

IN CONVERSATION WITH ALLAN SEALY

Keith Butler

In one of the last few days of December 2014, I talked to Allan Sealy about his latest book *The Small Wild Goose Pagoda* (2014). This occurred as part of a two day workshop, the first of which was an 'Arts' day, held at IIT Kharagpur, and the second was the researchers' workshop. This interview was one of the highlights of the Arts day which also saw my book, *The Secret Vindaloo* (2014), launched and two films screened. The event was attended by an audience of Kharagpur Anglo-Indians, IIT faculty, and Anglo-Indian scholars. Sealy, living on a plot of land in the 'small town' of Dehra Dun, reflects on the writing of this work, as well as being a resident of the town in India, and more besides. I began with an introduction to him and his work.

Keith: Irwin Allan Sealy is the recipient of literary accolades too numerous to list. The renowned critic Palash Mehotra describes Sealy as India's finest prose stylist. In Sealy's books Mehotra discerns a pattern, and "a theory behind the pattern, which Sealy articulates in the pages of Pagoda". In India's literary life, writes Sealy, "No home grown tradition of experimentation exists. You could sit down and try to hammer out a new shape, but it's simpler to fit an old one out with native content. Something of this happened in our paintings, a generation of painters lost to Paris, figuring their modernity by mirrors."

His latest book, The Small Wild Goose Pagoda, which we will focus on today, has received much critical acclaim. Novelist Amitaba Bhagchi writes, "The world of Irwin Allan Sealy is, and always has been, a world of formal experimentation, of stylistic innovation and uncompromising prose that straddles the artisanal and the artistic and, much like Pahari miniatures, blurs the boundaries between the two".

On a personal level I consider Allan an inspiration to me and the finest of contemporary writers. So, when I was asked to have a public literary conversation with Allan I have to confess I felt more than daunted by the prospect. But I was fortunate to be able to spend a few days before this interview with Allan and his charming wife Cushla, in Calcutta. We ‘hung out’, sampled iconic Bangladeshi food, walked some of the streets of Calcutta and reminisced; I got to know the man behind the novel. But before I really start this interview Allan, why is it you do not use your first name, Irwin?

Allan: It’s very simple, my father’s name was also Irwin and so it avoided a lot of confusion in the house. Allan is my middle name, but I resurrected the first part in print.

Keith: The blurb describes The Small Wild Goose Pagoda as a natural and social history of 433 square yards of India, essentially, your house in Dehra Dun. Here, surrounded by flora and fauna you look back on your life using the form of an almanac. Fascinating. Why did you choose an almanac as the form for this novel?

Allan: I think it’s because of its inclusive nature. For that matter when I was writing my first novel I was looking for a form which was all-encompassing—and a form is basically a peg which you hang your hat on—and I found it in the nama, *The Trotter-nama*. A Nama is a chronicle, it’s a story of a particular family, that allows you to introduce many many things and in the same way an almanac does: that’s the basic thing.

Keith: So it allows you to get away from the linear narrative?

Allan: Exactly. It allows you to look aside at this window and at that window.

Keith: Tell me something, as you say that ‘you look aside’, it’s been remarked that Indian novels are digressive. I’m thinking of what could appear random is really part of the form you use. It allows you to bring in a whole lot of meditations, recipes, biriyani...

Allan: The mind works in that way. Your mind doesn't actually follow a straight line. Your thoughts are constantly all over the place. And where you produce a traditional book you are actually ironing all that out, you are ironing out the wrinkles, and I try to get that back in.

Keith: You were very busy during this period of your life, weren't you? You were doing something else. You were building. Now is building something that allows you to just walk back to write a note to refer to later in your writing, or am I being too reductive?

Allan: No, it's literally that. Often when you sit down at your laptop you've got cement on your fingers. So it's this pristine sort of machine which is sitting there. You hit the keys and suddenly you think, "Oh god, that's killed it," but then you wipe it off and start again.

