

An Interview with Piyush Srivastava

Ques: Would you please introduce yourself to our audience?

Ans: I am a mainstream English journalist with a deeply rooted rural mindset. I have worked in past with The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and Mail Today. Currently, I am with The Telegraph newspaper, covering Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. I have reported in past from Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. I am mostly into political stories and have concluded in recent years that every crime, communal or commercial story has a meticulous political aspect in our country. My fiction The Centipedes was born out of that realisation.

Ques: How did you start creative writing?

Ans: I had started writing creative pieces in Hindi and English while doing my masters in English Literature from the University of Allahabad in 1990s. I also used to maintain some notes for future references without any clarity where would I use them. Then came the moment in 2012 when I realised because of certain reasons that I can't stop myself from writing a non-fiction novel.

There were some very genuine professors and authors including Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Manas Mukul Das, Sanjoy Dutta-Roy in English and Markandeya in Hindi whose conversations and actions were shaping my mind unintentionally because I was closely associated with them as a student and reader of literature. I am still in touch with them except Markandeya, who passed away a few years ago. May be that I don't meet them much these days but I am still learning from them.

Ques: How many books in all have you written till date?

Ans: The Centipedes is my first and the only book, which is a fiction. Writing is a tough job and takes lots of time and energy. I wrote 400 pages in nine years and found at the end that only about 150 pages were worth bringing out as The Centipedes.

Ques: Would you give us a glimpse of each of your fictions?

Ans: The Centipedes is a post-truth fiction. An incident of gang rape takes place in the national capital. Ramayan Prasad, the protagonist is an easy going reporter, who doesn't take much pain at work yet he is respected for his good stories.

He loves drinking and lives in luxury. But while trying to follow the incident of a gang rape from human angle, he realises the futility of his work. Ramayan finds that whosoever he is meeting is anti-woman and thoroughly corrupt. He finds that even the boyfriend and father of the girl, who was brutalized and killed, are no better than the rapists. Here he finds himself lost in a world where writing a report or two becomes meaningless.

Ques: According to you which one of your books is the best one and why?

Ans: I don't know whether *The Centipedes*, my only book, is good or bad. I am receiving appreciation from some of the best authors of the world but they are also saying that it could be better as a non-fiction. I don't know whether it is true or not. All I know is that I am relaxed after writing this book. I couldn't keep it for long within me, as it was hurting me.

Ques: How did you create the character in your book *The Centipedes*?

Ans: I didn't create the characters. The characters created me. I didn't know what shape the book is going to take when I started doing serious effort for the fiction in 2012. Later, I realised that Ramayan was going back to the jottings I had done since 1999, when I had heard a right wing leader saying in a meeting in Allahabad that they were like a centipede and could move forward even if a few of its legs were damaged. It is aesthetically an ugly comparison but ugly minds do exist on the earth and often lead the people. I kept it in my diary but Ramayan used it to develop himself in the fiction.

Here I would like to make it clear that I am not like Ramayan, the protagonist. I would have done the follow up stories after the gang rape and moved on. But Ramayan reacts.

Ques: What is the sole lesson from *The Centipedes*?

Ans: I believe that any literary work is meant for telling the truth and alerting the people for future in a creative style. *The Centipedes* is precisely a political fiction, a fiction that tries to expose politics and journalism simultaneously. The reader will get the lesson if he or she reads between the lines. I have said before that it is a complicated novel and I couldn't make it easy to read.

Ques: After reading your novel, I feel it is a periodical social history. Your view?

Ans: You are right to a large extent when you say that it is a periodical social history. The problem is that we don't get the magnitude of a fiction in every such periodical social history. Further, you can't get into every such social history as you will die soon if you frequently chase such things so deeply. This is why *The Centipedes* is just one social history that develops around intense political actions.

Ques: I find *The Centipedes* is an inquest into the materialistic life that has superseded every other values. Do you agree?

Ans: It is more than that. Being materialistic is normal in the post-truth era but insulting your girl friend or your young daughter after she was violated and killed by some criminals is something that needs to be

analysed in a clinical manner by a psychologist. Simplifying it as mere materialistic life would give the benefit of doubt to the boyfriend, the father or the brothers. I don't see any reason to pardon them; I see them at par with the rapists. Our justice system is such that the law decides the volume of punishment on the basis of intention of a crime. In case of *The Centipedes*, the intention of the boyfriend, the father, the brothers, the politicians and the journalists is really deplorable.

Ques: I compare your novel with João Cerqueira's *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* that came out in 2012. Joao's novel has gained much acclaim. I believe your will also gain the same fame.

Ans: Thank you, for comparing *The Centipedes* with the Portuguese novel and wishing me the fame Joao Cerqueira has attended. *The Centipede* is definitely an alternative history, for which *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is very well known. *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* has a bold and energetic beginning and continues with the same pace till the last page. However, the reader is expected to return to the pages of such novels time and again to read between the lines and feel elated once they understand what exactly the author wants to convey to them.

Readers may compare Joao Cerqueira's phantasmagoric description and magic realism in his political farce with *The Centipedes*, which some readers have called "a dance of democracy" because it also has deceptive appearances with scenes made of multiple political and social elements.

Ques: Why do you call *The Centipedes* a post-truth fiction?

Ans: Post-truth is a preferred way of life over truth because it is easy, attractive and payable. Truth is mostly unattractive and doesn't pay.

To me post-truth is not only a deliberate falsehood interwoven around a truth but at occasions it may also be distinct historical, social, and political relations. In India, it was in germination stage during the time of Jawaharlal Nehru but bloomed fast during Rahul Gandhi's time. However, it got legitimacy under Narendra Modi. A careful reading of *The Centipedes* would make this very clear to the readers.

My problem was that I couldn't make reading of my post-truth fiction easy because the subject was very complicated and my characters refused to follow my instructions and wishes.

Ramayan Prasad didn't act the way I wanted him to do, he followed his own instinct. It was painful for him to see a greedy and ugly man in Badreshwar Verma, the father of the victim. Ramayan wanted him to be true to his daughter but he was hell-bent on being worse than the rapists. Still, the world didn't scan Badreshwar just because he was smart and cruel within and playing victim card on the surface. It shows how superficial we are.

[Ques: What are you writing after The Centipedes?](#)

Ans: I had sent The Centipedes to Pankaj Mishra, who had asked me in 1999 to write something beyond journalism and create a world of my own. He has suggested me to write a non-fiction, which was demand of the time.

I have already started writing the second book and hope to finish it in next two-three years.

[Ques: Is there any plan to use The Centipedes in visual media?](#)

Ans: Some agents and film makers have shown interest in the book. I contacted some of them and some of them contacted me. Let us see how it works. In the meantime, I have written three Hindi scripts for a webseries and looking for a healthy agreement with someone willing to bring it on the screen.