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# Reconfiguring "Asian Australian" writing: Australia, India and Inez Baranay

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PAUL SHARRAD

*Reconfiguring “Asian Australian” Writing:  
Australia, India and Inez Baranay*

In the fifty or so years of building recognition for first “migrant” and then “multicultural” writing in Australia, it is a fair generalisation to say that visible emphasis shifted from European to East and Southeast Asian voices without much mention of South Asians. Some might attribute this to an exclusionary domination of the label “Asian Australian” by one ethnic group under the influence perhaps of critical debates in the US, or they might regard such a label, whatever it means, as a neo-colonial homogenising of ethnicities and cultural differences by ongoing white hegemony (Rizvi). Without playing a blame game, one can suggest reasons for the greater attention in Australia to diasporic writing by people of Chinese ethnic origin. One might even point to notable exceptions, as with the clear visibility on the national literary scene of Sri Lankan, Yasmine Gooneratne, Filipina Merlinda Bobis and recently – albeit with only small claim to hyphenated Australian identity – Indian Aravind Adiga. (No writer is quite so Australian as when they win the Booker Prize, J. M. Coetzee being another instance). Nonetheless, the relative paucity of non-Chinese names in “Asian-Australian writing” lists rather proves the general rule that the “Asian” label commonly means something other than “South Asian”.

By contrast to the history and size of Chinese immigration, Indians came in comparatively tiny numbers, were perceived because of the subcontinent’s position within the British Empire as somehow less alien, and tended to work in areas (whether as early camel drivers or later medical professionals) that were not threateningly competitive with white workers. As a consequence, they enjoyed relative invisibility or languished under it. Significant numbers of South Asians only

began to arrive after the relaxing of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s and so, apart from the one or two who had university or school positions (Gooneratne, Adib Khan), it has not been until their children acquired the education, leisure habits and a curiosity born of cultural ambivalence that a substantial body of writing emerges. I am interested in tracking that emergence, not only as a way of filling out the picture of Asian-Australian writing, but also, and in the context of calls by Robert Dixon and others to move beyond nation-bound frameworks for studying Australian literature, to see how the Indian connection at the Australian end is matched by an Australian connection in India, and how Australian literary studies might assume a different kind of “Asian-Australian” appearance viewed from the Indian side of a trans-national circuit.

As an anthology like Robin Gerster’s *Hotel Asia* shows, there is a long literary tradition of Australian contact with South Asia, from jolly, patronising (sometimes self-mocking) colonial travelogues (Molly Skinner, *Tucker sees India*, 1937) to full-on historical romance (F. J. Thwaites, *The Oasis of Shalimar*, 1950) to fictional accounts of the shock of monocultural Anglo-Australians encountering the teeming throngs of Hindu India (C. J. Koch’s *Across the Sea Wall*, 1965). Perhaps these three provide a template for most of white Australia’s writing about Asia. We can trace the first category through a series of journalistic contacts to the popular romp through religious centres, Sarah Macdonald’s *Holy Cow* (2002); the second leads to the still best-selling *Shantaram* (2003), an adventure romance, even if it is based on autobiographical fact; and the third to Inez Baranay’s *Neem Dreams* (2003). There are interesting variations on the recipe found in then journalist Christopher Kremmer’s dispatches combined with his own story of marrying into Delhi society (*Inhaling the Mahatma*, 2006), in Ethel Anderson’s strange mix of Kiplingesque yarns gleaned from her time in India as wife of a British military officer, and Australia’s interest in postcolonial politics appears in Hugh Atkinson’s novel about a cross-racial liaison during the Indian takeover of Goa, *The Pink and the Brown* (1957). Fictional attempts seriously to show the complexities of engaging with Indian culture might be said to begin with Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Ivory Swing* (1980). Globalising popular culture takes in

India in David Foster's fictional rock-band world tour in *Plumbum* (1983). I am concentrating on India here, and am also focused on fiction; for every prose encounter with South Asia there are probably five to ten poems and they can mostly be classified in the same broad framework.

We could argue that as time has passed, the "mainstream" Australian literary connection to India has tailed off. This is perhaps due to the dwindling of common ties to Britain, to "market saturation" thanks to the generations of youth taking the hippie trail (Vicky Viidikas being an Australian example), and more recently to a perceived increase in levels of violence and xenophobia on the subcontinent. Journalistic writing has continued, however, and there are signs of a renewed interest in the region, sparked in part by the international success of Indian writers, a continuing growth of studies in Australian literature in India, and the impact of globalisation on our collective consciousness. One sign of this is the recent anthology of Australian encounters with India, *Sadhus and Spinners*, a collaboration between Bruce Bennett and Susan Cowan of the Australian Defence Forces Academy and Santosh Sareen of Jawaharlal Nehru University, published by Harper Collins India.

