

Books

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Kunal Basu is familiar with writing about the unfamiliar. But even he is baffled about how he came up with his latest subject, writes **Kavitha Rao**

Science friction

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"I'M IN THE business of telling lies – believable lies – because that's what all good authors do," says Kunal Basu. "I'm a great believer in fantasy, in daydreaming, in going beyond one's own demographics."

Basu has certainly gone beyond his. The Indian-born, US-educated author's first novel followed the opium trade through India, China and Malaya. His second chronicled the life of a miniaturist in 16th-century Mughal India. His harrowing latest novel, *Racists*, is set in Victorian England.

The story is about 19th-century racial science – the science of the differences between the races. What Basu describes as "an indecent and dangerous curiosity" to determine the superiority of the races has fostered many streams of science, from craniology to intelligence tests, genetics and eugenics. *Racists* focuses on craniology, the science of measuring skulls to determine brain capacity. But Basu forgoes dry scientific theories in favour of describing an inhuman experiment: a test to determine which race is superior.

The story takes place on a deserted island off the coast of Africa, after British craniologist Samuel Bates makes a bet with French rival Jean-Louis Belavoix. Two infants, a black boy and a white girl, are raised on the island by a mute nurse in silence and deprived of human contact. They are monitored twice a year by the scientists. Bates, a white supremacist, believes the girl will emerge the winner. Belavoix predicts that neither will be superior, but that one will eventually destroy the other. It's *Lord of the Flies* crossed with Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, disturbing and thought-provoking by turn.

"It's still a mystery to me why I thought about it, particularly because I don't suffer from a minority syndrome, nor have I experienced the heat of street racism," says Basu. "As an author and academic, I've by and large given race a miss. But I wanted to write a novel, not about racism per se, but the enduring fascination with the puzzle of human variation – how societies through the ages have tried to rank humans as superior or inferior."

Was it difficult to write a novel with such unlikable protagonists? "I had to resist the temptation to slang back at the race scientists, given their extreme views and the hurtful references to the savages and heathens to whose lot I surely belong," says Basu. "But once I had gotten over the absurdity of it all, the intricacies of measuring human heads with complicated devices had me intrigued. Hard as it is to approve of the two racial scientists of my novel, I construed them as men of their times, not evil characters. So my novel doesn't condemn Bates and Belavoix, but the underlying ideology of their enterprise."

The two children were equally challenging to depict. "In portraying them, I sought to explore the tricky borders between civilisation and savagery. Were they actually civilised beings on the island where they lived, or were they savages bereft of the most precious of human gifts: language? I wanted to leave some ambiguity – tantalise the readers."

For a Victorian novel, *Racists* is surprisingly current. Much of the rhetoric of the racial scientists could as easily be heard in this century or the last, as justification for everything from the Holocaust to Islamic fundamentalism. In one of the book's most chilling passages, Bates tells a do-gooder worried about the children's suffering: "The children suffer so that you have the God-given right to civilise the savages... so that you have proof of God's will."

"History has shown us that today's good science turns out to be tomorrow's absurdity," says Basu. "The Holocaust and countless genocides have exposed the absurdity and danger of interpreting black skin as inferior, or a certain people or gender as inferior. Hopefully, our rising consciousness will help us muddle through our naivety about human difference and transcend our perceptions."

Basu has two distinct incarnations.



"History has shown us that today's good science turns out to be tomorrow's absurdity"

When not writing fiction, he teaches strategic marketing at Templeton College in Oxford University. He has a PhD in management, and has taught on four continents. "Actually, the lines don't converge, and I have managed to live with the disjunction," he says. "There's no secret corridor between my academic writing and my fiction. But fiction has always been an enduring passion. Not a hobby, but the reason I get up in the morning."

He has made up for his relatively late start as an author – his first book was published when he was 45 – by writing three books in five years. "I fit it all in by being maniacal about writing."

Most Indian authors are expected, even encouraged, to write about India, but Basu doesn't believe in the usual writer's wisdom of writing what you know. "It's true that writers should be free to write anything, but I see an unhealthy trend away from imagination. Authors are

advised to write only what they know to be true, as if literature was a handmaiden to social commentary. I was once interviewed on an American TV show, where the interviewer asked me, 'Mr Basu, you are not a Chinese, yet you have written about opium and China; you are not a Muslim, yet you have written an Islamic novel; and now you are writing a Victorian novel and you are not even white. Do you own this world?' To which I replied, 'I own this world by my imagination.' Grand words. But I believe them."

