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MENTORING ASPIRING WRITERS IS ONE OF MY GOALS

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ABSTRACT

David McMahon answers questions about aspects of being an Anglo-Indian novelist. He also explains what led him to embark on writing at an early age, and why he is committed to helping other would-be writers find their mojo. If you want his advice, contact him directly on his LinkedIn profile.

INTRODUCTION

This article comprises two parts: the first is a question-and-answer section which directly addresses some of the concerns raised in this special issue. It looks at issues such as how Anglo-Indians understand themselves and their relationship to the English language, what they seek to achieve in and through their writing, questions of representation, and whether there is a politics to Anglo-Indian writing, both in India and the diaspora. In the second part I explain what led me to embark on writing at an early age, and why I am committed to helping other would-be writers.

PART ONE

How do Anglo-Indian writers understand themselves as writers of English in India?

This is about inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Writing in any language is not constrained by age, ethnicity, status, talent or experience. It's totally unlike membership to a club, because no one votes you in or out. The doors are always open, so you choose when to enter and what exactly you want to do. Like a two-way

chemical reaction, you learn from those who write in the same language as you, just as other writers will one day value your contribution and learn from your own literary path and experiences in the field. In addition, being willing to share your knowledge is a major component in enabling other writers.

Do they have a unique relationship to the language not shared by others?

Not at all. To claim a unique relationship would be akin to beating one's chest and announcing that you are the supremely favoured child in a huge village. To do so would be totally without foundation. One's relationship with a language is a formative and ongoing process. Your experience with English – or any language at all, for that matter – is unlikely to be an exact clone of anyone else's.

Like any writer of any age, of any background, in any geographical location, the choice of writing in any language is fundamental: which of the many world languages do you choose to write in? Generally speaking, you would instinctively opt for the language you are most familiar with. While I would not categorise myself as strictly bilingual in terms of fluency, I still speak Bengali fairly comfortably, but I haven't written anything in that language since my school days. Ergo, I write in English because it comes naturally to me.

What do they seek to do through the act of writing and publishing?

To me, this is a key question, yet one to which there is no right or wrong answer. If you surveyed 100 authors of published fiction and posed this question to them, you would in all likelihood receive 100 different answers.

I was lucky. Blissfully ignorant about the prescribed path of first contacting a literary agent, I sent a brief email to David Davidar, who was then at the helm of Penguin India, introduced myself, told him I was halfway through a manuscript and asked whether he would be interested in the theme. To my surprise, he replied, asking me to contact him when I had finished writing. His response paved the way for the publication of *Vegemite Vindaloo* in 2006 and *Muskoka Maharani* in 2010, but after my debut novel was released, I made the conscious decision to use my own

experiences and my own learning curve to guide other aspiring writers around the world. To me, this aspect is probably even more important than being a published novelist. It's an absolute honour to have a publishing contract, but the real pleasure comes in guiding others towards becoming better writers.

Who does an Anglo-Indian writer represent?

This is defined purely by the subject matter the writer chooses. Beyond that, the writer has total freedom to explore, portray and project anything that he or she wants to. I believe I represent the family who raised me, the wider circle of people who were an integral part of my formative years, the teachers who catalysed my educational journey, and of course my wife and children who have been the central part of my life journey and who wholeheartedly supported my desire to become a novelist. That this has spanned many decades and countries says so much about the world we live in and how much we have to be grateful for.

Is there a politics to writing as an Anglo-Indian in/about modern India?

Honestly, I'd say it's more about awareness than politics of any description, be it purely political or socio-political. Long before I became a global affairs analyst, I was politically aware, not just regionally but internationally as well. But when writing a novel, you choose your own blank canvas and populate it in whatever fashion suits you best. I'm extremely proud of being Indian, just as I am about being raised and educated in India, but there is no intrusion of any aspect of politics in my approach to writing fiction. That's certainly not to say I am apolitical, but as a writer of novels I certainly have not cloaked myself in any politicisation so far.

How is it different for an Anglo-Indian writer living in the global diaspora?