For Indians, both colonial and post-colonial, Australia is seen in literature as a second-rate bolthole for refugees from independence (Allan Sealy, *The Trotter-nama*) and a last-resort destination for ne'er-do-wells (Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*). Otherwise it rates little mention outside of the cricket ground or protests against mistreatment of Indian students. The reclaiming of Non Resident Indians as favoured children of the motherland is a recent phenomenon and fixated on the UK and US and stories of economic success. It will take a while for books like Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, with its exploration of diasporic Indians in Burma and Malaya, or more recently Peggy Mohan's novel about Indians in Mauritius and the Caribbean (*Jahajin*, 2008) to find parallels in Australia. Within the writing by Australians set in their own country, we do, however, find a few links to India and its exporting of labour to the antipodes. Sally Morgan, in her process of self discovery as Aboriginal is told to explain her skin colour by claiming she's an Indian (*My Place*, 38), and Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) mentions amongst his supporting cast of characters (Ali) Barbu Ram,

general hawker of Indian products, catcher of finches for the international market, collector of horse-hair and cow tails, and a general figure of ridicule. Robyn Davidson invokes the “Afghan” immigration of the 1860s onwards much more respectfully when she writes of her camel trek across the central west of the continent (*Tracks*, 1980) and the switch from carting goods to farming vegetables by Punjabis in pre-war Victoria is recorded with a mixture of comic disparagement and affectionate regard in Eve Langley’s *The Pea Pickers* (1948). More recently, Thomas Keneally dramatises his Irish grandparents’ part in the establishment of Kempsey in northern New South Wales (*A River Town*, 1995) and gives a leading secondary role to Bandy Habash, a Muslim Punjabi hawker who supplies mercery and medicines to country farms.

The Punjabi migration provides the material for the first Indo-Australian literary work, the story collection *Time of the Peacock* (1965) by Mena Abdullah in collaboration with Ray Mathew. Something of a rural idyll, it records a cross-communal marriage and settling in to life on a sheep farm with a cast of typical bush characters. The impact lies in depictions of nostalgia for India and the organic link to traditional practices. Sporadic stories and poems by mostly Anglo-Indian migrants appear over the following decades, and stories by Chitra Fernando, an Australian academic from Sri Lanka mostly appeared in her home country or through Writers Workshop, Calcutta. A consistently visible South Asian literary presence is, however, not established until the post-1970s era of multiculturalism. Yasmine Gooneratne’s amusing critique of stereotypes and assimilationist attitudes in *A Change of Skies* (1991) received the kind of positive attention that opened up spaces for other writers. Ernest Macintyre’s plays, notably *Let them eat Curry* (1985), spoke of the Sri Lankan experience in Australia, a connection kept alive in fiction by Chandani Lokuge’s work. The increasing intellectual clout overseas of diaspora studies and India’s developing taste, through its globalised publishing industry, for “chick lit” and call-centre comedies, finds its Indo-hip equivalent in Australia in Shalini Akhil’s *The Bollywood Beauty* (2005), which brings the internet together with migrant generational conflict and the classic search for a suitable boy. Poets Dipti Saravanamuttu and Pooja Mittal (with other work published in New Zealand and Singapore) bring a consistent output to

South Asian-Australian writing, and Anglo-Indian-heritage Michelle Cahill has her own book of verse and edits the multicultural literary journal *Mascara*. Christine Mangala writes novels about Indian life with an evangelical purpose. Chris Raja is writing short stories – the list is getting longer and more diverse.

By contrast, Indians residing in their home country writing about Australia are few and far between, although there is some Tamil and Bengali writing that circulates in local magazines as well as in community publications in Australia. The only trackable book is *Australia Helix* (1983), a sequence of poems by a visiting academic, Prof K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, although Professor Chamal Nahal produced a historical novel of the Gandhian period that depicts some Australian characters. Amitava Ray returned to Calcutta after extended stay to publish a novella and books of poetry. Malaya Gangopadhyay taught linguistics at Monash for some time and published an autobiography and critical essays in Bengali in Calcutta. Adib Khan reports that *Seasonal Adjustments* was translated into Bangla and was well received, save for some offended army officers (Mabbot-Athique interview).