Writing about such unfamiliar subjects requires considerable research, but Basu says he doesn't believe in overdoing it. "I do a bit of reading to acquire the inviolable facts, and spend a lot of time trying to uncover the foreground details that make my story credible. I read all kinds of things – published diaries, old newspapers – to fertilise my imagination to tell the tale."

Although all three of Basu's books are historical novels, his writing style changes from book to book. The lush, evocative prose of *The Opium Clerk* gave way to a more measured, atmospheric style in *The Miniaturist*. By contrast, *Racists* is taut, almost minimalist. "Style is very important to me," Basu says. "I wrote *The Opium Clerk* reminiscent of a long sea journey and *The Miniaturist* in the Urdu dialect of a court painter in the Mughal era. *Racists* is a harsh novel in many ways, so I have deliberately chosen a harsher, sparser style."

His three novels all feature common men who wage uncommon wars against the British Empire, Mughal social mores, or the Victorian scientific establishment. Yet he denies having a pet theme. "I write complex novels, and I hope to weave in many grand themes. My novels need to tell a compelling story with characters and plot, keep the reader engaged till the last page, and yet evoke a grand theme related to the human condition. The challenge and excitement of writing on a broad canvas is that different readers can see different things. It's like life itself."

Basu says he considers himself an Indian writer, a label many Indians writing in English find stifling. But he says that "writers who write on post-colonialism or the Indian diaspora tend to spend a great deal of time thinking about their identity. I don't. Categorisation of authors by their residential address is crude, to say the least."

AUTHOR'S BOOKSHELF

Love in the Time of Cholera
by Gabriel Garcia Márquez
"It overwhelms even the most jaded of souls"

Waiting for the Barbarians
by J.M. Coetzee
"A stark reminder of the evil within"

The English Patient
by Michael Ondaatje
"For its delicate fusion between poetry and historical narrative"

Samarkand by Amin Maalouf
"A sweeping novel that bridges civilisations"

The Lover by Marguerite Duras
"For sheer playfulness"

I think it's a huge advantage being Indian, not least because we come from a civilisation that is reputed for its imagination. One thing that is common to most Indian writers is their penchant for storytelling."

He credits three novelists as influences: Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and 19th-century Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

As for the future of Indian writing in English, Basu says the best is yet to come. "The best of Indian writing is in vernacular languages. People forget that Indian writing in English is a very new phenomenon. I think we will see more varied writing – histories, biography, travel – if we give it time."

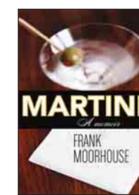
Basu's next novel will entail a return to China, but his protagonist will be a Portuguese doctor seeking a cure for syphilis. Again, he says, there will probably be no Indian characters. "What I would like to do is enter doors I have never entered, and have my reader enter the door with me. That, to me, is success."

Racists (Orion, \$188)

Kunal Basu is a guest at the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival

review of the week

AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Martini: A Memoir
by Frank Moorhouse
Knopf, \$210
★★★★☆
Alister McMillan

Frank Moorhouse arrived in Hong Kong for the 2003 literary festival amid the Sars outbreak and the war in Iraq. He was in therapy for a breakdown, and death loomed for one of his oldest friends, Richard Hall, former private secretary to 1970s Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam.

He writes: "I have been to quite a few literary festivals around the world but I have never been to one where three of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were also present: war, pestilence and death."

Moorhouse had doubts about giving his festival lecture, entitled *The Martini Dialogues*, during such anguish.

When he said as much to the packed audience in the M at the Fringe restaurant, Langan University professor Meghan Morris stood to thank Moorhouse for providing "an affirmation of the good life in the face of the human condition".

The rest of *Martini: A Memoir* is less solemn, although just as sensitive to the moments – dark and hearty – when a martini should be in hand.

Moorhouse, 67, hasn't told all in his memoir. Nor has he added to the self-help shelf with an etiquette guide. *Martini* records the history and cultural baggage of the cocktail he describes as "one of the great narratives of modern folklore", and it candidly explores the appearance of the cocktail in his life and writing. But the autobiography and the drink are only the botanicals of this book. *Martini* is about connoisseurship.