The post-war, post-Independence, global diaspora has changed swiftly and dramatically due to a number of contributory factors – the acceleration of migration policies in some countries; the advent of the European Union; the opening of borders across Europe and the adoption of the euro as a common currency; Britain's return of Hong Kong to Beijing; the end of apartheid in South Africa; the reunification of

Germany and the breakup of the Soviet Union; the first non-white elected national leaders in South Africa, the United States and Great Britain; and the dramatic rise of Asian economies.

The other major change, of course, was the advent of the internet, the rise of social media and the many huge strides in technology, digitalisation and electronic access in what we now call the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Industry 4.0, where connectivity is not just its beating heart but its lifeblood as well. Instant access means that because the world has changed in so many ways, it is possible for a writer of any background or heritage to live and work in almost any country without ever feeling like an outsider. As an Anglo-Indian writer of fiction in the 21st century, I feel none of the geographical or social constraints that probably confronted many of my predecessors.

PART TWO

The genesis

I sometimes wonder if Ashish Chatterjee, my friend from primary school, remembers the day we became co-authors. Well, sort of. We were probably all of six years old when he came over to spend the morning at our house in Kolkata and I decided it would be a great idea to write a few mini-stories and give them to my mother for her birthday. I found a notepad and tore out a few pages, some for Ashish and some for myself. Each page was less than half the size of an A4 sheet of paper, so the stories, written in our neatest handwriting, were probably only three or four sentences long. When we had finished the exciting project, we glued the top of each page together, so each of the stories could be flipped up to read the next one in the sequence. I decided to put them in the letterbox and because I was far too excited to wait until someone actually found them, I told my mother where they were. Her enthusiastic reaction and her appreciation of our literary efforts probably convinced me that I would one day be an author.

In primary school, I had a class teacher whose name was Sheila Geileskey. In my childish writing, she somehow saw the same spark that my mother constantly referred to, so she would make me stand up in class and read my essays aloud to my

classmates. Not surprisingly, she was one of the people I mentioned in the acknowledgement section of my first novel and when I sent her a copy of the book, she graciously replied, saying she always knew I would be a writer.

It was when I went to boarding school at St Joseph's College, North Point, Darjeeling, that I received further validation as a would-be writer, becoming only the second student in the history of the school to twice win the North Point medal for essay writing, in my penultimate year and again in my final year. Here, in the cradle of the Himalayas, the wisdom and considerable intellectual depth of many teachers helped shape my creativity in my adolescence. Three of them in particular stood out – Maurice Banerjei, Father Hank Nunn SJ and Father Victor Tucker SJ were among the people who most influenced me at the school that was my home in the mountains. Long after I had finished school, graduated from university and embarked on my career, I exchanged letters with all three of them for many years.

Not surprisingly, North Point is mentioned in *Vegemite Vindaloo*. While it is purely a work of fiction, there are also other aspects described with a degree of forensic accuracy – the sound of the lions in the zoo, heard clearly from an adjacent classroom at St. Thomas' School; the number 35 tram that Mrs Ghosh takes to and from her teaching duties in school; the bustling Howrah Station; the lake and the migratory birds at the Alipore Zoo; the foreign doctor who operates a free pavement clinic on Middleton Row; even the man who carefully wraps a cloth around his mouth and eyes before burying his head temporarily in the mud in an attempt to earn money from passers-by is an accurate description of something I saw near the city's Indian Museum when I was a teenager.

On the other hand, Jindaroo Creek is a fictional bush outpost, but its surrounding geography is as real as it gets – the sand dunes, the sheer Bunda cliffs and the calving southern right whales are all synonymous with the Eyre Peninsula in coastal South Australia, a region I was privileged to visit in 1999, while I worked at *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne before my career and my interest in the digital world took me from journalism to technology. The chapters in which I describe Richmond station and the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) are factually descriptive too. The Australian Football League (AFL) grand final is one of the annual highlights of the national

sporting calendar, but I took the liberty of describing the first grand final played at night under lights. This had never happened when the novel was published, but in October 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, there were two significant departures from established tradition. Not only was the grand final played interstate (in Brisbane) for the first time in the game's history, it was played under lights!

