

“DIFFERENT WRITERS AT DIFFERENT TIMES IN MY LIFE HAVE INFLUENCED ME”

Mani Rao was born in India in 1965. She is the author of six books of poetry and her writing has been published in numerous journals including Chandrabhaga, Wasafiri, West-CoastLine and Meanjin. Mani has been invited to many international literary festivals over the years including recently to PEN World Voices 2006 in New York. Other recent activities have been as the 2006 Writer-In-Residence at the University of Iowa and as a visiting Fellow of the 2005 University of Iowa International Writing Program. She previously worked in the advertising industry and moved to Hong Kong in 1993. She is now writing and traveling, lives sometimes in Hong Kong, sometimes in India.

RT: Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

MR: Too vast a question! Some of my past selves can be met in my writing.

RT: How long have you been writing? What kickstarted the process?

MR: I have been writing since I was 12 or 13. It may have functioned as a refuge, but I am not sure - I doubt if there is one situational formula that will 'start' everyone. Martha said writers; visual artists and musicians are interrupted yogis from a

previous life.

RT: Does your work come in the way of your creative writing? How regularly do you write?

MR: I stopped working in early 2004 to give myself time I needed, i.e., not only to convert into writing. In the days when I had a regular job, it did not come in the way of my writing - I thought One made the other possible. I give myself no timetables for writing, even now, I write for my sake, not for writing's sake

RT: Have any writers had a particular influence on you?

MR: Different writers at different times in my life have influenced me. Earlier, Camus, Gide, Robbe-Grillet. Later, Musil, Pessoa were my inspiration. Recently, I've come to see there is no difference, it is all one mass, one tends to feel that whatever reflects, develops or challenges oneself the best right then is influencing one.

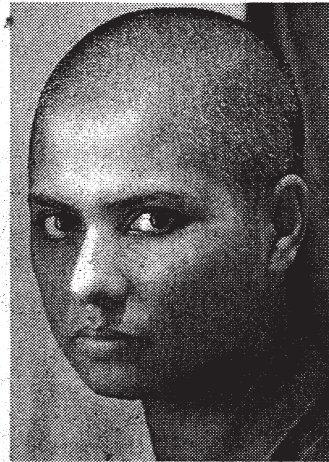
RT: Does the writer's relationship to the text change as the book is published and promoted?

MR: I don't think so.

RT: What are your aims as a writer?

MR: To stop writing.

RT: Have you ever felt a sense of deprivation or loss by the fact that



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you are unable to write in Telugu which I suppose you can speak fluently enough?

MR: My parents know Telugu, a mellifluous language that I am learning to write and read now. No I have not felt deprived, I inherited English, and I'm not ashamed or proud of it.

RT: What are the things that you like or dislike about Indian writing?

MR: I can't categorise.

RT: Please name some writers you think should be read more widely.

MR: I don't know about 'should', but perhaps in today's

India, some writers who may find a use are Kabirdas, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Clarice Lispector.

RT: Could you share some memories of your Iowa experience?

MR: A generous land and sky, expressive trees and birds, lively literary context, and refreshing to be among first-rate writers who remain down-to-earth and engaged with a universe beyond their own writing.

RT: Tell us something about your Writer-in-Residence stints.

MR: I was in the 2006 Writer-in-Residence for the University of Iowa International Programs. It was part of their outreach program - I visited schools (especially students interested in creative writing), libraries, senior centres and other groups of people for readings, talks, and conversations (about life, literature, poetry, my own writing, etc). I found the mid-west full of freshness and vitality, and people knowledgeable and yet interested and unassuming. I had interesting conversations, learnt new things (about snow, birds...), sold books, made some new friends, and met many people who were embarrassed about Bush!

RT: Do you think Indian writers need to go outside of India to

achieve something?

MR: No.

RT: You read beautifully at a Loquations program in the NCPA Sunken Garden some years ago. Do you think it's important to recite poems by heart?

MR: Rhythm and voice plays an important role in my own writing, and when I read aloud, I try for accurate expression. I hope it was not memory you were impressed by!

RT: What's the literary scene like in HongKong? Is the place conducive to poets and writers?

MR: Hong Kong's focus is commerce, and the literary scene is small. Vibrance can come from connecting with other writers; sometimes just one writer-friend can be adequate while it fulfils its purpose. Perhaps the resourceful will always find their sources anyhow.

RT: What are the changes you would like to see in publishing and the writing establishment?

MR: I think it is fine. Thriving. More development will come from the people, i.e. from the market.

RT: What advice would you give to beginners?

MR: Listen to everything, try not to believe everything.