Finding parallels with a Japanese tea ceremony, Moorhouse describes 13 "awarenesses" in the consumption of the martini. He captures the tint of his memoir and his sensual life in explaining that one of these rituals involves the careful delivery "of a brimful glass, without spillage, without theatre, but with ceremony".

Much of the memoir is a conversation with martini aficionado V.I. Voltz, a "Manhattan identity" who avoids the "chewed bone" look of olive pips by putting them in one of the 12 pockets available to men in jacket and trousers. "If you put the chewed pips back into your glass they really disturb the elegance of the drink," he says.

Fussy and camp, the pair sift life for quality. Voltz is wary of travelling, particularly to Europe, which struggles with the temperature and generosity required for martini ice. "France doesn't understand ice," he says.

This is not a Luddite's guide to the charms of the old world. Moorhouse and Voltz are more than the impractical sophisticates of literary stereotype. They're pragmatic, experienced and knowledgeable. Both are happy to forgo the letter for e-mail. They're even prepared to forgive James Bond's preference for martinis shaken, not stirred. Purists say shaking bruises the gin.

"I've always wondered if scriptwriters on the Bond films have been making subtle fun all these years by having him

make the martini the wrong way: something a Marxist French critic would've fastened onto to deconstruct Bond's pretensions of class," Voltz says.

You Only Live Twice has the only Bond with a predilection for stirring, Voltz notes. "I suspect this is because the screenplay is by Roald Dahl, who would know that stirring is generally the preferred technique among purists."

Moorhouse keeps his book from becoming a parody of *The New Yorker* magazine by explaining the lesson of infinite nuance in a martini, quoting a late friend who said that pursuing any subject, with the right approach, would bring one to the great questions of life.

Moorhouse is devoted to learning why no two martinis taste the same. He resists becoming obsessed, but is earnest enough to stay out of the debate over martini spin-offs in the cocktail menu.

"I do not deride the Crazy Drinks, the post-modern drinks, and I am curious enough about them to taste them when a companion orders one," he says. "The thing of it is this: I just haven't time enough to include them in my life. Inclusion at best is an act of appreciation, and appreciation has its sometimes tiring demands."

The martini is the most mentioned cocktail in film and literature, according to Moorhouse. It's a unisex drink, and the height of its popularity, in the 1920s, coincided with the period when the social mobility of western women expanded – they could shop unaccompanied for the first time, go to a nightclub or lounge, wear make-up by day and refresh it in public, thanks to the compact mirror and lipstick tube.

Guides to manners are generally about concealing our dirty bits. Moorhouse explains the etiquette of life. Never offer or ask for "another" drink, he says, and everyone should have two inter-generational love affairs – one with an older person and one with a younger. Naturally, he recounts his two such flings.

Observations on taste, manners and the full life are rife in Moorhouse's most acclaimed novels, *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*, which both revolve around Edith Campbell Berry, a woman from a small Australian town who becomes cosmopolitan in manners, learning and sex while working for the League of Nations in Geneva.

Moorhouse, a journalist for provincial Australian papers in the 1950s, was a bisexual in towns that considered a gin and tonic a gay drink. He slowly learnt to enjoy the martini in the quiet corners of country pubs. The drink had a place in many of his relationships and affairs, and began to appear in his writing, some of which is melded into the memoir.

Moorhouse says no evidence exists for the idea that alcohol kills brain cells. He believes in drinking as a social lubricant, "a way of washing the blood off our togas".

"I have found that there are those whose company brings out the truth and those who deter the truth, as there are those whose company magically increases our vocabulary and unlocks our knowledge and our wit. When the stimulation of good company is combined with alcohol, the alcohol itself behaves differently."

He might have added: When a writer deliberates on his favourite cocktail, he finds it lights certain corners of his life.

WRITER'S NOTES

Genre Historical fiction
Latest book *Racists*
Born Calcutta, India
Lives Oxford, Britain
Previous titles *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003)
Other jobs Fellow of Strategic Marketing at Templeton College, Oxford University; former director of McGill University's Centre for International Management Studies in Canada. He's also worked as a literary columnist and acted on the stage

Family Married with one daughter
Next project Historical novel about a Portuguese doctor who visits China to find a cure for syphilis
What the papers say "Kunal Basu's *Racists* is a cool dissection of the roots of European racism. The novel is also a cutting satire about the 'scientific' attitudes which buttressed racist beliefs, and which are still a recognisable feature of current academic behaviour" – *The Guardian*

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