Keith: The novel's certainly meditative. It offers reflections about a brick, to the issues of mortality. Memento Mori is the medieval Latin theory and practice of reflection on mortality – is mortality an important construct in this book?

Allan: It's a book about turning sixty. So yes, the thought that your time is now limited and what are you going to do with it? And then of course you turn around and go back and see what happened in the time that went before. So that consciousness fills the book, but as you say it's a book about getting your hands dirty. It's a book about labour, it is about building. In fact the passage that I am going to read now, if you like, is about my guru who is a mistri... In fact I started to write about another man who was also my guru, my mali – my gardener. So between these two men they taught me a lot about life. And they are illiterate men and I wanted to tell their story in a way that they couldn't do themselves. So that's what this book is. This book is about a piece of land which is 433 square yards. It's the plot where we live, and it's the story of that piece of land, so in a sense that land is the hero of the book. But as I said, I set out to tell the story of these men who couldn't tell their own stories, and I'll read you a passage about one, the mistri.

At this point Sealy reads from his book, from pages 241 to 242:

Outside toilet:

The one thing that holds me back is making the join with the old sewage pipes: just that. I don't want to disturb a system functioning perfectly well. The tricky bit would be introducing the new pipe into the inspection pit, a shallow covered cesspool to which all gross solids are conducted before travelling down the ceramic sewage pipes. A join would require the breaking of the brick surround and certainly the pit wall and possibly the pit roof – which would mean a complete rebuild.

Habilis put in the present roof. The day, a sheet anchor for the chronology of 433, is set in stone. Clara and Riccardo, fresh from Ravenna and translating the compost novel, scratched their names and the date while the cement was fresh: 20/11/2001. On this day Habilis and I were squatting amiably on either side of the pit.

The inspection pit always has an inch of water, clean flushed water, at the bottom, but because it links directly with the two toilets, by two primary pipes entering it at their peculiar angles from the two bathrooms, it can have a turd floating in it. Today there's just a tint fragment drifting idly. Both of us are aware of it, and look everywhere but there. As Habilis works, a morsel falls from his trowel and lands in the clear, but compromised, water. Obedient to some law of physics a droplet splashes up from the pool.

It settles on Habilis's chin.

Here is a terrible moment, an *egregious* moment. It is also a comic book moment, and a historic moment, the closing of a paradigm. Heisenberg should be there.

'But I am,' says a voice.

I see the droplet land. Habilis feels it and knows I've seen. I want to say something but there's nothing to say. The situation is too complex for words. All the social distance between us, which I have tried to ignore by squatting down companionably beside him to watch him roofing over my shit, is reduced to that void between the surface of the water and his chin. Eternity is in that clear but tainted droplet.

Habilis doesn't blink. Lightly, and with great delicacy, he brings his shirt cuff to the offending drop, and dabs it dry, accurate as ever, giving it the precise measure of attention it deserves, not too much because that would demean him, but not too little because that would exonerate me. He goes on working unruffled, as if to say: *these things happen*, and *all in a day's work*, but also *such is life*, and *such is the world*.

Keith: Thank you. Just to push it on a bit more. When I read your novel I kept thinking of Shah Jahan and his grand obsession of building the Taj Mahal. And it

reminded me that this was a grand obsession about a project by you, where the Vastusastra – the ancient treatise on the science of environmentally friendly buildings – meets the form of an Almanack, if you like. In the section entitled ‘Stock Taking’ the almirah door (which you had just finished renovating, or rebuilding) swings open. I really love the sense of the closet expressed using Anglo-Indian parlance. The almirah door swings open and the hooded figure steps out, and then ensues the conversation between the inquisitor and the reader.

Allan: It’s true, yes. I think when you finish a building project, something you build with your own hands... I set aside ten years of my life so that Habilis could teach me his skills. That’s why I say that I am apprenticed to a bricklayer. As it happens he’s now gone, he’s absconded, and so I am without a master. And my mali has also retired. So, the building of something like a pagoda, or the rebuilding of this almirah, that I found is immensely satisfying and on par with the finishing of this [book]. So I don’t distinguish between jobs in the real world and jobs at my desk.

