability of the West to solve the Palestine issue (the American ambassador was in the audience), to Aman Nath, co-founder of the Neemrana Group of Hotels, getting up and making a statement at the end of the Om and Nandita Puri session.

"Nandita should have told Barkha to shut up and asked her to focus on the other parts of the book instead of going on about my liaisons," growled Om Puri in conversation with Delhi journalist Namita Bhandare and Nand-

ita Puri on his wife's recent biography of him *An Unlikely Hero*. The discussion starts off with a reference to "elephant on the lawn", or the controversy raked up by the excerpting of two passages from the book in *Tehelka* and then later on in the week, Dutt's grilling of Nandita on NDTV. The passages, from a chapter titled Relationships, focused on some of Om's earlier sexual history in particular with a woman who lived and worked in his house. "I wasn't upset with the book, I was upset with the way the book was introduced," says Om.

Bhandare then asks Om about the contrast between the films he made in the '80s and the '90s and those he's doing now, including *Singh is Kinng*. Om brings the house down as he hangs his head and says in a gruff, Papa Bear voice, "I'm sorry Namita, I worked in *Singh is Kinng*." In another session Geoff Dyer says that his book won a prize for the best comedy and the prize was to have a pig named after the book, so somewhere there's a pig named Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi. One of the previous winners, DBC Pierre, was apparently so excited that he rode the pig. Unfortunately, the onset of H1N1 meant that Dyer couldn't do likewise.

In yet another session Applebaum tells us that Stalin escaped from Czar-

ist camps and figured that he had to have camps that no one could escape from. And Sir Alexander McCall Smith recalls that on a trip to Botswana, he went with a friend to a woman's house who was supplying them the chicken for their lunch. The woman, who was traditionally built, chased the chicken around the yard and then wrung its neck. The image stayed in Sir Alex's head for a while, and gradually evolved into Mme Ramotswa.

The Diggi Palace is a nice setting for the festival. I'm sipping a beer at Slow, the all-day dining area situated at one end of the hotel with the

*SAHGAL SAYS THAT AS A NATION WE ARE SEXUALLY REPRESSED. EDWINA'S LETTERS TO NEHRU, CLAIMS CATHERINE, ARE BEING HELD UNDER WRAPS BY THE GANDHI FAMILY. GOOD CLEAN FUN*

Durbar Hall in front of me, and the Mughal Tent and the Baithak on my left and right. I can hear voices in different languages from the venues around me. Lulled by the beer I'm in no mood to attend a full session at the moment, but I soon wake up and wander into the Mughal Tent and listen to writers Nayantara Sahgal and Catherine Clement in discussion on the latter's book on Edwina and Nehru. Sahgal is quite clear that as a nation we're sexually repressed and we like to pretend that we lack sexual organs, which is a reason for the very real relationship between the two not being talked about. Edwina's letters to Nehru, claims Catherine, are being held under wraps by members of the Gandhi family. Good clean fun.

Full Circle is the official bookshop for the fest, and has a nice stall, which on a daily basis displays books by the featured authors so that you can pick them up and get them autographed. Penguin India has a neat stall that is short on books but long on aesthetics. There are a couple of minor food stalls and in the morning and evening hot chai is dished out free of cost in kulhars to all comers. Children from Step by Step, the Noida-based school, have set up an art show-cum-sale on the front lawns.

Tina Brown has described it as "the greatest literary show on earth" and she says it is not without reason. It's a literature festival but it's not high-brow at all (except for Amit Chaudhuri!) and besides the great blend of writers there is music and live performances each evening, including an absolutely brilliant performance by guitarist Titi Robin's French quartet in accompaniment with two Rajasthani musicians and Gulabo, a Kalbelia dancer.

At the inaugural session, Gulzar narrated his nostalgic poem 'Kitabein', about books and their being abandoned. Later on, there's a Barkha Dutt compered session 'Can the Internet save books?', with an illustrious panel comprising Steve Coll, Vikram Chandra, Tunku Varadarajan, Prasoona Joshi, Gulzar, Navtej Sarna and Tina Brown. Based on what I see during the course of the all-too-brief two days I have spent here, we have no such worries in India. If the organisers stay true to their ideals and to the thousands of people around the world who come for this festival, books are in safe hands in India.

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Fans crowd around Chetan Bhagat