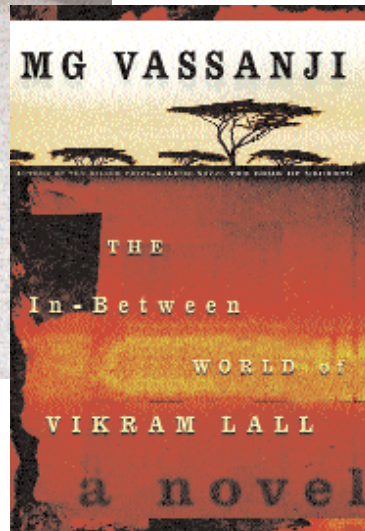


PHOTO: DENISE GRANT

This new novel by M.G. Vassanji marks the return of one of Canada's most beloved writers, and winner of the first Giller Prize. In this excerpt, narrator Vikram Lall, himself born in Africa, reflects on his ancestral homeland.



EXCERPT

THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL

INDIA WAS ALWAYS FANTASYLAND TO ME. To this day, I have never visited my dada's birthplace. It was the place where that strange man with the narrow pointed face, bald head, and granny glasses, Gandhiji, had lived and died, and where the man with the white cap, Nehru, now ruled, and where the impossibly four-armed and pink-faced gods of my mother's statuettes and Lakshmi Sweets' annual calendar pictures had fought their battles and killed devils, and where Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing had that year conquered Everest. It was Vrndavan where the butter thief Nandlal Krishna presided, where Dadi was born and the goddess Dayamati had presided. My mother had a dresser on which she kept her statuettes of Rama and Durga and Hanuman and of course Ganesh, and at times of stress she went and stood in entreaty before them. Our

daily preservation, especially in those nervous times, was due to their faithful intercession, she had no doubt about that. Even now, even here in this Canadian wilderness, I cannot help but say my namaskars, or salaams, to the icons I carry faithfully with me, not quite understanding what they mean to me. But I am convinced they represent some elemental force of nature, some qualities of it, like gravitation and the electric force and all other entities conjured up for us by scientists from our mundane existence. But I digress.

My father—proudly Kenyan, hopelessly (as I now think) colonial—went to India once, and brought back my mother.

He found everything in India dirty and poor, and for the most part he had a miserable time of it. Even to see the

EXCERPT THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL

Taj Mahal you had to walk over gutters and push through a street fight, he would say. Beggars and touts everywhere; men standing around openly picking at their crotches. Even a taxi! he would exclaim. Even a taxi! You hail one, you want to feel posh and escape all the scum around you, you open the door and what happens? You step into a lump of fresh shit! It was one of his favourite stories, he would

It was like discovering a single, solitary rose blooming on the grimy sidewalk

get graphic, and Deepa and I would roll with laughter. Mother would simply smile and say, There he goes again, with his taxi-shit story. It was 1944, the year he went, and the streets were in turmoil with strikes and demonstrations in aid of India's freedom. While walking along a street in Peshawar once, Papa chanced to see a girl on a bicycle—evidently returning from college, her books clasped to the carrier behind her. She had one long pigtail almost down to her waist and she wore an embroidered cap. There was something in the face she made, when she had to halt and wait for a handcart full of smelly onion sacks to go past, that caught his fancy. It was like discovering a single, solitary rose blooming on the grimy sidewalk—he would go on,

coming to the part designed to please my mother. Here were tongawallahs screaming at each other, the babagadi of half-rotten onions, an open kiosk selling tea and puris next to a gutter, everyone barefoot or in chappals and wearing dirty clothes, and this girl comes by on her cycle wearing a crisp pink and white shalwar-kameez, with glistening black hair, full pink cheeks, and flashing black eyes!

