


ELLE THE CONVERSATION

My Literary Hero

FROM CITYSCAPES AND CHARACTERS
TO FELLOW WRITERS AND ICONIC
NOVELS, NINE AUTHORS TALK TO
NEVILLE BHANDARA ABOUT THE
INFLUENCES THAT DROVE THEM TO
PICK UP THE PEN 

ILLUSTRATIONS VEER MISRA

ELLEIN 100 MARCH

"I'm torn between Odysseus and Don Quixote. They both have something in common: they both understand that reality is malleable. And Odysseus is particularly good at fashioning reality.

He's a teller of stories but he's also a teller of lies, and a trickster figure. He's the only one on his fleet of ships who gets home safely from the Trojan War. He's a survivor.

And he survives thanks to his ability to mould and elasticise reality. The *Odyssey* is a foundational text—and it's one of my favourites.

How do you get home from a dangerous world? How do you get through time, in a dangerous time? How do you get through life? They are all the same question. The other thing about Odysseus that interests me is his idea of the fluidity of the self. The idea of a 'fixed self' is very much a staple of fiction. But Odysseus has this instability and fluidity about him that effectively means he could be no man or even Everyman.

"Don Quixote is different.

He's an idealist in an extreme sense of the word; someone who insists that the reality he imagines is more real than the reality that exists. We need Don Quixotes—intelligent people who can see possibilities—not just in fiction, but in our world too, and especially in politics. Not just mad dreamers, but people who can see that reality is fluid. One of the most dangerous ideas of the last five hundred years is that the world comes with one face and one name.

We've had people who are rigid in their definition of reality and in their practice of politics. We don't have enough dreamers. We need someone who says, "yes, we can feed everyone" or "yes, we can educate everyone". It's been a long time since we've had a figure like that—someone who dreamt it, believed it, and damn well tried to make it happen." >



BEN OKRI
AUTHOR OF *THE FAMISHED ROAD*
(WINNER, 1991 MAN BOOKER PRIZE)

"I think my literary hero is my mother. Let me be honest, she's not a great storyteller; in fact, she has withheld every important story from my family history from me, which is part of why I write the way I do—to uncover those kinds of 'untold stories'.

"But she was the one who started it all. She introduced me to books and fuelled my love for them when I was a child. She told me that nothing in the bookcase could hurt me. You see, she grew up poor in the rural American south. She taught herself to be a scientist and became a professor of chemistry. As a woman in the 1950s, books were her window onto other worlds and possibilities. That's also why I took her to the Pulitzer Prize ceremony as my date."

**ANDREW
SEAN GREER**

AUTHOR OF *LESS* (WINNER, 2018
PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION)

Photographs: Neville Bhandara (shot on iPhone XS); Illustrations: Veer Misra



YANN MARTEL

AUTHOR OF *LIFE OF PI* (WINNER, 2002 MAN BOOKER PRIZE)



“My favourite living writer is JM Coetzee, because of his style. It is spare and restrained, and his gaze is narrow and steady, but it’s incredible what he pulls off. I read his work and find myself wondering, ‘how does he do it?’.

“My other heroes are places that connect me to stories; like India, for instance. There’s a quirkiness to the psyche here that I think is its salvation. It is eccentric and idiosyncratic, and it is a place of contradictions

It is this that makes its approach to life extraordinarily rich. You come to India—and I think this is typical of westerners—and you go, ‘Wow’. It’s so intoxicating and stimulating. I’ve said this before: India is all of life in one place at one time. Which is why it is one of my literary heroes. It reminds me that stories still matter, because they connect us to our humanity.

“And language is another hero, quite on a literal level—because I’m fascinated how these sounds we make carry meaning. And if I have to get really analytical, then life itself is a hero because it teaches you. Being alive and being able to do the things you want to, is at the source of everything. I suppose that’s why my approach to writing has always been quite philosophical. I am puzzled by this thing called life. We’re alive, but what do we make of it? That inspires me to write.” >

“When I was starting out, I was inspired by writers who began about 10 years before me. Not the diaspora of Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee (that was the previous generation, which had done very well for itself), but those who were producing work that was cosmopolitan, yet rooted in India. Pankaj Mishra is someone who embodied this. He grew up in towns all across north India; he studied in India, and went and rented himself a house in the Himalayas just to sit and read and write. And he had absolutely no career in the West. That is very inspiring for somebody who doesn’t have a career in the West. His book, *Butter Chicken In Ludhiana: Travels In Small Town India* (1995) really inspired a lot of people, and allowed them to imagine themselves as writers. Mishra wrote it when he was still in his late twenties, and he’s a literary hero for me because he’s completely self-made.

“He decided to be a writer and did everything he could to realise that. Then, he moved to the UK and began producing more ambitious books; in particular, a wonderful one on the Buddha. He also wrote a novel, which I found very inspiring, because not only is it the story of his life, but also that of the life of an Indian educated in Western literature and culture—a slightly divided person who knows he has a foot in a certain kind of provincial north Indian culture, but who is also very aware of his distance from it. Pankaj has just turned 50, and his career is remarkable.

Through the power of his belief in reading and writing, he has created his vision of the world, which is something I think all writers want to achieve.”