Despite these connections, there is not a consistent or equal two-way literary traffic between India and Australia. Publishers in English are certainly mushrooming on the subcontinent and they are on the look-out for marketable material with some local relevance, so NRI (overseas Indian) autobiographies are creeping onto the shelves. It is interesting to see that this, plus the conference circuit and interest in South Asian Australian writing sees Bem LeHunte (*The Seduction of Silence*), David McMahon (*Vegemite Vindaloo*), Chandani Lokugé (*If the Moon Smiled*) and Yasmine Gooneratne (*Masterpieces*) on lists of Indian publishers. Adib Khan and now Pakistani-Australian Azhar Abidi also have work on bookshop shelves in major stores. Amongst the few with no family links to South Asia, Steve Toltz's *A Fraction of the Whole* is out with Penguin India, Colleen McCullough has two titles with Harper Collins and Janette Turner Hospital's *Due Preparations for the Plague* appears as part of an Indian boom in books on terrorism.

Curiosity about Aborigines, and comparisons of underclass cultural politics in India and indigenous issues in Australia result in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Kim Scott's *Benang* and even a book of creation

stories being briefly taken up by Indian publishing houses. In many cases, it has been personal visits followed up by interest from teachers of Australian studies in India that has caused titles to be adopted. Runs are small and titles disappear from lists quickly. Australia is a very foreign country in many ways and it is only books with Indian connections that seem to make a splash. During a visit in early 2009, for example, I found Sarah Macdonald's debunking travelogue *Holy Cow* on roadside stalls in Rajasthan and Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram* at most railway booksellers. Aravind Adiga's mix of birthplace, Booker and NRI background meant you could buy *The White Tiger* from children peddling magazines at any intersection in a major city. The effect of all this is to produce a quite different view of Australian literature as a body of work from what is discussed in Australian academe. Apart from universities holding to the established study of White, Wright and Hope, plus the later additions of Carey, Malouf and Murray, the most visible Australian writing in India is by Aborigines and South Asian diasporic writers (not always acknowledged as Australians).

What is interesting as well is the gradual inter-penetration of the two countries in ways that go beyond the "home and away" model of diaspora and call for new terms like "transnational" and "cosmopolitan". Australia's most quintessentially diasporic South Asian writer is probably Satendra Nandan, who rehearses a doubleness and exile in part related to India but also to his birthplace, Fiji (to where he has now returned). Christopher Cyrill, on the other hand, is born in Australia of Anglo-Indian parents, and though he writes about imaginative ties to the country of his ancestors, his is neither a nostalgic doubled consciousness nor a freely bricolaging multinational world. Equally, Suneeta Peres Da Costa records a migrant mother's mental anguish at separation from her native Goa, but centres the "homework" of her novel's title on the daughter's troubled but resolutely Australian world. *Homework* does take in international affairs and a sardonic demolition of nationalist stereotypes and the easy ideals of multiculturalism, but nonetheless refuses ethnic separation, diasporic longing and an insouciant globalised consumerism. Bem LeHunte's writing is more aligned with a diasporic mode, but Sri Lankan Michelle de Kretser

writes of France at the time of Revolution, late colonial times in her birthplace, and in *The Lost Dog* frames the nostalgia of an Anglo-Indian family settled in Australia within a global cosmopolitan outlook. “Transnational” seems to be the most appropriate label with which to read such writing. Similar complications can be found in the poetry of, say, Sudesh Mishra, a diasporic Indian, but several generations removed, from Fiji, long resident in Australia (and for a time in the UK), who not only writes about his childhood, but also records with modernist irony visits to his cultural homeland India alongside of lyric and satiric evocations of Australia.

We might find an interesting subtle reversal under transnational movements in which it is India that absorbs elements of Australia and so puts us outside of, or at least at a tangent to, the usual discussions centred on multicultural or migrant writing within Australia. In this context, the idea of “Asian-Australian” comes to mean not only writing in Australia by people of Asian origin, but also writing by Australians of any origin that begins to take up, shall we say, an “operative place” within (South) Asia. I’ve already indicated the adoption of some writers by Indian publishers as a starting point in this process, but there are other factors as well. Les Murray has had one collection of poems published in India and another translated into Bengali, and has begun to occupy a space in English departments there as a surrogate Indian – or at least as an Australian occasion for discussing Indian matters – via his “Walking to the Cattle Place” sequence that speculates on the world civilisational history of nomadic herders, connecting Australia’s rural heritage with the Aryan settlement of the Indus and Gangetic plains (Sharma, Singh). And, as mentioned, Aboriginal writers and works with Aboriginal themes are co-opted into an Indian discussion about race and caste relations (Baranay, “Multiculturalism” 129–30). The “new age” movement that drew Australians to India also generates a fascinating blending of cultural references and experiences such as occurs in the circuit of Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo going to India, writing in Australia, and then being examined by Indian scholars (Bhadoria).