Impulsively, he began humming a film song and followed the girl in a rickshaw until she reached home. The next day, waiting for her at the same place and time as he'd first seen her, he saw her and again followed her in a rickshaw. He then

asked a boy, who had observed him staring after her as she went through the gates of her house, Tell me, what college does she attend? The boy gave a wink and told him, and so the following afternoon my father waited for the girl outside the college gates. Before he could muster the courage to speak to her, she said to him, Ay budhu, you oaf why do you follow me? You must be a stranger in these parts, don't you know my father is a police inspector? He'll have the pleasure of having both your legs broken for you. Nevertheless, she let him escort her home. She was enchanted by his foreign accent and awkwardly Indian ways. After a few days my father made an appointment with her father at police headquarters and did the unortho-

1994

M. G. VASSANJI
THE BOOK OF SECRETS

1995

ROHINTON MISTRY
A FINE BALANCE

1996

MARGARET ATWOOD
ALIAS GRACE

1997

MORDECAI RICHLER
BARNEY'S VERSION

1998

ALICE MUNRO
THE LOVE OF A GOOD WOMAN

GILLER TURNS TEN

2003 marks the 10th anniversary of The Giller Prize, the most glamorous and high-profile literary award in Canada. Here is a look back at all the winners of the prize.

EXCERPT THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF VIKRAM LALL

dox thing of proposing to marry his daughter Sheila.

Inspector Verma—my father would say, running forefinger and thumb above his lips to indicate his father-in-law’s military moustache—did not speak a word for a full ten minutes, staring at a report in front of him, on his desk. His midmorning cup of tea came and he proceeded to drink it, he nibbled a Marie biscuit. My father had of course introduced himself in some detail. Finally Inspector Verma raised his head and eyed the brash young man who was by now utterly discomfited. He grilled him about his background, made sure my father realized that his antecedents in India amounted to nothing, being village banias at most, and that his father had demeaned himself further as a labourer. When Papa was completely deflated, Inspector Verma told him to send his relations with a formal proposal.

Inspector Verma was a widower, and also somewhat unusual; he worked for the British, and in his duties to maintain law and order he often had to arrest Congresswallahs agitating for independence, one of whom was his own son Mahesh, or send laathi charges against street demonstrators. Gandhi was in jail, there were sporadic riots between Hindus and Muslims. The civilizing order of the day, to the stern inspector, seemed to be on the wane, and the country was on the verge of falling apart.

So he agreed to let his lovestruck daughter get away to a part of the world—be it in Africa—where the Empire still held firm, English values and manners still ruled the day.

My father returned to Kenya with my mother in late 1944. I was born the following year. In 1948, after the partition of India, in which Peshawar became part of Pakistan, my mother’s kid brother Mahesh—one of the millions of refugees now—followed her to the colony. My father and his brothers called him “communist,” because of his radical ideas, the term having a special ring to it in those days, meaning worthless intellectual ranter. My father actually tolerated him and could hold a conversation with him, but his brothers detested Mahesh Uncle. He was broad-shouldered and muscular, with a black untrimmed beard and wild glaring eyes behind his black-framed glasses. He was argumentative and sometimes ill-tempered, and he had a degree in English. And just to irk the settlers and the colonial Indians, on occasional days, such as India’s national day, he paraded Nakuru’s main streets in khadi, the pyjama and long shirt combination of homespun cotton that had been the symbol of Indian protest, the uniform of those who had fought for India’s independence. It had the desired effect in this British colony, in the heart of white settlerdom, where they still believed in the fifties that the sun would never set on their empire. ■

1999

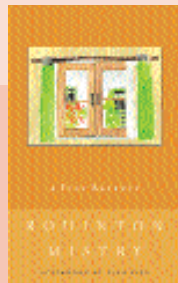
BONNIE BURNARD
A GOOD HOUSE



2000

(CO-WINNERS)

**DAVID ADAMS
RICHARDS**
*MERCY AMONG
THE CHILDREN*



MICHAEL ONDAATJE
ANIL'S GHOST



2001

RICHARD B. WRIGHT
CLARA CALLAN



2002

AUSTIN CLARKE
THE POLISHED HOE

