



A TALE OF TWO STORIES

He is an architect by day and a writer by, well, all other times.

This June, his drawings took a backseat as his first book, 'The King's Harvest: Two novellas' made its nation-wide debut in Gangtok. Meet Sikkim's newest storyteller, **CHETAN RAJ SHRESTHA**

By Remuna Rai

I am an architect by training, but writing was what I was meant to do – there was no escaping it without inviting madness,” says Chetan Raj Shrestha, who erects new buildings and restores old ones by day and retires to the recesses of his literary imagination by night.

The 35-year-old conservation architect is the newest published author from Sikkim. His first book 'The King's Harvest: Two Novellas' was launched at Rachna Books in Gangtok on June 29.

Published by Aleph Book Company, the book is a collection of two novellas both of which are set in Sikkim. The first one An Open and Shut Case is a crime story anchored

by two female protagonists – Kamala, a murder accused, and Dechen OC who is handling her case. The second one, The King's Harvest, which lends the book its title, tells the story of Tontem who makes a journey in 2005 to Gangtok to meet the Chogyal whose fields he had been entrusted with in 1973. It has been written as a fable, has many Buddhist influences, and is tempered with a liberal dose of dramatic irony.

While most people prefer to focus on one career at a time, Chetan seems at ease juggling his practice and his writing. Of course, ask him how he does it and he quips with his characteristic wry humour, “Life would be dull without a nervous breakdown or two, no?”

AS HE LIKES IT

Chetan is the son of businessman Chin Kazi Shrestha and retired schoolteacher Dorjee Ongmu Bhutia. He grew up in Jorethang, and moved to Gangtok fourteen years ago. He did his schooling from North Point Darjeeling and Bishop Cotton Boys School Bangalore.

“I was a good student in school in that I never had trouble memorizing or understanding. This left me free to engage in subversive activities all around. I chose the Science stream in Class 11 and 12 and there encountered my first academic difficulties.”

One of his first creative works was back in school – a comic parody called Julius Caesar – As We Like It which he penned for a school play in

Class X at North Point School. He remembers it as being ‘hugely nonsensical.’ A verse he remembers from that play goes: ‘Rome needs democracy like plants need starch. So we’ll kill Julius Caesar on the Ides of March!’

“The play had everyone in splits. I remember seeing the Rector (the school principal) clutch his stomach from laughing too hard.”

Chetan went on to study Bachelor of Architecture from KRVA Mumbai. Chetan describes his years in architectural school thus: “Because I was more literary than visual when growing up, architecture was a strange choice to make. I went for it only because I preferred it to engineering, my first option. Those five years were the most difficult years of my academic life, but in the end, proved more than worthwhile. It also made me appreciate the idea of an intuitive intelligence, as opposed to the cramming kind. It opened up the ‘third eye’ that designers often talk about, and this made the world infinitely more interesting.”

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

After graduating, Chetan came back to Sikkim and worked here for a while before leaving to pursue his Master’s in Heritage Conservation at Sydney University.

“I chose conservation architecture because I am very interested in history and, by extension, historical buildings. It seemed a natural drift towards the tangible remains of our past. I’m really happy with my choice of specialization. And it also helps that my writing career is coming into its own.”

Chetan worked in Sydney as a student and as a full-timer for some years in various heritage conservation firms. The highlight of those years was working on sandstone buildings in Sydney University Campus and on Arriyadh, an ancient mud city on the outskirts of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. He returned to Gangtok in 2009, started a partnership firm and has been here ever since, working on commercial, residential and conservation projects, of which his favourites are the Hee Gyathang Monastery at Zongu and the McFarlane Church at Kalimpong. Another favourite is the ruins of the third palace of Sikkim at Tumlong, under the aegis of the Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department, whose officials he says are committed to the cause of heritage conservation in Sikkim.

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

To all this, Chetan’s writing played out as a background score.

“I’ve always been a reader, and have never been too far from a book. Any reader always aspires to becoming a writer. It seems like a logical step. I was lucky in that I could start writing immediately after my architecture degree.”