Keith: Could you make some comments about how your book relates to the theme of this conference, that is, ethnographic profiling of Anglo-Indians in small towns, given that the novel can be seen as an artefact of a small town?

Allan: I’m a small town guy. I grew up in small towns; I continue to live in a small town. I have no time for the metropolis. I have lived from time to time in cities like Delhi, that’s all. But I chose to live for the last twenty five years in Dehradun. So that’s home. So that feeling does come out in this book and probably in every book, especially in *The Everest Hotel*. There I wrote about a one square mile territory of Dehradun and so it’s a book about how it is to *not* move, to *not* migrate, to put your roots down, and I think those roots have gone deeper and deeper, and I can’t see myself being uprooted.

Keith: In my experience of the micro culture of Anglo-Indians, it was never ‘if we go’; it was ‘when we went’. So I notice that you are quite rooted to the land, beyond the physicality.

Allan: I *did* go but I came back. Twenty years I was gone, and that was a good thing. I don't regret it.

Keith: Why did you come back?

Allan: Okay, I came back with a project in hand: my first book. It was set in Lucknow and I needed to be in Lucknow in order to write it, and that started it. I wrote the first few pages in a small settlement off the Pacific Ocean in New Zealand, and it worked. But as I got deeper into the book I found that I needed to be there on the spot. Then after that, then I stayed.

Keith: And the light bulb moment [for the current book]?

Allan: The light bulb moment? I don't know. I went to China and when I came back after travelling around there on my own, I found that I was divided between trying to do what I was busy with before I left, which was writing the story of these men that I've just mentioned, and the presence of China. I loved it so much that it was weighing heavily on my head. I remembered that I had seen this little pagoda in a city in the old Imperial Capital of China called the 'Small Wild Goose Pagoda' and I realised that was what I had been building all along. It was a kind of pagoda. And that these ten years had not been wasted. It had been working towards the point of this book.

Keith: At this stage of the conversation can you say something about the monumentalist line, the tell-tale phrase that came from you, the monumentalist line in your work?

Allan: The monumentalist line. There is another pagoda in the same city called Xian. It is called the 'Great Wild Goose Pagoda' and of the two my preference is very clear. The great work of art, the great book; all these things you can aspire to. But they lead you away from your life. They lead you into a kind of cul-de-sac, that you might want to call art or whatever it is. They make you untrue to yourself. So you try to return to the truth of yourself: you are in a very small place, and that small place is what I am talking about in this book. So the great monument, all of that, you leave

that behind. When I was a young man I was attracted to that, I set out to write a great book, a great novel. And it was a big book. But this is a different book.

Keith: There is a simply stated allegiance to Anglo-Indians from you throughout the book, yet the book is for a global community readership. At the same time there are aspects of the book that speak directly to Anglo-Indians; patois, phrases, mythologies. And it reminds me of what Marquez said about The 100 Years of Solitude, in his multi-layered narrative, which is similar to your work. There are things that only the taxi drivers of the locality get. Creative fiction that uses post-colonial theory includes the repossession of narratives, the appropriation of landscape, physical and fictional. So I must ask: What is the relationship, if any, of post-colonial theory, to the Small Wild Goose Pagoda?

Allan: Zero! Nothing! I have no interest in theory. I can say that with a clear conscience because at one time I *did* have, as a student, and then you leave it behind. You return to what you can feel on your fingertips.

Keith: As an older teacher I try to balance use of modern technology, and its immediate gratifications, with the long term wisdoms contained in the classics. I push Dickens and the Augustans and so on and so forth, to balance with the delights of Minecraft, Xbox, and Facebook. Allan, from the past who do you turn to most? And why?

