

By VITUSHA OBEROI

HERE IS a man so delightfully biase about the reasons which propelled him to dedicate 10 years of his life to writing a novel. He did it because.

For Mukul Kesavan, that is reason enough even though the muses were never so strong and the passion consuming enough to have made the task either a fulfilling experience or a cathartic one.

"I always wanted to write a novel. In fact, I began by writing the reviews of the novel I was yet to write," says Kesavan with rare candour, admitting he did not enjoy the process of writing.

"It was generally quite frustrating," says the 38-year-old author of *Looking Through Glass*, the hottest new literary work set to storm bestseller to hit the bookstores.

The chronicle set during the Quit India Movement promises to make big news among the literati, a group Kesavan has easy claim to. Amitav Ghosh of the famed *Circle of Reason* was a classmate in Delhi's St Stephen's. He himself is an M Phil from Trinity College, Cambridge, and a job as a professor of history in the elite Jamia Millia Islamia university.

With his background, a novel was but a matter of time and Kesavan today rightly has the air of a man with a debt discharged.

"Right now, it feels like never again," he says, on whether or not another novel would soon be en route.

*Looking Through Glass* was never conceived as a whole. It was written in bits and pieces, most of which had to be rewritten at least three times over. There was no such thing as theme and cohesion, at least not till Kesavan decided upon the Quit India Movement to be the thread that would hold his

non-structural," says Kesavan, whose book began in a train in 1983.

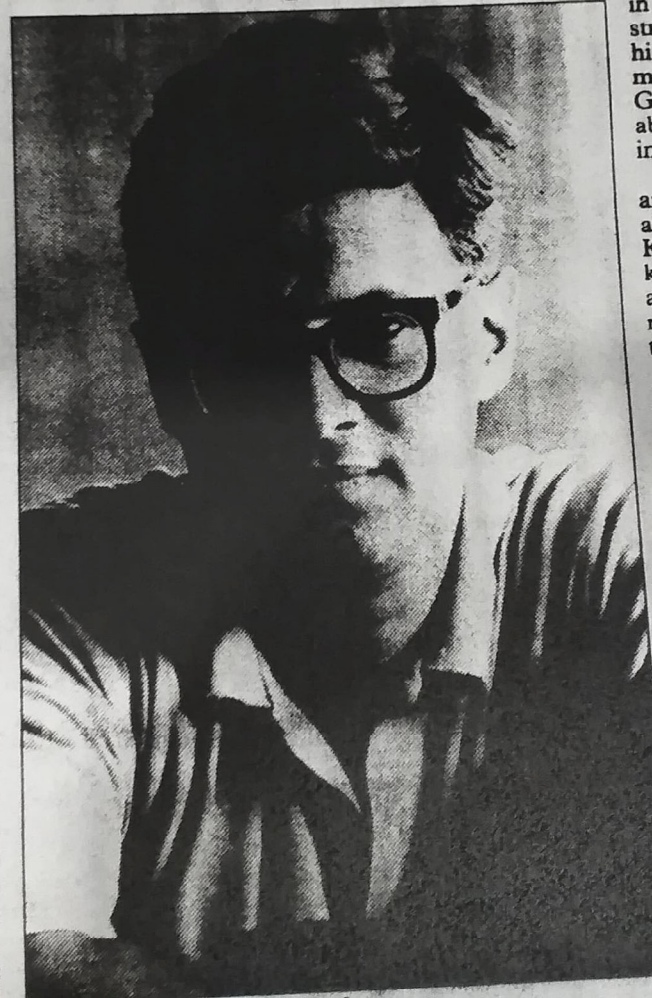
"I had no idea where it was going. It was completely arbitrary. I scraped together a few things and then put them together. I did not actually set out to write about 1942 but I always saw it as a turning point in India's history.

"For the first time, the British began to think whether there was any future for them in this country. On the reverse side of this was the Congress which lost on two fronts during the movement.

"Firstly, it alienated a lot of Muslims from it, and secondly, it got itself jailed," Kesavan says, adding that his grounding in history contributed a lot to his novel.

Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* borrows much in terms of concept from Alice in *Through The Looking Glass*, who found the whole world topsy-turvy. And the harder she

*The professor who has rewritten history. To weave a magic tale*



grandma, stoking the fires of a fledgling rebellion.

The very same grandma whose ashes he is carrying in a thermos flask strapped to his chest, his mission to submerge these in the Ganges having been aborted by his fall into the past.

The characters are where they have already been and Kesavan's hero knows the route they are taking and the route history will take.

The hero waits on Jinnah in a hotel, is privy to the Simla conference and lives with a Muslim family which really is Hindu or vice versa.

Impossible situations in the realm of the improbable, so Rushdiesque and yet so without the throbbing imagination of Salman Rushdie, the amazing reach of his canvas and on a simpler level, the effortless ability to spin a yarn by the fireside.

The novel, being published by Ravi Dayal in India, Chatto and Windus in the UK and

person drops in from the present into the past. It is not strictly historical.

"Most of the tension in the narrative comes from the fact that there is a character who is aware of the future because that is where he comes from," says Kesavan.

Says the hero of *Looking Through Glass*: "In less than five years, there would be murder, arson, rape, flight, migration... refugees, dispossession, enemy aliens, in short, Partition.

"And here they were, Asharfi, Ammi and Hassan, living in lull... It made me feel omniscient. I felt like a historian brought up face to face with some lost cause, some extinct life that He had chronicled."

At another point, unable to take his train back into the future because "Gandhi's rabble" had blasted the railway tracks, he says: "I had done my best by this alien time. I had treated its characters like flesh and blood equals, as free, self-willed individuals carving their destinies like me when in reality they were cardboard figure playing but roles in a tightly scripted play without a happy ending."

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Amitav Ghosh's *Circle of Reason* had the greatest influence on his work, says Kesavan.

"My debt to Rushdie is so much in his use of language as in his ability to put places and people so that they become instantly recognisable the sense in which India to be an unrecognisable before Rushdie," he says.

Ghosh too was important. "What you bring to a novel is what you have read before."

A Booker should be the final finale of Kesavan's not that he wants to queueing for it.

"For a first-time reader like me, the greatest excitement lies in finding a publisher who is kind of hyperbolic."