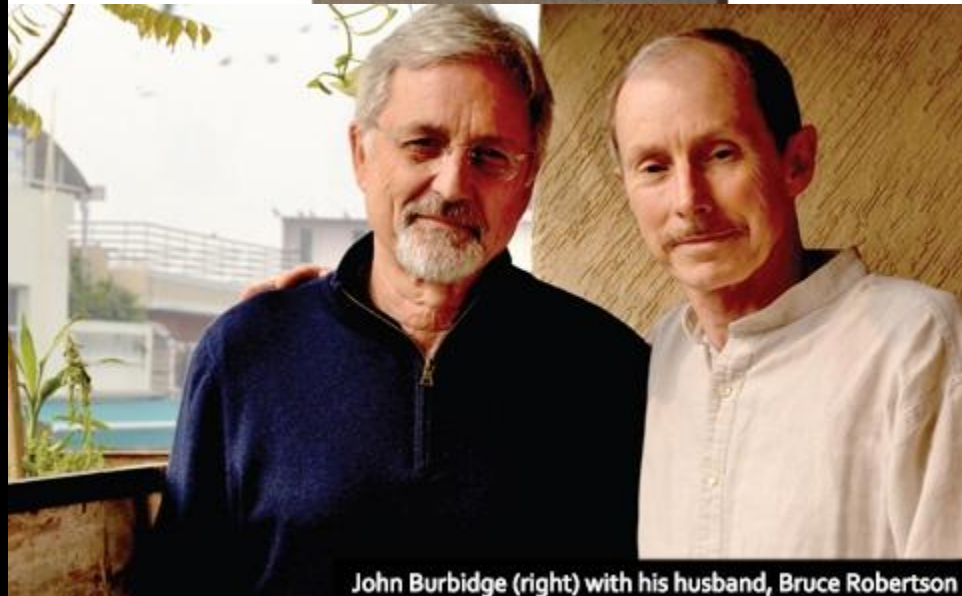


**Interview: John Burbidge**

*John Burbidge tells Time Out how India helped him come out of the closet*



John Burbidge (right) with his husband, Bruce Robertson

"If it hadn't been for India, I don't think I'd have been able to come out so bravely in any other country," said John Burbidge, author of *The Boatman: A Memoir of Same-Sex Love*, recently published by Yoda Press. The book, about the six years that Burbidge spent in India in the early 1980s, recounts his gradual realisation of being gay, followed by his uninhibited exploration and exploitation of his newly found sexuality. Burbidge used to work with an NGO called The Institute of Cultural Affairs in a remote aboriginal community in north-western Australia. He first visited India in 1977 as a volunteer and later in 1980 as a fundraiser. It was during his second term in the country that he discovered a side to his own self that he was unaware of, or, perhaps, didn't acknowledge until then. Most gay men identify their sexuality in their teenage years or at least have some inkling, but with Burbidge it was different. "I guess there was an inkling but it was suppressed," he said. "Australia was still very homophobic. Few, if any, public figures had come out as gay and traditional macho attitudes of masculinity prevailed. Gay men often lived in fear of being ousted, which could result in losing your job, being disowned by your family, and generally being marginalised by society." Stereotypes of gay men as "homos", "poofers" or other derogatory epithets were common, he said. "So the fact that my own self-image was so far removed from this is probably one reason why I never saw myself as a homosexual at the time. But coming to India, being battered by the chaos, building relationships with so many people, kind of freed me up to experiment and to risk."

Burbidge describes himself as a "late bloomer in the game" in the book, who pretended to dismiss it as a "cross-cultural fascination". But the realisation dawned on him from his exhilarating encounters with the "maalishwallahs" at Bombay's Chowpatty Beach to risking it unwisely in public loos; from clandestine meetings in parks after dusk to renting rooms for a satisfying night of pleasure. Three years after his exploits, he finally mustered the courage to come out to his American friends and colleagues, Sandy and Sean, and found in them much-needed, unwavering support. But *The Boatman* is more than a collection of sexual episodes. It also touches upon the difficulties he faced in trying to keep his formal work life at the institute separate from his nightly escapades.

The memoir is a story that Burbidge wanted to get off his chest. At first he wrote an 18,000-word article about his experiences for an Australian magazine, which surprisingly got published not in his native country, but in London. Then in 2000, while taking a memoir-writing class in Seattle, he decided to revisit it in the form of a book. He was friends with actor and director Mahesh Dattani, whom he had met in 1984 during a theatre performance in Mumbai. So after several foreign publishers rejected his manuscript, he turned to Dattani for help.

Through Dattani, Burbidge got in touch with Yoda Press, a publishing house known for addressing critical social and gender issues in India, and soon things fell on the right track. Burbidge, however, is sceptical about the book's reception, especially in India, where the notion of homosexuality does not go down well with everyone. He wondered in whose hands his confessional memoir was going to find itself. Ironically, it comes out at a time when the Supreme Court has rejected a petition from the government and campaigners to reconsider its decision to reinstate Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, that considers consensual homosexual relations a criminal offence.

"There were people from every religion and background," he said. "I had hundreds of encounters with gay men in India but only a handful of them had come out to their families. There was huge risk, even if guys wanted to come out to their families, they risked being cut off, maybe forever, maybe financially; apart from anything else, they risked a lot being sexually active in public." Two decades have passed since he travelled here first and things have started to change. There was no representatives of gay activism and movement in the late '70s, early '80s. "No publications, support groups or websites existed that could bring up the issue. It was all underground and the extent of exchange was limited to signals in a park or meetings in a loo. Thanks to publications like *Trikone* [started in 1986] and *Bombay Dost* [started in 1990], people gradually became aware," he said.

Burbidge, now in his sixties, lives with his husband in the US. He has also recently authored the biography of Australian writer, Gerald Glaskin.

*The Boatman: A Memoir of Same-Sex Love* Yoda Press, R350.

**By Arunima Mazumdar on February 28 2014 10.32am**  
**Photos by Arunima Mazumdar**