Allan: Who do I turn to? If you are just using a book, then it is the Bible, there is no question about it. The Bible is full of stories and in the same way as the Hindu would turn, to say the Mahabharat or the Ramayana, it's because it's in his blood. My mother instilled this in me so all those stories live, and constantly, every time you write. Out of a dozen sentences one will have some echo of that Book. So it's not a religious matter at all, it's a literary matter for me. Okay? So that is the book, no question about it.

Keith: Thank you. As a teacher, I find teaching de-churched students in the West interesting: they lack knowledge of the Bible. For me it is not just a matter of faith, it is a matter of not knowing your literature. All the wonderful phrases, such as, 'A

cross to bear,' that have some meaning, a lot of it comes from the Bible. So I do completely agree with you.

Your book has an incredible interest in flora and fauna, did you have to do research or was that something you kind of grew up with?

Allan: I didn't have to research that part because I love plants. I am a gardener, and my mother taught me, and so there is no research on plants. There is no research on birds either. I love birds.

Keith: Do you think this is for Anglo-Indians, or people generally who live in places where the environment is slightly more kind? Whereas if you lived in the bustling metropolis, to have a patch of your garden...

Allan: So those are the 433 square yards that are Eden.

Keith: I'm really interested in how you go about your writing: I noted you put your scratch notes on the back of the Red proofs. Now scratch notes, tell me, that's so delightful. What is a scratch note? Is it a chit?

Allan: It's any piece of paper with a blank side, and you put it on your bedside table, and you have a wife sleeping... Not to disturb her I scribble in the dark. For forty years I've been scribbling in the dark and most of the writing gets done right there. The next day you try to recover something from that. Lines have gone across each other. There's a whole blank sheet and I've written two sentences, one directly over the other. You cannot imagine... It's a tragedy!

Keith: Do you find, as the great author Chandler said, that you have to murder your darlings when editing? Is it easy for you to get rid of a line you really like?

Allan: It is painful but I've trained myself to get rid of some. I lost a hundred good pages of this book, which I swotted over, sweated over, each sentence. *Thus*, done.

Keith: And do you start with the character, or do you see the plot, or does it evolve? Where is your starting point? How does it go for you?

Allan: Now that you mention that, I was in a bus in Vancouver, Canada, when the first line of *The Trotter-nama* came to me.

Keith: What is your next book about?

Allan: There is a kind of sequel to this. It is actually a little more dark than this book, because the man with whom this book ends, my father, has moved on, just a month ago. And I had been looking after him this whole year, and somehow managing to do other things and actually doing them rather badly because of that. And that's why. In the end it is dark and sad. It's that for everybody, of course, but when it turns your life upside down it's something that you have to treat very carefully. And I think that will be the next book. There will be some elements of dark humour and comedy. I can see certain images and certain characters rising, but it will follow on from this. I wrote a novel *The Everest Hotel* which followed on from my mother's death. I found that I have to anchor my books on family events and events in my personal life, to make them real. You can't research a book. You can, but it won't live. That's my feeling.

Keith: Allan, this book should be bought by everyone. Where do we get this magnificent book from?

Allan: I don't know. They'll sell it online. It's cheaper that way isn't it?

Keith: Yes, I have been doing a little bit of scouting and it is online on Amazon India, and there is also an e-copy book. And of course there is the hard copy in the major book shops.

Also by Irwin Allan Sealy: *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle* (1988), *Hero: A Fable* (1991), *From Yukon to Yucatán: a Western Journey* (1994), *The Everest Hotel: A Calendar* (1998), *The Brainfever Bird* (2003), *Red: An Alphabet* (2006).

Keith St. Clair Butler is an award winning Anglo-Indian novelist and teacher living in New Zealand. He writes for national newspapers, literary journals, and anthologies. His classic post-colonial novel, *The Secret Vindaloo*, was funded by The Australian Literature Board and published in 2014. The novel uses food as a deep metaphor for the inscription of a particular time, place and people. Of his many loves, he includes India, Indians, reading, writing, and of course, food. Watching re-runs of *I, Claudius*, *The King and I*, and the History Channel with a chota peg of single malt Laphroaig close-by is his preferred indulgence.