The Influences

Reading was an integral component of my childhood in Kolkata, back in the days when it was still Calcutta. Before I learnt how to read, my mother would read to me every single day and I was instantly lost in the magic of words. I clearly remember her reading A. A. Milne's delightful stories about Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh, Rudyard Kipling's books and many more. I actually don't remember when I learnt how to read, but I clearly recall the wonder of losing myself in books, of which there were literally several hundred in our home. I devoured Enid Blyton's stories and the 'William' series by Richmal Crompton, Richard Gordon's 'Doctor' series and many others and when I had completed them, I progressed to a wide range of more advanced literature – poetry anthologies, autobiographies, history, adventure. Every time I finished a book, I could choose from hundreds more, a veritable literary smorgasbord that helped form my own narrative preferences.

To pick up a book was to lose myself in a new world every time. I loved the freedom of choice. I was drawn to the monthly soft-cover *Reader's Digest* as well as their collection of hard-cover condensed books. Equally important in shaping me was the regular arrival at home of four other magazines – *Time*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic* and the now-defunct large-format *Life* magazine'. The first two whetted my appetite for news reporting and design, while the other two lit my spark of appreciation for imagery, balance and, as my own interest in photography progressed, the understanding of how descriptive powers could be best harnessed in words alone. Appreciating the perspective and visual balance of my surroundings was an increasingly pivotal factor that shaped the way I wrote. These treasure troves transported me across the world, while instilling in me the awareness of how words could best be used.

As a teenager with a well-established appreciation of Byron, Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley and the Bard of Avon, I discovered the novels of Thomas Hardy and his evocative descriptions. Later in life, having become a novelist myself, I was honoured when a reviewer said my descriptive powers were Hardy-esque. The point of this is to say: always embrace your own influences. They will strengthen your writing in immeasurable ways. Follow your own instincts because they are a true echo of your influences and because they will lead you down the path of spontaneity, a great gift for any creative person.

In short, there is only one person who can tell your story. Naturally, that's you. Trust your creative instinct. Put your first mark on a blank sheet of paper. You'll be surprised at how wonderful an experience it is. Write with freedom. Write with honesty. But most of all, write with joy.

The Approach

Your literary canvas has no bounds. From a creative point of view, that is your golden ticket to literary exploration. Find your own fulcrum when you balance discipline with freedom. The process of writing encompasses a certain degree of discipline, which in turn defines focus and clarity. Yet there are freedoms at every step of the process, especially if you are writing fiction.

A short synopsis has inestimable value. When I wrote my first novel, *Vegemite Vindaloo*, I started with great momentum. But I didn't write a synopsis, so I got derailed very quickly. I could not figure out where the plot was going. This was a crucial stumbling block - but there was a simple solution. I sat down and wrote a very short synopsis - a mere three sentences. It took me all of ten minutes, but the entire theme crystallised instantly. From that point on, it was like looking at a GPS map.

If you're driving in unfamiliar territory, you always rely on a GPS-based app or, if you're really old-school, you consult a road map first. Whatever approach you choose, the intention is always the same – you need some points of reference by which to travel to your destination. Writing is no different. It helps sharpen your focus if you work out your synopsis first, whether it is one paragraph or several pages. Once you know where the plot is going, you'll find it all falls into place. And don't be afraid of taking

diversions. When I wrote *Vegemite Vindaloo*, I planned to introduce a couple of laconic 'Outback' characters and to give them two or three pages at most. But they bulldozed their way through the plot and instead they became integral to two major chapters.

So, yes, having a plan is crucial, but don't let the plan enslave you. Being willing to deviate and come back to your own broad outline is equally important. Write from your heart and you'll never go wrong.

The First Sentence

Don't fret if you can't construct the ideal opening for a piece of writing. Just start with the first thought that comes into your head. As you write and the thought process begins to fall into place, you will eventually think of the elusive first sentence. The point I'm making is: don't sit there for hours staring at a blank computer screen. If you simply start writing, you will spare yourself the frustration of a delay. Writers can start anywhere and go back to construct the first sentence. Builders can't do that. They have to start with their foundation and build upwards.

As a writer, the structure is like creating something with Lego blocks, where everything is easily interchangeable. We're lucky. We don't have to build a piece of writing in a linear fashion. We can build 'bricks' of sentences and paragraphs in any order and just cut and paste them where they belong. If you feel like you've hit a brick wall, just take a detour and start elsewhere. It's the sort of freedom that few other professions have. Recognise it. And revel in it.

