

The Potencies of Chaos - Ingrid Ruthig Interviews Novelist Rabindranath Maharaj

Rabindranath Maharaj was born and raised in Trinidad. He received degrees from the University of the West Indies, then worked as a teacher and as a columnist for the *Trinidad Guardian*. In the early 1990s Maharaj moved to Canada and completed a second M.A. at the University of New Brunswick. For a number of years, he taught high school in Ajax, Ontario, where he continues to live.

Maharaj is the author of two previous novels: *The Lagahoo's Apprentice* (Knopf Canada, 2000) and *Homer in Flight* (shortlisted for the 1997 Smith-books/*Books in Canada* first novel award), as well as two collections of short stories, including *The Interloper* (nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book), and *The Book of Ifs and Buts* (Vintage, 2000).

His third novel, *A Perfect Pledge*, has recently been published by Knopf in Canada, and by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US. The story centres on a Trinidadian village and cane farmer, Narpal Dubay, whose ideals, morals, and pride pave a difficult path for his family.

Rabindranath Maharaj and Ingrid Ruthig recently discussed his new novel.

Ingrid Ruthig: You've often said that leaving Trinidad allowed you to write. Given the years that you've since lived in Canada, how have your perceptions of both places altered, and did these manifest at all in the ideas that compelled you to write *A Perfect Pledge*?

Rabindranath Maharaj: Leaving Trinidad allowed me to view writing as a profession with its own rules and obligations, different from what I had imagined. In Trinidad, everyone has some grand fantasy or another, so I needed to be certain that my desire to write was not just another half-crazy idea. I was fortunate, I believe, that I moved to Fredericton rather than, say, Toronto, because I was completely cut off from everything familiar. The landscape could not be ignored. I began to contrast everything new with all I had known. And everything I've written since then has been coloured by this contrast. The chaos in *A Perfect Pledge*, the haphazard idea of progress, would not have been clear to me if I had not moved to Canada.

IR: In what way? Is Canada really that different, or are the contrasts merely of a kind that time and familiarity begin to dissolve?

RM: No, it's the similarities that are more superficial. At one time, I felt that, because both places were colonized by the British and the French, and both are multicultural societies attempting to frame a debate on national identity,

that they were alike. But Canada, in spite of its many critics, has a better idea of itself, of where it's headed. Sometimes I feel that the most optimistic Canadians are immigrants.

IR: That's an interesting observation. Can you expand on the notion of optimism a little?

RM: Well, I'm speaking of immigrants generally, people who have arrived from countries where the amenities we take for granted here, aren't readily available. So people like us are naturally optimistic about Canada and are frequently surprised at the Canadian tendency for self-criticism, the awkward comparisons with America, the anxiety about our image abroad and so on. I think some people are puzzled and a little fearful of multiculturalism, which is a word I really don't like. Maybe it's the same for immigrants everywhere. There's a sense of hope and new possibilities, moderated by the day-to-day disappointments.

IR: What determines which form you choose for a story, and why the novel for this one? Was your experience of writing this book different from the others?

RM: Writing is like a game of chance, I feel. You write and write and keep hoping, and then suddenly something happens. The story comes together and the characters emerge from the dust. I began *A Perfect Pledge* with a clear idea of a man obsessed with building a factory. I stumbled through the first two or three chapters until I got the right voice and sensed the conclusion. I guess this book was different because I had to go so far back, and had to unearth these dim memories of the village and the lifestyle and so on. When I started the book I was worried about the extent of details and the absence of a conventional plot. I wondered whether it wouldn't be easier to tell the story entirely from the son's eyes. It may have been easier for the reader, perhaps, but it wouldn't have been the kind of book I wanted to write. I wanted to lay bare the place with all its tumult and contradictions, and tragic and comic characters.

IR: With chaos as the predominant theme in this book, the main character, Narpat Dubay, sees that the "world resisted improvement; decay and instability were its natural states...everything would revert to chaos." Do you view chaos as a natural state?

RM: Yes, but I also believe that the adherents of chaos—and I use the word in its broadest sense—sometimes try to replicate its conditions elsewhere, not because of ideology, but because this is the milieu with which they are familiar and in which they are comfortable. It is what they know. This may be an overly simple view, but I see signs of this all the time.

IR: Narpat rails against backward thinkers, insisting that the only way to live is to be a "futurist". His ideals and expectations set him apart. He rages

against the wrongs of his past and is obsessed with undoing them, to the point that his rigid adherence to being right and having control become foibles that set an unhappy course for his entire family. What happens to those who, like Narpat, attempt to “paddle their own boat” in a place like Trinidad?

RM: I think the central theme in *A Perfect Pledge* is the idea of progress in places like Trinidad. Individuality is not really encouraged. It is seen as a kind of selfishness or conceit or a mask for some more serious condition. But every now and again, places like Trinidad throw up people like Narpat. They might be poets or politicians or revolutionaries, but they are always slightly mad. They sail along recklessly on their ambition and their rather ruthless pride. Maybe they have to be like this to take on years of oppression and neglect and insecurity. Typically, they enjoy a brief popularity before they are brought down. Then someone else takes their place.

IR: Can change occur at all then?

