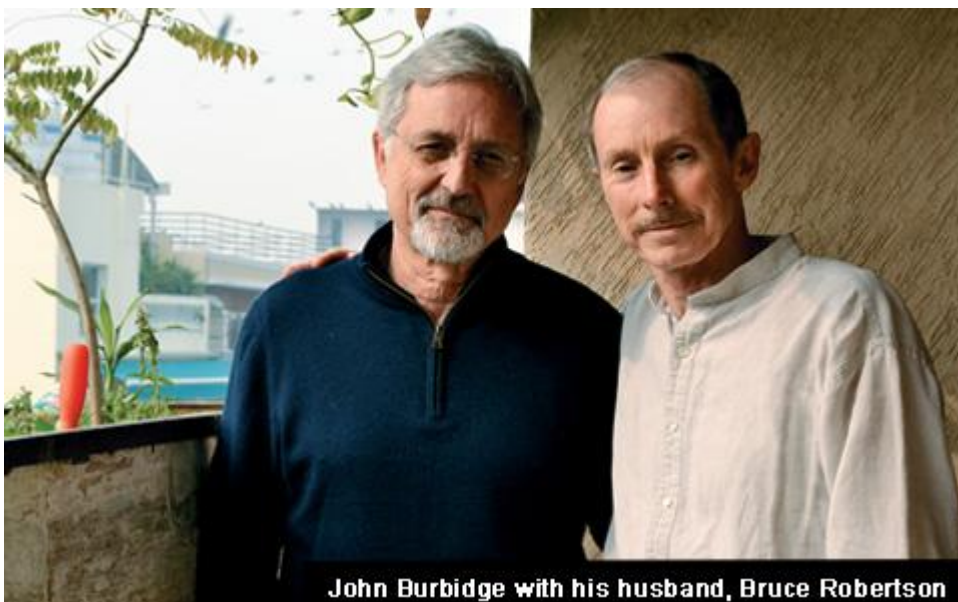


Gay & Lesbian

Two books from opposite ends of the spectrum celebrate gay sexuality finds Time Out



A friend was once asked to be part of Toronto's *mille femmes* – a thousand photographs of “women in art”, done up by Lancôme stylists, and exhibited in a proud wall-to-wall human landscape – a monumental venture that was the brainchild of French artist, Pierre Maraval. Each participant was asked to describe herself in one word, my friend chose *tenacity*. It was an idea I bounced off a photographer, but in *our* version we would have large black-and-white portraits of people of any gender or persuasion, without tags or descriptions, but for a small note at the exit quietly announcing, “They’re *all* queer”. You’d only read it after soaking in the humanity of these character filled visages, trying to piece together *what* connects them all. Suffice to say, we couldn’t enlist even 20 people to lend their fresh-faced (we planned to use a local spa) countenances for an artistic cause, stymied as we were by the catch-all alibi of identity politics, the patriarchy, and the culture police.

So when singer Vivek Shraya, who had toured India with his book of childhood vignettes, *God Loves Hair*, wanted me to participate in a project that simply asked of each contributor, “What I Love About Being Queer”, he had me at hello. What started out as scrawled messages on Polaroids of sloshed party-goers, became an extensive online blog, and is now a tastefully done book with the hook, “One Big Question. Over 100 Answers”. The responses vary from the polemic to the politic to the disarmingly audacious (“my boyfriend’s butt!”). People talk about being “free to colour outside the lines”, of “living life in rooms full of weirdos, knowing we’ve all got each other’s backs”, and that “everyone has gifts, queerness is ours”. The drollness lends credence to the notion that even voices borne out of repression can be both subliminally self-deprecating *and* celebratory.

With a desi man at the helm, there are several “brown” voices in the mix, attesting to the tantalising vibe of Toronto’s multicultural melting pot. It is feel-good stuff, with the consistency of a decidedly urbane queer experience, but without the whiff of propaganda. Most of all, the affirmation never feels cloying (not quite *Chicken Soup* territory) but neither does it possess the edgy subaltern charge of other works that have emerged from the queer underground. An incendiary tome comes to mind — the photo-journal *Red Threads*, that completes a decade of its existence this year — whose images of desi queer visibility are much more disquieting (wherein lies its power).

At the other end of the spectrum is the new book, *The Boatman*, by former aid worker John Burbidge. Set in India during the 1980s it is based on Burbidge’s “coming out to India”, as it were. It’s not a particularly literary endeavour, more possessing of the artless tenor that memoirs are usually better served by. Bombay, still in the throes of a colonial hangover, allows him access to its deepest recesses — a thriving gay underground that existed well before a queer discourse had even emerged in India.

At one level, it reads like the confessional of a sex-addict whose long line of encounters with proletarian men is described unabashedly (although not written as erotica *per se*, even if the humble orgasm attracts inventive use of language). Burbidge glosses over the “risky business” of anonymous sex (even in a pre-AIDS era) with only a single cursory mention of a condom. Each dalliance seems fraught with passion, and tinged with romanticism, but certainly, in those reticent times, the most fleeting of encounters acquired the heady dimensions of something truly life-transforming.

In Burbidge’s case, a phantom India allowed an uptight white man of working class stock (insulated from his own leanings) to truly embrace his sexuality, which explains the “kid in a candy-store” narrative, as he assiduously “makes up for lost time”. In these rose-tinted memoirs, the parallel culture only feeds and emboldens, and indeed, Burbidge consumes voraciously. Missing is the craft, that in a work of fiction, could drive home the dull ache of the unalloyed emptiness of the closet (perhaps, more so for the young men he encounters who could never hope to be “delivered” as he was), but real life thrives on happenstance and must follow its own itinerary.

That the undefined sexualities of men in middle-India to this day remains an intriguing anthropological quest to those who continue to negotiate these minefields of uncertainty, marks the book out as unexpectedly contemporaneous, while still managing to evoke the ethos of a country in flux – the early profusion of exotica giving way to a more observed understanding of India. Burbidge appropriates Ganesha as his own patron saint, and in a particularly touching chapter, feels his alienation in a foreign land spectacularly crumble. The payoffs lie in these incidental details.

Even if *WILABQ* is populated mostly by denizens of Toronto, the full circle it represents is glaring (especially when juxtaposed with *The Boatman's* cesspool). It's a journey all cultures undertake, from a space that is extremely cloistered to one that is deliriously free (or thereabouts), in which a tapestry of open, bright faces need not anymore be obscured.

The Boatman *R333*, available on Flipkart. What I Love About Being Queer \$20, available on vivekshraya.com.

By Vikram Phukan on July 30 2014