Character Building

How do you create your characters if you're writing fiction? That depends on how strongly you view them in your own mind and how deftly you portray them in your writing. Take the time to present your characters exactly as you perceive them. This is not just limited to what they look like, but how they behave and how they react to situations they face. One very senior figure in the publishing industry told me something that I have always valued greatly – he said my characters were three-dimensional and believable. I still treasure that.

Like life itself, *Vegemite Vindaloo* introduces many different personality types. It is a tale of many journeys – journeys of distance, journeys of personal growth, as well as journeys of the soul. On the surface, it is a story of how a well-to-do Anglo-Indian family, with a son of their own, gradually open their hearts to the infant son of the woman who, through an unusual series of events, has become their servant. But beyond that simplistic explanation, it is a tale of pride on the one hand and prejudice on the other.

The women in the novel are the strongest characters. Zarina, the servant woman, finds a resolute voice when her husband Ismail, in maudlin mood, turns spitefully to drink instead of trying to solve the problem of their sudden displacement. Hilary Cooper, initially resistant to her husband Steve's unconditional affection for the servant's infant, Azam, is the one who bridles at his suggestion that they turn their backs on the child as they prepare to migrate. Bertha Cooper, Steve's mother, is forged of pure steel – she kills a cobra in one chapter and thwarts a curse in another. And there is a strong but crucial cameo by the simple grandmother who commands the men in Betulnagar, a slum, to listen to her. She announces her hopes and dreams for her newborn grandson and when the males question her logic, she explains how the child will slip the bonds of seemingly inescapable poverty.

And what of the men in the novel? Sailen Nath Banerji, the little slum boy who becomes a senior pilot, philanderer, and a power player in a national airline, seems keen to interfere in the Coopers' personal decisions. Yet he turns out to be a modern Solomon in a stalemate over how the prestigious Airlines Club will farewell the Coopers. His salutation to them, delivered on the shore of a lake at the Alipore Zoo, is endowed with the uncanny voice of prophecy.

Steve Cooper himself starts out as a man of uncommon depth and compassion, but when stripped of his comfort zone and forced into unfamiliar circumstances, his severely misplaced pride threatens to become his Achilles heel. Ismail, too, seems to be a pillar of strength until he comes undone in the challenging surroundings of Calcutta. Later, as a last-minute battle of emotions ensues when the Coopers are about to leave India, it is Ismail, seemingly against all odds, who becomes the eloquent voice of reason.

If you believe in your characters, so too will your readers.

Planning

I don't sit down and plan a sequence, a segment, or a chapter to the nth degree. I know which characters are going to be in the chapter, where they are and roughly what they'll be doing, but I just write the story as it unfolds in my head. In my case, the best creative instinct comes when I sit in front of my keyboard and one idea just leads to another and one sentence leads to another.

Often, a writer will work as a lot of film directors do – by planning or 'blocking' every sequence before the cameras roll. If that approach works for a writer, more power to them. It works for them and there's no reason why it won't work when crafting narrative. As I once told an American writer who sought advice on the appropriate level of planning – if you find you're getting bogged down because you can't brainstorm a whole scene, try writing instinctively instead.

Finding Your Rhythm

A childhood friend of mine is a gifted writer, a committed wildlife expert, a wonderful photographer, a published poet, and an award-winning documentary maker. Some years ago, he made a start on what sounded to me like a terrific novel. But time is his problem. As an overseas bureau chief for a major newspaper, he's on call 24/7 and travels constantly. On one of his visits to Melbourne, I figured it would have been remiss of me to let him abandon his novel entirely. So, I told him about my ‘narrow window’ theory. We all have demands on our time, but is it possible to set aside even ten or fifteen minutes each day to write? It's a very narrow window of opportunity, but one that could potentially yield great creativity. There is an added advantage to that sort of approach. Regular work on a manuscript sends your brain into ‘plot gear’. Simply put, it means ideas will regularly pop up with an efficiency that would be absent if not working regularly on a manuscript.

Writer’s Block

You're probably going to hit a brick wall a couple of times, because it comes with the territory.

