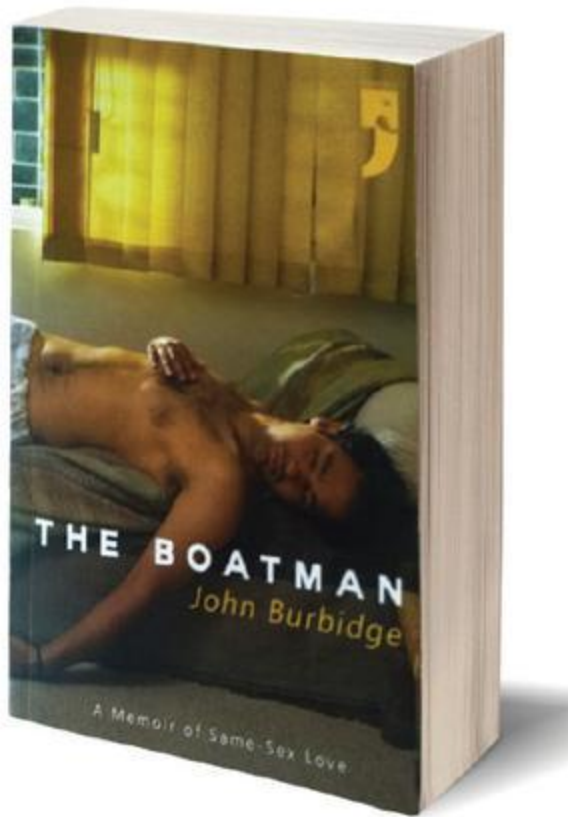


‘Cruising’ in India

Priyanka Kotamraju



The Boatman John Burbidge Yoda Press Memoir Rs 350

Packed with rendezvous and revelations

John Burbidge’s “memoir of same-sex love” set in India comes at an opportune time, when the LGBT movement has found voice against a draconian law recently upheld by the Supreme Court. Set in the ’80s, *The Boatman* candidly chronicles Burbidge’s exploits in the streets of Chowpatty in Bombay, the parks of Connaught Place in Delhi and the maidans of Calcutta. But what begins as an adventure to “test his gay potential” soon turns into a tale of addiction. Indeed, in an interview Burbidge says that he had sexual relations with more than 200 men in two years in India.

It is 1980. A 33-year-old Burbidge arrives in India, four years after his first stint. He is neither a “poofter”, nor a “homo” — the derisive terms hurled at gays in his home country Australia — but finds himself increasingly drawn to India’s “young men”. Over the next four years, we follow Burbidge as he builds his double life of a keen international NGO worker by day and a raging homosexual scouring the cities’ underbellies by night. Chapter after chapter, night after night, told in a style resembling paper presentations made at dull seminars, Burbidge stumbles upon public spaces where an invisible populace comes together — *maalishwallas* offering more than just a massage, young medical students, men whose loving mothers feed him home-cooked meals, husbands and rickshawallahs — in parks, dimly-lit streets, urinals at railway stations and men’s hostels for fleeting gratification.

On a fundraising trip in Calcutta, Burbidge’s sexual life is subjected to a humorous scrutiny by his friends — “So Burbs, what’s this I hear about your after-hours activities? What do they call it, boating?”

“From that day on,” writes Burbidge, “I was saddled with the title of ‘the boatman’.”

Not all of his encounters are pleasant. Plainclothes policemen catch him in the act at a brothel in Calcutta, at railway stations and in parks. Word also gets around quickly about his sexual diseases. Rumour and suspicion rule at his office, where co-workers begin to get curious about his nightly escapades. Trapped in a low-paying job, he is also bitter about not being able to move out of “the street gay scene”.

But Burbidge survives, and the dangers scarcely stop him and “his agenda”.

For a country that still criminalises homosexuality, *The Boatman* chronicles its own cities that defy the law every night as spaces morph, people emerge and all types of liaisons are made and broken.

(This article was published on March 14, 2014)