What is also interesting is how two writers who in this country are discussed as Bangladesh- and Pakistani-origin diasporic Australians

(the already mentioned Adib Khan and Azhar Abidi) are circulated from New Delhi as though they are part of the global spread of Non Resident Indians. Khan in fact has family links to India as well as Pakistan and did write a Rushdie-like novel set in India (*The Storyteller*), but it is his thriller on a fundamentalist group in Bangladesh, *The Spiral Road* that has displaced his more autobiographical diasporic works from Indian lists. Adib Khan is interesting for his own literary trajectory, regardless of how he is read abroad, since his novels begin with the classic melancholia of the diasporic “exile”, trace a journey to the homeland that leaves the protagonist divided and finally suspended in an existential limbo, then move to a fabulist treatment of India, and follow up with a very good book on Vietnam veterans (*Homecoming*). His counterpart Abidi messes up this transnational, perhaps critically attractive, circuit by beginning with a fabulist novel set in Renaissance Europe (*Passarola Rising*) and then writes his book of family memories from life before migration (*Twilight*). Adib Khan makes the point that “the voice of diaspora is beginning to sound a bit tired” and writers need to “force their way into the mainstream” (Mabbot-Athique) so as not to get stuck, but once books are taken up in other countries, he admits that “they may not be widely read and perhaps not categorized as Australian writers, but that they will open... up vistas that lead to further debate and self-questioning about identity and belonging” (Khan 2009, 9).

Another quite different writer inhabiting transnational space, physically and imaginatively, and who has the distinction of having her last two books first published and reviewed in India, is Inez Baranay. She takes a more positive view of the possibilities for cross-cultural negotiations, although she is also aware of the self-interest and ignorance that runs interference on harmonious understanding. Baranay is a feminist who argues with orthodox white middle-class feminism (in and around her early novels set in Sydney, *The Saddest Pleasure* and *Pagan*), a “multicultural writer” who argues with multiculturalism, a socially committed person who adheres to the truth of writing rather than the writing of truth – she is a hard writer to pin down. Baranay has travelled now at least eight times to India, perhaps finding refuge there from her inherited Euro-Australian diasporic binary. In between

she has written fiction based on time in Indonesia (*The Edge of Bali*) and a shaped-up “report” on volunteer work in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (*Rascal Rain*). Sensitive to the finer nuances of neo-imperialist power, she can still take up a combative “no-bullshit” stance to defend her right to represent “the other” in her writing (Baranay, “Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh”, 62). Her work might be taken as a case study of Deleuzian deterritorialised nomadology as her essays slide between authoritative pronouncements in which her own fiction seems to be quoted like sociological evidence, and a Derridean self-critique in which text and meta-text mutually break down any position from which to speak with authority.

Baranay nonetheless engages with the problematics of transnational material and cultural flows as her own position and that of her fiction moves “Asian Australian writing” into a transnational mode where Australian writing does cultural work within Asian spaces. Baranay critiques a politically correct condemnation of the transnational writer, arguing that it seeks an impossible position of purity outside of the situation being tackled (Baranay, “Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh”, 63). Her novel *Neem Dreams* shows the messy complicity of everyone in modernity, in global trade, in self-interested encounters with another culture, but nonetheless reserves the right to say something. Baranay’s experiences of tourism in Bali and development projects in PNG equip her to hook into ecological struggles in India and criticise the operations of global “biopiracy” (Indra and Pinto, 159) – the commodification of everything in the interests of multinational corporate control of resources.

Since few people outside of India will have read the book, let me indulge in a short summary. Pandora, a Greek-Australian feminist with a conscience, goes to India to seek out a project worthy of Australian support and an article she needs to publish. Of course, her name suggests mythic mayhem arising from her do-gooding. Her selected project is a self-help cottage industry employing village women to collect seeds from the neem tree. It’s run by Meenakshi, a US-educated Tamil woman who starts it up because she is disappointed with her lot after returning to rural South India, having married into a conservative family. Her husband Prashant runs a factory processing neem

but is constrained by his uncle's political interests and local communal unrest spurred by manipulated unemployment. Also hunting for Meenakshi is Jade, another Australian, but one who has sold her feminist soul to the New York fashion trade and is after exclusive rights to turn the local craft project into a supply chain for health-care product. Into this mix comes Andy, a British lawyer to whom Jade is attracted but who turns out to be gay. His partner has died of AIDS and he brings the ashes to the Ganges for dispersal and, HIV positive himself, seeks a health cure from Ayurvedic medicine. Neem holds all these people together as the neem tree also shades the centre of the small town where Meenakshi lives.

