



Mukherjee, 44, is now working on his third book

BOOKS

The insider

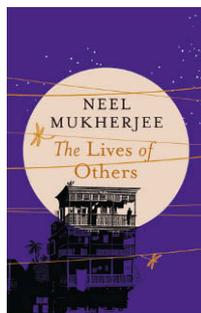
LEarlier this year, when Neel Mukherjee learned he was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize, he was in the hills in northern Italy. “I had no cell-phone reception. And when I was in an area that did, I saw all these missed calls and messages from my editor and agent,” he says.

The shortlist announcement in September reached him via an all-caps email from his editor, asking him to call back immediately. He was at his home in London, seated at his writing desk. “I was stunned, shell-shocked,” he says. Since then, he hasn’t had a moment to savour the news.

Even though Mukherjee lost out on the prize to Australian author Richard Flanagan, this admission to the Booker club changes everything for the two-book-old author, who, at 44, is a relatively young addition to the galaxy of literary stars.

His debut novel, *Past Continuous*, was the joint winner of the Vodafone-Crossword Book Award in 2008 along with Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea Of Poppies*. Sharing an award for his first book with a beloved veteran was a life event in itself, but the Booker brouhaha for his second book puts him in a different league altogether. (On his part, Ghosh was “incredibly gracious,” says

Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize this year, **NEEL MUKHERJEE**’s greatest strength is imagining the lives of others in astonishing detail—but the novelist says that’s just him doing his job. By ANINDITA GHOSE



Mukherjee). Since the Booker announcements, there’ve been scores of interviews and a BBC documentary, and the number of emails he receives a day has gone up from roughly five to 50—an incredibly stressful development for someone who compulsively replies to every email he gets. But it’s “good stress,” he admits.

When we met in September, a month before the prize was announced, I’d asked about his favourites from the shortlist. And Mukherjee had picked Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* (he called it an “unfailingly beautiful book”) and friend Ali Smith’s *How To Be Both* (“a masterpiece”).

Added to this gift of insight is Mukherjee’s old-school charm. He writes his novels on paper and is fussy about the pens and ink he uses. “I could use any old legal pad, I can write on the backs of envelopes... but pens I’m stupid about,” he shares. It is a kind of fixation that spills over to his prose.

GLASS TOWERS

Mukherjee’s celebrated second novel, cannily-titled *The Lives Of Others*, is a sharply observed story about three generations of a Bengali joint family in Kolkata. The book begins in the >

1960s with the harrowing account of a wage labourer called Nitai Das, who is unable to feed his family and kills them in a burst of violence before killing himself. This act, born of generations of deprivation, is juxtaposed with the relatively petty concerns of the bourgeois Ghosh family in Kolkata, pointing to struggles for equality in the world's largest democracy. The book has garnered high praise from stalwarts like Anita Desai, who's drawn comparisons to Premchand, Manto and Mulk Raj Anand.

One of Mukherjee's greatest gifts is his capacity to imagine the lives of others. Not just historical detailing—in the sense of what jewellery women of a certain caste and class would wear to a wedding in the 1960s, which he does meticulously, too—but intimate secrets: sexual fetishes, food cravings, sibling rivalry and all. In her *Guardian* review of the book, the novelist (and Booker Prize winner) AS Byatt calls out to this, saying, "He can move from inside one head to inside another in a conversation or conflict and take the reader with him."

Take, for example, one of the book's central characters, Supratik, a young bourgeois intellectual stirred to revolution. At 21, he leaves home to join the Maoist Naxalite guerrillas in rural Bengal. Supratik's accounts of paddy farming in waist-deep water, his notes on sleeping in mosquito-infested mud huts, his descriptions of consuming pathetic meals of waxed gourds and roots—it's hard to believe these come from the mind of someone who spent a good part of his life studying late 16th-century English literature at Oxford and Cambridge.

For Mukherjee, this delving into personal perspectives is essential to the writing process. *Past Continuous* explored the fraught experiences of a young Indian man living in Brixton; Mukherjee himself moved from Kolkata to Oxford at the age of 22. But none of it is autobiographical, he insists. "This is what I keep trying to say to people, that part of the novelist's job is to squeeze his eyes tight shut and launch into a situation and then imagine..."

This philosophy doesn't come without its share of legwork. In the three years that it took him to write the book, Mukherjee travelled to Medinipur, one of West Bengal's poorest districts, through the different cycles of rice cultivation: in monsoon for rice transplantation, in autumn for the harvest. "I feel that if I am asking readers to invest in reading a big book, I might as well give them a whole world... properly. That's a gift one gives to the reader."

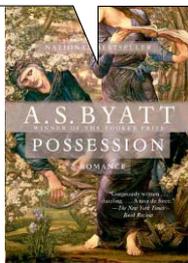
TWIN PASSIONS

One of Mukherjee's abiding passions is the dual narrative—present in both the novels he has

READING LIST

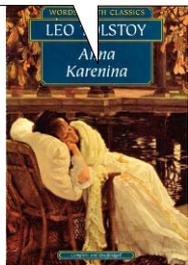
Mukherjee on the books that matter

My favourite Booker winners
"Possession by AS Byatt, *In a Free State* by VS Naipaul; it's three narratives. I find that way of doing novels very interesting."



A book I like to revisit

"Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy. I first read it when I was 19, and I revisit it every four or five years."



A book that defined my childhood

"Raj Kahini (Tales of Princes) by Abanindranath Tagore. They're little stories written in clean Bengali prose."



written so far. In *Past Continuous*, a fictional story alternates with the real one. In *The Lives Of Others*, the story of the Ghosh family in Kolkata is interspersed with Supratik's letters from rural Bengal.

This love for the dual narrative was fuelled by Byatt's *Possession*, which won the Booker in 1990. "It made a big impression on me," says Mukherjee, an unabashed admirer of the English poet and novelist. "Then I started finding dual narratives everywhere. I chanced upon *The Master And Margarita*, a Russian novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, which is a towering example of the 20th-century novel, and that had an inset narrative, too. I thought it was quite a wonderful way of doing things!"

Kolkata, Bengali characters, the 1960s and the Maoist Naxalite political setting of his book have drawn comparisons to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowlands*, which, incidentally, was on the 2013 Booker shortlist. Mukherjee says he only learnt about her book after he turned in his manuscript in early 2012. The comparisons don't irritate him, though. "The human mind works that way. We try to find similarities and make connections all the time," he says.

Mukherjee's selection came in a historic year for the 46-year-old literary prize, as it opened up to writers of all nationalities. What are his thoughts on the Booker opening up for American writers? "I feel inclusion is a better policy in life generally... in everything. I don't like the club mentality. My only caveat would be that the Americans open up their prizes to the rest of the world as well. The Pulitzer is essentially American, I understand. But perhaps the National Book Award could be opened up for people writing in languages other than English?"

When he's not writing books, Mukherjee reviews fiction for the *Times*, the *Sunday Telegraph* and *TIME Magazine Asia*, though this has taken a backseat as he focuses on his next book. This Oxbridge alumnus isn't snobbish about literary genres. He loves science fiction and graphic novels. "I've just reviewed a science-fiction trilogy by Charles Burns called *X'ed Out*. These days, I only review books that I desperately want to review or books that I think won't get reviewed otherwise..."

While the world eagerly awaits his third novel, Mukherjee says he hasn't had the time to write at all over the last six months. "My head isn't in the same place at all. Maybe after all of this calms down," he says. Meanwhile, *The Life of Neel Mukherjee* would make for a most compelling read. ■

Neel Mukherjee will speak at the Times of India Literary Carnival, December 5-7, in Mumbai