A friend of mine who is a very good writer told me she was constantly frustrated because she would get bogged down with her writing. Turned out that she was writing very late at night and would often spend a couple of hours just writing a few paragraphs, getting progressively slower and slower and crankier and crankier. I suggested that she try writing in the afternoon or evening – fitting in with her busy schedule – when her mind was fresher. It worked. She wrote quicker, with more clarity, and found she wasn't propelling herself inexorably towards a standstill.

It's important to recognise when to stop and take a break. I have always encouraged writers to acknowledge inspiration and take the hard step of getting started, but it is equally important to know when to take some time out. Because writers are often busy with other aspects of their life, it’s not always possible to sit down at a computer or pick up a smartphone when inspiration strikes. Late one night, I thought of a subtle plot twist when I was writing my second novel, but the next morning I simply could not remember what it was. Several hours later, with a sigh of relief, I recalled the twist. Ever since that day, if an idea occurs to me, I write it down, because there is nothing worse than having a brilliant idea and then losing it forever in the mental fog of your myriad daily chores. Recognise your moment of inspiration. Write down the thought. And when you are back at your computer, allow it to guide you. Occasionally, these ideas ‘write’ themselves, but sometimes they need a lot of sweat and toil to translate into words on a computer screen.

There are times, too, when ideas ebb and flow. But we're human beings, we're not machines, which means that some days our output will be prodigious and on other days it will simply be a trickle of words.

Research

Be prepared to do some real research, even if you're writing fiction. I like to cite the example of the late American writer and journalist Paul Gallico, many of whose novels I read as a child. His desire for hands-on research manifested itself most notably in 1923, when he was in his mid-twenties and a sports reporter for the New York *Daily News* tabloid. Assigned to cover the training camp of world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey before his title defence bout against Argentina’s Luis Angel

Firpo, he boldly asked Dempsey if he could get in the ring with him for one round. Dempsey agreed, but asked: “What’s the matter, son? Doesn’t your editor like you anymore?” As the aspiring writer explained later: “I'd been in the sports department (of the *Daily News*) for about a year. I was hidden really, out of sight. I simply didn't exist. I thought if I wrote a first-person story, it would be a good feature. It would be exclusive. Nobody else had done it.” In the ring against Dempsey, Gallico ducked one left hook but claimed he could not remember how he did it: “But I didn't duck the next one” he admitted. “I found myself on the floor. Everything went sort of black. The ring made one complete revolution clockwise and then went back, counter-clockwise.”

So good was his account that it earned him his first byline, a rarity in that era. About a year later, he was writing a regular sports column for the paper. Fame was just around the corner, but he would have to wait a trifle longer for fortune. He aspired to fiction and in 1936, one of his short stories was snapped up by Hollywood for $5,000, a handsome sum at the time. He moved to Europe, gave up sports writing and turned his attention to converting one of his short stories into a mini novel. This of course was *The Snow Goose* and the unusual love story, with its spectral culmination in Dunkirk, changed his life.

Editing

A simple piece of advice I’ve given to every writer is this: Don't worry about editing your manuscript until you've actually finished. When your writing is complete, it’s a lot easier to judge where to edit it and how much you need to edit it. Trying to do so in an incomplete essay, academic paper or manuscript can often be a frustrating exercise.

About a year after *Vegemite Vindaloo* was published, a newspaper colleague of mine told me quietly that he had been inspired by my example and that he was also going to embark on his debut novel. I was delighted, especially because I knew he was a gifted, instinctive writer who often sat at a café and wrote in the most engaging and relatable manner. But for some reason he struggled with the novel and several weeks into the project, he confessed to me that he had only written one page. I was aghast because I knew how quickly he normally wrote. However, it turned out that every time he completed a sentence of the novel, he would agonise over every single word, questioning if he could have done it better. Basically, he was bogged down by his own

desire to self-assess. I told him that he had to discard this ‘handbrake on’ approach, break his self-imposed shackles and go back to the sort of free-flowing, unencumbered writing he did so well and so consistently before he took on the novel.