The prospect of big money and the threat of international patenting of a freely available local resource divides men from women, rich from poor, left from right, resident from foreigner, husband from wife. Jade goes to buy statues of Ganesh and is caught up in a religious gathering. Already edgy because of communal unrest, it becomes a trampling mob and she disappears under it to reappear only as a mythified sakti figure (268–70). Pandora visits the village where women harvest the neem and farmers mount a Gandhian protest when news comes of international appropriation of local crops (243). Her good intentions are challenged by a local activist who mocks Western universalism and says if Pandora is going to tell any story, she had better only tell her own (248). When Andy rejoins her having tracked down the corporate raid on intellectual property rights, they debate how best to act so as to bring national and world attention to the problem. In a passage framed by words like “say, suppose, imagine”, they see their own story merging with the Indian one under globalisation and fling a protest slogan to watching children while torching the seed store, possibly incinerating themselves in the process (276–7). This symbolic sacrifice seems to match a burning-out of passions in the real life of the community, although there the destruction is at the expense of the poor. The dreams of all the characters appear to go up in a conflagration that may or may not be redemptive. Critics Indra and Pinto claim the book for ecofeminism and a spiritual tie to nature and location, but it is also a “problem play” intent on setting out the complexities of modern struggles and our conflicted positions within them.

What is of interest in the context of the “Asian Australian” discussion is how such a text begins to circulate within a South Asian critical space, even more so than in an Australian one. Richard Nile has detailed the ways in which “British publishers such as Hodder & Stoughton have been a factor in Australian cultural history” (28); perhaps with the globalisation of the market and the current opening up of printing and publishing in India to overseas conglomerates, Australian literature will develop similar circuits of production and reception in India. For Baranay, Swati Pal takes the common line of Indian reviewers, praising the book for “digging deep” rather than just retailing stereotypes, and picking up on the “outrage” against global commerce that keeps the third world poor and boils beneath “paragraphs of poetic prose”. Pal sees how Australians’ self-conscious late/post/colonial condition can make them “sensitive to their Otherness ‘in a manner akin to the Oriental’,” but also remarks on Baranay being something of a “fringe writer” (2–3). The observation is pertinent. Baranay, in person and in prose, has been a wanderer, finding her family’s European origins (ethnically Hungarian, but she was born in Italy) putting her on the margins of Australia’s mainstream, even under the illusory glow of multiculturalism (see Baranay, “Multiculturalism, Globalisation and Worldliness”). India allows her to forget her “ethnic” identity and be “fully” Australian, but at the same time, she finds herself alien to India but assuming the status of honorary belonging by virtue of long contact via her study of yoga and her books appearing within the Indian market. This ambiguous contact allows her to see things in Indian society that locals have neglected or refused to see so that Pal’s review sounds a note of shock in its call to pay attention to what the novel shows about self-interest, corruption, communal hostilities and Hindu fundamentalism manufactured by politicians. But the novel admits that, “you can never see everything you’re looking at” (8) and is careful to show the limitations of each foreign and NRI perspective. The multi-perspective text of *Neem Dreams* owes something to Baranay’s respect for Forster’s *A Passage to India* (271, 277, Baranay, “Aspects of Two Novels”), but it also derives from her own sense of displacement – she and some commentators, not inappropriately, mention another wanderer, Jean Rhys (Baranay, “Scene Stealers”; “Six

Texts Prefigure a Seventh”, 50). For many in India the book is not an easy read, either as a piece of fictional prose or as a picture of contemporary society. Smita Agarwal, for example, finds it “strident” (191) and wearily full of stereotypic images (189). This might be excused in that the Westerners through whose eyes the story is mostly registered are all tourists of a kind (as Baranay observes in interview with Santhanam), but Agarwal also finds their perceptions dominated by programmatic ideas and authorial stage managing (189).