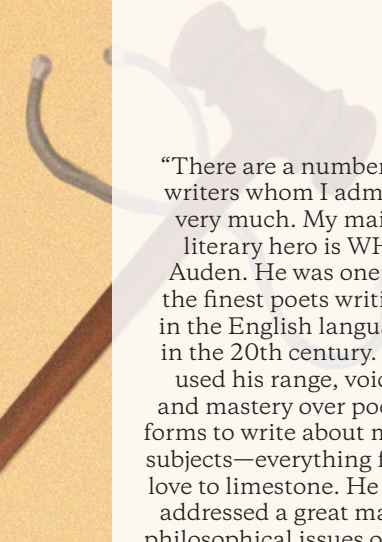
ANJUM HASAN

AUTHOR OF *A DAY IN THE LIFE* (2018)



Photographs: Neville Bhandara (shot on iPhone XS); Illustrations: Veer Mishra





“There are a number of writers whom I admire very much. My main literary hero is WH Auden. He was one of the finest poets writing in the English language in the 20th century. He used his range, voice and mastery over poetic forms to write about many subjects—everything from love to limestone. He also addressed a great many philosophical issues of the day through his verse.

“Another one of particular importance to me is RK Narayan. I don’t think I would’ve written *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series if it hadn’t been for him. He was a wonderful storyteller, and I’m a huge fan of his Malgudi novels. They were such a marvellous depiction of life in a small town. I first came across his work in a library—*Swami And Friends* was the first title I picked up—and then went through all the others. I also did an introduction to his novels when they were republished in the US, in the hope that more people would discover him. I think he should have been awarded the Nobel Prize. It’s a pity there isn’t a posthumous one. Even [the novelist] Graham Greene considered Narayan to be his favourite writer.” >



ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

AUTHOR OF *THE NO. 1 LADIES’ DETECTIVE AGENCY* SERIES



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“There was a lot of American influence in Australia when I was growing up in the 1980s, so some of my heroes are people like John Irving, who wrote *The World According to Garp* (1978) and *The Cider House Rules* (1985). I love the bigness of those books; they are a world unto their own. They’re unbelievable in so many ways, but if you’re willing to go on the wild, bizarre ride through their pages, you’ll discover that they are also touching and beautiful. I’ve always admired Irving because he expects his readers to invest themselves in his books.

“I remember reading *The Outsiders* (1967) and *Rumble Fish* (1975) by SE Hinton when I was 14. Those were the first books that made me want to be a writer. When I was 16, I tried to write my first book: it was eight pages long and could have been included in a competition for worst book ever.

“In college, I studied [Joseph] Conrad and Shakespeare, and read a lot of [Ernest] Hemingway, most memorably, *The Old Man And The Sea* (1952). Then, I read JD Salinger’s *The Catcher In The Rye* (1951) when I was 19. I’ve read it again since, and I find that it’s one of those books that gets better as you get older, but it also gets sadder. I used to think Holden Caulfield was this obnoxious kid walking around New York, but now when I read it, he’s a boy grieving the loss of his little brother.

Clearly, I’m attracted to heroic individuals that don’t come off as such, the ones whose heroism is born out of their vulnerability.”

MARKUS ZUSAK

AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK THIEF* (2005)
AND *BRIDGE OF CLAY* (2018)





TANIA JAMES

AUTHOR OF *THE TUSK THAT DID THE DAMAGE* (2015) AND *ATLAS OF UNKNOWNNS* (2009)

“I think I have many literary heroes, but I’m going to talk about Samantha Hunt. She is a fiction writer who writes novels and short stories. She’s wild and likes to play with genres. I love her work, but even more than that, having met her, I find her overwhelmingly kind. And the longer I’ve been a writer, the more I see the value of kindness. It’s easy to be kind to other writers, and to your readers, and it can really leave an imprint.” >

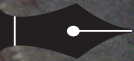
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“I think a work that really encouraged me was James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), for the way it turned Dublin into a character. I read it when I was young, and I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to be able to do that?’ To actually feel that strong a connection with a place that you can turn it into a living thing? I tried to do that with Edinburgh in *Trainspotting* (1993), but I’m not sure I succeeded as well as Joyce did. To have that kind of ability as a writer, to breathe real life into your subject, is brilliant.

“And the way *Ulysses* has been written means that it sometimes becomes really challenging to make sense of it in the traditional way of following a narrative, but you have to just let it happen. You have to read it not even as a work of experimental fiction, but as an experience. Let yourself go with it. Every time I’ve read the book, I’ve gotten something different out of it. It’s a fundamental text that I keep finding myself coming back to and encourage others to pick up.”

IRVINE WELSH

AUTHOR OF
TRAINSPOTTING (1993)



N H A I R
X H A
U I C K I



“When I first entertained the thought of being a writer, I started reading my way through contemporary American fiction, which is where I encountered the novelist Don DeLillo. He’s been writing since the early 1970s, and worked for a very long time without anybody paying any attention to him. But then, in the late ’80s and early ’90s, people started to realise how fantastic he was. He seemed to me as though he had some sort of magical connection to the deep currents of things; to the way our imaginations worked in the expanding technological age. He wrote about terrorism many years before 9/11, and I read (and reread) his work after the attacks, and it seemed as though he perfectly understood the media spectacle that terrorism is.

“I came to New York about 10 years ago, and I was invited to a film screening by another writer, and somehow DeLillo and his friend [the novelist] Paul Auster were there. And they turned to me and said, “Do you want to go get some lunch?” So we did, and I wound up in a Jewish deli in Midtown eating pastrami sandwiches with Paul Auster and Don DeLillo. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that. Just as I was losing myself in the moment, DeLillo turned to me and said, “Oh, I read your book and I really enjoyed it.” I couldn’t come up with a response. He’s the one person who can reduce me to total incoherence.”



**HARI
KUNZRU**

AUTHOR OF *WHITE TEARS* (2017)