RM: Yes, but not at the moment. I will give you one reason. There is a Trinidadian term: *mauvais langue*. It’s a potent form of gossip, a badmouthing which can spread like wildfire. Politicians can fall from office, with reputations undone in a day. It is not so much naïveté or gullibility as it is a love for little dramas, for conspiracies. All of this is wonderful for writers though. I think I was lucky that I grew up in this storytelling environment where exaggeration and parody came so naturally to almost everyone.

IR: You touched on your early perception of Canada as an ordered place, where one might also conclude that the social environment doesn’t nurture a flair for the bizarre. Outside the setting of small communities this might be particularly accurate. Do you think it’s more difficult to unearth these “little dramas” and eccentric characters in a homogenous or ordered setting?

RM: We can only write about what is presented to us. Even the style we choose is affected by our environment. This sounds awkward, but I believe it is true. Look at the Latin American writers for whom magical realism is the only form to express the pervasiveness of myths and the fluidity of those societies. Or 18th century writers like Jane Austen who picked apart the conventions and manners of their regulated societies with such precision and detail. While Canada, or more precisely suburban Canada, would not throw up the same range of characters as would a village or a small town, I believe there are other opportunities. The ambivalence about so many things, the fear of encroachment, the little prejudices, the distaste and envy of the big cities. But I remember Naipaul and Richler being asked about why they had never written a British novel and both saying that they had no idea what the English did in their homes at night. So there’s that too.

IR: Mr. Doon, a young teacher who returns to Trinidad after years in Canada

echoes Narpat's views with a shared sort of ambition. Eventually he bows to pressure and comprehends that Trinidad remains an "absentee society...absent culture, absent responsibility, absent intelligence." What does he mean?

RM: At one time most of the Caribbean sugar colonies were absentee societies. The plantation owner lived in England or France and allowed an overseer to run his place. These people, the owners, bled the place dry. There is still this feeling that those in charge lack legitimacy; leaders who can deal with mundane problems are stymied by more significant issues. However, Mr. Doon would have been seeing the place from the perspective of someone who lived abroad. Someone from the village, for instance, would not have seen it this way.

IR: This book often resonates with literary familiarity, despite its tropical locale. I was reminded of Thomas Hardy, and even of David Adams Richards—their characters, though set in different places and times, are flawed souls who paint themselves into moralistic corners within small, insular communities. There are hints of King Lear, especially when the son, Jeeves, imagines Narpat, wild-haired and raging against the storm. Did you have a sense of the 'universality' of such stories as you were writing?

RM: Writers for many, many years have explored the interaction between man and his environment. This novel, with a different cast of characters, could have been written by someone from Australia or Africa or the Maritimes, for instance. But to answer your question, I don't usually think of these universal stories until they are brought to my attention by a reader, and then I am curious about the interpretation the stories may bring to this reader. However, at the end of *The Perfect Pledge*, when I was writing the scene you described and was seeing Narpat through his son's eyes, I did see the old man as a kind of Lear-like figure.

IR: What initially binds couples in Trinidadian culture? Relationships in *A Perfect Pledge*, and indeed in all your books, are fraught with tension, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. Is this something that you feel is a truth, that is, the reality of life for many?

RM: I'm not sure. Most of my characters are ordinary people trapped by one fancy scheme or another, an elusive goal which jeopardizes relationships and puts a strain on intimacy. Maybe I am drawn to these characters. Perhaps they are more useful to my stories. Maybe I am writing about people like myself. I really don't know.

IR: Jeeves seems to find gradual peace, even contentment, despite the quarreling and constant criticising. How is it that he ends up different from the rest?

RM: Jeeves is similar to his father in the sense that they are both misfits. But

he does not rail against the society nor does he try to change it. Rather, he is an observer. He develops from the years of watching movies, an eye for detail. He becomes more aware of his environment. Compared to the other characters, he is more self-aware. This self-awareness allows him to create some order in his own life. This is the hope for places like Trinidad, I believe—people stepping back and getting a broader picture of what's taking place.

IR: It appears that Jeeves, in his quiet way, is the only one who even tries to formulate some understanding of his family as people within a larger context. You once said that “life in Trinidad is too happy” and yet the lives of the characters in this book are anything but. Why this difference?

RM: The standards for happiness vary from place to place. In the novel, the characters who come into contact with Narpat are inevitably frustrated by his bullheadedness, but I hope there is also a sense of others who, in spite of poverty, are fairly content. However, during my most recent visits there, I've felt that the pervasive happiness I took for granted may also be a kind of pose. There is an old Trinidadian saying: “not all skin-teeth is a smile.”

IR: What is the motivation for the posing then?

RM: Insecurity, uncertainty, politeness, the flair for drama and parody that I mentioned. Trinidadians tend to soak up outside influences easily. There are a great many people there who have modelled themselves after some movie character, down to all the little mannerisms and the speech patterns. Several books by writers from the Caribbean have featured these people. In some, they are treated deferentially, in others with amusement. In real life they usually evoke both responses.

IR: With that in mind, what do you see yourself exploring in future work?

RM: The unreliability of narratives. It might change into something else. Maybe I have to figure out what Canadians talk about in their homes at night.

Ingrid Ruthig is a writer and editor. She served with the author on the editorial board of *Lichen Literary Journal*.

This interview was originally printed in *Books in Canada* in September, 2005.