



Illustration: Henry Wong

Writing is the greatest buzz for former heroin addict

Indian author Jeet Thayil's debut novel, *Narcopolis*, is a blistering yet poetic tale of opium dens in Mumbai and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. The ambitious book spans 30 years, employs a profane cast of pimps, pushers and gangsters, and describes how the gentle world of opium is gradually elbowed aside by the savagery of heroin. The 53-year-old Thayil is also a poet, musician, and composer. He spent most of his childhood in Hong Kong, and the novel has some scenes set in China. Thayil talks to **Kavitha Rao**

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Kerala, southern India, but spent my early childhood living all over the country because my father, T.J.S. George, was a journalist. When I was eight, he moved to Hong Kong to found a magazine, *Asiaweek*. I went to Island School and spent nearly 12 years there.

What are your memories of Hong Kong?

It was the 1970s, so it was a really heady, exciting time, with so many cultural changes. Long hair had just been invented, there was all this great new music, drugs came along and Mao Zedong was looming over everything. I remember being suspended for smoking, searched for drugs and learning how to swear. I have always admired Cantonese swear words. They are so expansive, so enveloping, with just a few words they can damn your ascendants and descendants in the same breath. I lived in Grosvenor House on MacDonnell Road. I went back in the mid-'90s and tried to find it, but I couldn't. The landscape had become unfamiliar. That's the thing with Hong Kong, it changes so swiftly. Which makes for a vibrant and vital culture, but it also distances you from the place. So I have no real emotional connection to Hong Kong.

You have been open about your drug use. Is *Narcopolis* based on reality?

Yes, a lot of the journalistic details are drawn from reality. I was a journalist in Mumbai for nearly 20 years, and I was an opium and heroin addict for much of that time.

I'm going to ask you the question your heroine, Dimple, asks the narrator, Dom. When you had a good job, a great education, a family who loved you, why did you become an addict?

Such a great question, but there's no answer. It's something to do with self loathing, in a way. Opium is, in many ways, a beautiful thing; all the romantic, poetic clichés about it are true. Even the pipe is aesthetically pleasing. When I first walked into an opium den, I was seduced. It was

like finding my literary home, especially for someone who loved Baudelaire and poetry. And I was not the usual messed-up junkie, but holding down good jobs. Heroin, on the other hand, is disgusting; nothing romantic about it at all.

How did you finally quit?

I tried many times ... nearly two dozen times ... But my parents were always there to support me, and I think that probably saved my life. In 2002, I went to a clinic in New York and got clean. It was only then, at age 42, that I became serious about writing. I wrote several collections of poems, an anthology, an opera, started singing, wrote this book, then another ... I am a late bloomer.

Why did you write *Narcopolis*?

Because it's a story only I could tell. Most novels about Mumbai only show the magic, the glitter. I wanted to show this whole, other, intricate side of Mumbai.

It had some bad reviews in India, many calling it unreadable or pretentious. Did you expect that?

Bad? They were savage (laughs). I did expect non-comprehension. I did not think this book would find its readers in this generation, let alone in the next few years. It's really not a book for everybody, and maybe not everyone should read it.

The first sentence of *Narcopolis* is seven pages long. Was that a test for readers and reviewers?

I knew it was not going to be a popular novel, and certainly many reviewers couldn't get past that sentence. Perhaps I took a bit of perverse pleasure in that. But, while it's a literary novel, I tried hard to make it readable. And I think it is.

Did your wife's sudden death influence your work? (Shakti Bhatt, a journalist and editor, died of a heart attack in 2007, aged 27).

All my work, particularly *Narcopolis*, has an obsession with death, ghosts and strong women characters, so you tell me. When Shakti died, I could have gone

under. Instead, I chose life. I shut myself up in my house, with no internet, no phone, and began to write *Narcopolis*. The Shakti Bhatt First Book prize, which honours debut writers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, is in its fifth year. This year, we had 96 entries. Last year's winner, Pakistan's Jamil Ahmad, had his first book, *The Wandering Falcon*, published when he was 78. It's never too late. thereview@scmp.com

Jeet Thayil will be appearing at the Hong Kong International Literary Festival. For more details, go to festival.org.hk