The write-now, edit-later mindset is what I call the Volkswagen Beetle approach. Back in the later 1990s, the German car was relaunched when our eldest daughter was in primary school, and she asked if she could have a birthday cake in the shape of what was being referred to as the ‘New Beetle’. In a moment of ill-judged bravado, I volunteered to make the cake, and then spent a day or two trying to work out how on earth I could deliver on my promise. To cut a long story short, I started with two rectangular cakes, placed one on top of the other and armed myself with a long, sharp knife. A little bit of slicing here, a little bit of chiselling there and some judicious finishing touches completed the project. So, how did I carve the VW out of two rectangular cakes? Simple. I just cut away everything that *didn't* look like the car.

In essence, that it how editing works – you cut away extraneous elements that do not belong.

What Next?

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair once narrated a story at a symposium I attended, and it really struck a chord. Having been chosen in 1994 as the country’s youngest Labour leader, he led his party to victory in the 1997 election, ending almost 20 years of Conservative Party tenancy of 10 Downing Street. The way he told the story, the huge transition from being in opposition for so long to finally winning government was characterised by the feeling of “Right, what do we actually do now?” the next morning.

Variations of that question have probably confronted many writers through the ages. Yes, you’ve found a publisher and your book has been released – but what will your next step be? I was in my late twenties when my first non-fiction book was published, and I always knew that one day I would write a novel. In April 2006, when *Vegemite Vindaloo* was published, I was already writing my second novel, but I decided during a conversation with my wife that I was going to help as many writers as I could, using my blog as a free advice platform accessible to anyone. Because I already had a fairly

substantial number of followers, I received multiple queries each day and answered every single one of them. This was quite simply my way of giving back. Sharing knowledge across an international community of writers was – and still is – a privilege.

This decision to lend a helping hand sixteen years ago to people whom I'd never actually met had an interesting echo very recently. One of the writers I came across in my blogging days was a health professional based in the UK, but his career and family life meant that he had little time to devote to a full-length manuscript. My own career took me to Singapore for almost a decade and I moved from Big Media to Big Tech, but he and I occasionally interacted. Then in late 2022 he emailed me to say he had finished a manuscript and wanted to know if I would take a look at it and guide him through the next steps in the process. Of course, I said yes, with a big smile on my face. Yes, I still regard sharing knowledge as both a priority and a privilege.

So Now You're an Author

Shortly after *Vegemite Vindaloo* was released, we were in Kolkata for a family funeral. Just before we flew back home to Melbourne, a family member asked me to give him ten copies of my book so he could give them to close friends. Because Amazon was then in its infancy, having launched its online operation a few months earlier, I took my children to the bookshop I knew best – the Oxford Bookstore on Park Street. It was where I had spent countless hours as a child, browsing shelves, gazing at a mind-boggling array of books, occasionally carefully picking one off a shelf and reverently turning its pages. It was very special to take my own children back to a place that was such a part of my formative years.

That day, time was tight. I picked up ten copies of the book and took them to the cashier. He put them through the register and took my card to put through the payment. I have no idea what made him look at the name on my card, but he did a double-take and exclaimed: "You're the author!" Yes, I admitted, he was correct. The person in the queue behind me, a foreign tourist, paid close attention to what was happening, especially since the cashier announced he was going to inform the store manager that I was on the premises. The tourist told me he was waiting to pay for a book he'd selected for a long flight to Europe, but that he'd changed his mind and instead was going to buy my novel instead. "I don't think I've ever met an author before," he told

me. He disappeared for a few moments, returned with a copy of my book and asked me if I would mind autographing it for him. Would I mind? Of course not. I was delighted.

As it turned out, I signed quite a few more books that day. The manager arrived and asked me to autograph a series of my novels that would be sold with special jackets saying: “Signed by the author”.

But the most significant part of that experience was sharing the moment with my own family, in a bookstore that had been such a pivotal part of my childhood. In a real-life echo of any good literary experience, I had come full circle in a way that truly mattered to me.

David McMahon, *editor, photographer, writer and family man, was born in Kolkata, where he began his career in journalism and wrote his first non-fiction book. He was the youngest associate editor at the* Anandabazar Patrika Group*. After migrating to Melbourne, he worked for* The Age *and the* Herald Sun *newspapers. He was shortlisted for two National News Awards and was a finalist in the Walkley Awards, the Australian equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. He then spent nine years working in Singapore, where his interest in digital strategy and change management led him to the world of global technology. He can be contacted directly on his LinkedIn profile.*