Three publications, Weekend Review, Sikkim NOW! and Talk Sikkim have been pivotal in his writing life. He worked for three months at the erstwhile weekly



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CHETAN

Currently reading

Mo Yan's Red Sorghum, about a Chinese family in WWII and Aatish Taseer's Stranger to History, a chronicle of a journey through Islamic lands. I also just finished Ryszard Kapuscinski's The Emperor, an account of the last days of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie. It is very well structured and was a pleasure to read. I was reading J G Farrell's The Siege of Krishnapur but I put it aside because, though recent, it felt quite dated.

My reading was indiscriminate in earlier years, but now, because the time I can give to books has shrunk, my reading is more selective.

Fact or fiction?

I prefer fiction, but well-written non-fiction is always preferable to badly written fiction. Kapuscinski's The Emperor is a good example of non-fiction utilizing the best devices of fiction.

Book he'd save from hail, fire and storm

A House for Mr Biswas by VS Naipaul

Favourite line from a book

'So later, and very slowly, in securer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past.' (A House for Mr Biswas)

Personal library

Around 400 books

Harvest time!

Both the stories that make up The King's Harvest have their seeds in conversations that I had with friends. 'The Kings Harvest' evolved from an idea that came from Karchoong. Similarly, the second story, 'An Open and Shut Case' was conceived in 2002 when a classmate asked me to translate the Nepali song 'Resham Firiri' which she loved, into English for her. 'The King's Harvest' was written in a single stretch while 'An Open and Shut Case' took around eight years and five drafts to reach its final form.

He also likes

Nepali folk music, old Hindi songs and recently, Game of Thrones! I've also been trying to learn the names of plants and trees in Sikkim, but there are thousands of them and each one has three different names, so I don't know where that's going to take me. And, at the beginning and end of each day, there's my 11-month-old niece who demands great attention. Any infant who eats raw karelas cheerfully has got to be special!

On his favourite literary destination in Gangtok, Rachna Books

Besides bringing us an endless supply of books and, now, coffee, Rachna Books has also been a point of convergence for all things creative, a rare platform and if you are a reader, a source of replenishment as well. It started when I received a gift from Raman for my first story 'The First Few Words of a Friendship' which was published by Sikkim NOW! in 2003. I had my first reading of one of my stories here, and many others since then. Rachna Books is entwined with my evolution as a writer and may it long prosper.

Family matters

My family has been a tremendous help and support in my work. My parents ensured that I received the best education, even when we weren't very well off, a sacrifice whose enormity is apparent only today. And, throughout the writing of the book, our house and my room was one place I could retreat to and write.

Challenges of working in a big city for a small townier

The one thing which struck me was the dispensability of friendships in big places. Coming from a place where friendships tend to be a cradle-to-grave affair, it was that which was most difficult.

Mantras to success

Stubbornness

newspaper Weekend Review in 2002 and started writing short stories for the daily Sikkim NOW! in 2003. In 2007, he was approached by Talk Sikkim's editor, Mita Zulca, to write for the magazine, engendering, in his words, 'a relationship which is still going strong, despite occasional tiffs.'

He says, "I owe Talk Sikkim a lot, more than I can sensibly articulate. It has been a wonderful platform. The stories which got me noticed by Aleph were mostly written for the magazine, including The Glass Carpenter and A Victimised Transfer."

Occasional assignments for publications outside Sikkim include a

narrative feature on 'prison tourism' in Sikkim for Motherland and an account of the September 18 earthquake for the New York Times.

The 'music' took center stage when in 2011, Ravi Singh from Aleph Book Company came across some of his stories, which he had sent out in the hope of reaching publishers, and offered Chetan a two-book contract! The first of these is The King's Harvest.

With the publication of his first book and a second-book contract to boot, will his architectural work take a backseat now?

"Writing occupies a very small

part of my life. I think of it more as a vocation than as a career. I'm an architect for most of the day. But then again, the combination of architecture and literature has done me well so far. Let's see where it takes me. For now, I'd like a nice, long break, if I can get one!"

Chetan will also be starting work on the second book. "This book is set in Gangtok, and based loosely on the series of six inter-related stories which I'd written for Talk Sikkim between 2008 and 2011."

We hope to have him back here very soon then!