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Abstract
As a child growing up in Kerala where her grandmother ran a pickle factory, Arundhati Roy dreamt of being a writer but, out of the need to earn a living, she went on to pursue a degree in architecture. A truly free spirit, she did a number of jobs, including selling cakes on beaches in Goa, before marrying a filmmaker and turning to acting and script-writing.
As a child growing up in Kerala where her grandmother ran a pickle factory, Arundhati Roy dreamt of being a writer but, out of the need to earn a living, she went on to pursue a degree in architecture. A truly free spirit, she did a number of jobs, including selling cakes on beaches in Goa, before marrying a filmmaker and turning to acting and script-writing.

After spending five years on her first novel, Roy showed it to an editor who sent it to a literary agent who in turn managed to secure for it an advance of £150,000 off a very excited Harper Collins. Deals were tied up across the world and the advance reached £1m, a record which shot Roy into limelight and led critics to declare, months before the Booker shortlist was announced, that *The God of Small Things* would be the 1997 winner.

On meeting Roy a couple of weeks before her grand Booker finale, I inevitably brought up the B-word, and asked if she was nervous at the thought of the big night. She simply shrugged her beautiful shoulders, blushed slightly, fluttered her eyelashes and admitted: ‘Oh, I guess.’ That’s it? An endearingly modest response perhaps, but hardly what was expected of a writer of whom A.S. Byatt complained: ‘She just writes too many words.’

Persevering, I asked what she planned to put into her acceptance speech, should she win the prize, and discovered that she hadn’t in fact prepared one: ‘I don’t know why, I can’t bring myself to believe that I’ll actually win it.’ Such an attitude is undoubtedly touching; it also suggests a certain amount of self-confidence. Indeed, Roy serenely informed me that she had not even read any of the other works on the shortlist. This seems like a rather egotistical statement but Roy claims that ‘they’re just not available in India, and I only just came from there. It’s not on principle at all.’

Faced with Roy’s ever so peaceful beauty, I suddenly felt like a very unbalanced and over-excited Westerner. All things considered then, it was probably bad etiquette to ask this self-possessed woman what she would do with the £21,000 prize money if she were to win. An elegant eyebrow was slightly raised and I got a look that put me in my place: ‘Money is a very difficult question. I mean, I’ve made so much money from this book, I don’t know what to do with it. I want to do something with it but I don’t know what. You have to be mature about it you know, it’s not just a joke.’

But surely she must have been just a little bit pleased over the record
advance she got for the book? ‘I don’t know what’s record about it. The thing to remember about it is that it was really publishers at work. It’s not one person saying, ‘I’ll give you a million dollars,” y’know. And what’s a more important thing, that the book vaulted across all these cultural barriers.’ Yes, even I could see that that must make her very proud: ‘No, it’s not pride, it’s being touched. It’s really touching to see that something can connect across the world.’

Roy may have won fans across the globe but support is not undivided in her own country. In her home state of Kerala, a local man has started court proceedings against her on the grounds of obscenity in view of her inclusion of sexual relations between a Christian woman and an Untouchable. Even in the face of this less pleasant attention, Roy remains unruffled. She puts the proceedings down to jealousy over her success and is confident that, if she plays it cool, things will all blow over. The court system, she says, is such that her time will be taken up, for months or even years, but the worst possible outcome to this inconvenience is that the court will tell her to remove chapters from the book. She will then refuse to do so and *The God of Small Things* will not be published in India.

Her view, it seems, is that it will be more India’s loss than hers. Roy, as her writing shows, does not hesitate to voice her criticisms of India. In her novel, set in the 1960s, she portrays several female characters whose lives are severely constrained: one woman marries a drunkard to escape her claustrophobic family, another is regularly beaten by her husband. I asked Roy whether things have improved now: ‘Not really. The kind of things that happened to my women characters, the level of helplessness, is still there. But India embraces several centuries. You have a woman like me who lives a completely new life (but I have had to fight for it) and then there are women living in medieval times. There is no one woman where you can say, “this is representative of the country”.’

In spite of her willingness to speak her mind, Roy is devoted to India, so I asked her about the ‘50 Years of Independence’ celebrations in her country. Apparently, nothing much happened there: ‘We refer to 1997 as the BBC Festival. In India there has been so much political chaos and there are so many other things to worry about. Besides, we feel a little older than 50. People treat India as such an old country and yet they talk about it being 50. It’s really the West latching onto something and getting excited. I don’t really know much about it but people keep asking me to write on the subject, but I have said no.’

Roy is an enigmatic and even mysterious woman but one thing that shone through was her love for her book. During the five years she spent writing it, she became very involved with her characters and felt, on completion of *The God of Small Things*, ‘as if I was leading them out into the world, abandoning them’. Understandably, while she was writing it, the novel was a very important part of her life: ‘My friends used to tease
me and say it was like my bomb shelter.'

It came as a shock then when she declared that she didn’t know if she would ever write another book: ‘Well, it isn’t something you can control completely. Somehow there is something you have to respect and it sometimes works and it sometimes doesn’t. It’s not like having a nine to five job where you can think, “I’ll do this and then I’ll do that”. It’s not like that. So I fear it in a way.’ I’m sure though it’s a fear the formidable Arundhati Roy will overcome.