There’s no question that the book is conscious of theories of cultural studies and postcolonial politics of representation (219–20), and the second-person narration used at times can seem forced, but this is the world of the contemporary global, especially for educated Australians working for New York companies and Indians educated in US universities, and the second-person narrative device, unusual as it is, is I think an attempt to hold personal impressions at a distance and allow us a distance from which to judge the drama that is otherwise a kaleidoscope of personalities and perspectives. If Baranay’s narrative sounds at times dogmatic, it usually does so in a second-level rehearsing of clichés from travellers or guidebooks or turns out to be an internal monologue of self-questioning in one of the characters (e.g., 40–41). There is certainly a message in the book and a central interest in the choices we make (48–9), but it rests on a vision of non-didactic interactivity. She sees the worldliness of her work as resting in the productivity of writing itself. The shape and meaning of the story comes out of the writing process as much as, if not more than, being the prior stratum re-presented in the text (Baranay, “Multiculturalism, Globalisation and Worldliness”, 122; “Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh”, 54). Sissy Helff’s work on diasporic writing takes up ideas from the German theorist Ulrich Beck to posit a mode of “transcultural narrative unreliability” that includes “insistent self reflexivity”, “plural realities” and “uncertainty” (5). Helff applies this to a reading of Peres da Costa’s *Homework*, but its tactic of making meaning of “transcultural modernities” (7) is also evident in Baranay’s orchestration of multiple viewpoints, voices, cultural backgrounds and rhythms (9), and perhaps it can be applied to our critical categories as well.

This idea of emergence through process relates to the way we construct critical categories, and to how they might change. “Asian Australian” has emerged as a useful label because of certain historical and cultural movements, and it can be modified further as circumstances change. Here, it can be made to include South as well as East and Southeast Asian, and perhaps gradually it can be used as a way of thinking about the transnational spread of Australian writing in general into the Asian region. This is not to claim a spurious or easy belonging. Baranay’s ideas of process derived from many years spent studying Iyengar yoga, often at ashrams in India. She allows for cultural interchange and transnational modification of identity, but makes no claims on belonging: “I am not pretending to be an Indian. [but] It is a positive aspect of globalisation that we live in hybrid cultures... nativity doesn’t define us.” (Baranay, “Multiculturalism, Globalisation and Worldliness”, 129–30). Nativity can limit our vision, however, and Baranay wanted to test the response of Indian readers, knowing that the average Australian reader might not be able to respond (Santhanam). In fact, going on the author’s own accounts, Australian publishers still have a largely exotic late-colonial view of India, refusing to take up her nuanced exploration of local and global interactions in South India as “unrealistic” (personal communication).

Baranay spent some time at Griffith University both as a creative writing teacher and a doctoral candidate. Her interest in technical things like point of view and voice and her experiences with yoga and India merge in an imaginative update of Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge*. In Baranay’s *With the Tiger*, Larry, a philosophically minded-young man receives a small inheritance and forsakes his upwardly mobile Brisbane fiancée to go on the “hippie trail”. The fates of girlfriend and seeker are tracked by a gay playwright (modelled on Maugham) who moves in the art circles of Sydney, so that passion and yuppie style run in counterpoint with ascetic renunciation. In many respects, it is a very Australian book (not unlike some of Janette Turner Hospital’s bifocal novels), if only because Baranay feels the need to inject some social purpose into Larry’s spiritual quest – “what will he DO?” she asks herself (Baranay, “Scene Stealers”), but it has been written largely in India and taken up there by Harper Collins rather than by an

Australian publisher. This may well have to do with the very slow pace of the story, something suited to the meditative life of the central but often absent character Larry, and to readers more attuned to spiritual themes than the putatively materialist Australian reader. This takes Baranay beyond the kind of ethnic-based writing that allows ghettoising in some small corner of “Ozlit”, but it also means that she becomes the marginal “dis-placed” figure Pal finds her to be. Australian publishers decline her work because it no longer fits in the kinds of pigeonholes the nation and the Miles Franklin Award find convenient, and it refuses to trade in the stereotypes of India that will sell overseas. An Indian publisher (and not an Indian-based multinational) takes her up, but there are so many writers in India and so relatively few Anglophone readers, and even fewer publishers and bookshops in Australia that will pick up titles from India. It will be a while before significant levels of interaction emerge; perhaps only a Booker prize will break the barriers. Nonetheless, to quote Baranay: “writers need to walk around in all of the world” (Baranay and Guest, 6). It looks as though Indian and Australian writers are beginning to wander into each other’s spaces and settle there in increasingly numerous and complex ways.

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