Wasafiri
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwas20

Anita and Kiran Desai in Conversation: Writing Across the Generations
Maggie Gee

Available online: 18 Aug 2010

To cite this article: Maggie Gee (2010): Anita and Kiran Desai in Conversation: Writing Across the Generations, Wasafiri, 25:3, 30-37
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2010.486250

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Anita and Kiran Desai
in Conversation

WRITING ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

On 31 October 2009, Wasafiri held its 25th birthday party with a day of events at the Purcell Room, Southbank Centre, London, which included the rare opportunity to hear acclaimed mother and daughter writers Anita Desai and Kiran Desai talk about their lives and work.

Maggie Gee, the noted novelist, who is also an active member of the Wasafiri editorial board, led the conversation.

Maggie Gee

Something very special about this event is that we are genuinely able to celebrate, here in Britain, the great success of two world writers who, not long ago, would have been doubly categorised and marginalised, as Indian writers and as women writers. Celebrating success is such a pleasure, because you can grow weary of having to recover lost or forgotten authors, of having to make claims for unjustly neglected authors, as I’m sure Wasafiri has sometimes felt. So today really is a day of happiness. I think that Virginia Woolf, who was one of Anita Desai’s British literary heroes, would be very glad to have you both here, with rooms of your own and with this whole peopled room of your own today.

Anita Desai was born and raised in India to a German mother and an Indian father, studied at Delhi University at Miranda House, I believe that was a women’s college?

Anita Desai

It still is.

MG

Anita Desai went on to write a dozen novels for adults as well as novels for children; two striking collections of short stories which include some of her best work; literary criticism; and the screenplay of the Merchant Ivory film of her novel, In Custody. She’s held various university fellowships in the USA and at Cambridge in the UK and was Professor of Writing at MIT. She currently lives between Mexico, India and New York. Anita Desai has been shortlisted three times for the Booker and has won many international prizes over the decades, from the National Academy of Letters Award in 1978 for Fire on the Mountain – which is a very bleak, but superbly written book in which all of her later themes are, I think, in embryo – to the Alberto Moravia Prize in 2000. And somehow or other, I don’t know how, among that writing and teaching and travelling, Anita Desai has also raised four children, including her youngest, the novelist Kiran Desai.

Kiran was born in India to Anita and Ashvin Desai and raised there until her mid-teens, when she moved via England to the United States to study at Bennington College, Hollins University and Columbia. She has published two novels, Hullaballoo in the Guava Orchard in 1998 and The Inheritance of Loss in 2006. Those two books have made a dramatic impact. Hullaballoo was highly praised by Salman Rushdie and won the Society of Authors Betty Trask Prize here. The Inheritance of Loss, eight hard years of work later, won the National Book Critics’ Circle Fiction Award in the United States and the 2006 Booker Prize, making Kiran the youngest woman ever to do so. Of course what matters are the books, not the prizes — but the prizes do help!

Among the topics in both these writers’ books, written about as comedy but also as tragedy, are the ways in which violence and the irrational break out in families and in societies; how individuals are thrown about like flotsam and jetsam in history; the uncertain and sometimes heroic nature of journeys across the earth; and the persistence of terrible cruelty and hatred — because these are not soft books.

But also, sometimes, there is the persistence of altruism and love. Anita and Kiran Desai’s work is full of intimate stories, enjoyable and full of moments of tenderness and laughter. But don’t be fooled because they are big books, big in depth, if not always in size.

So let’s start small by talking about your beginnings as writers. Anita, although you married very young at twenty-one, you said your sense of yourself as a writer was already established. Can you tell us when you first remember writing and when you first had a sense of yourself as a writer?
AD I have to go back a very long way for that, because I remember going to school, being taught my letters – English letters, because it was a mission school – and going home and sitting down at a green table in the corner and then starting to write. I had wanted to do that ever since I had started to form letters and I was always harassing my family, ‘How do you spell this? How do you spell that?’ and they would wonder ‘What is she doing? What is this about?’ But I was always writing ever since then.

MG And were you writing in English?

AD Yes I was. I spoke German and Hindi at home. But English was my first written language, it was the first language I was taught to read and write. So I’ve always thought of it as my literary language, my literary tongue.

MG And when did you know that a writer was what you wanted to be?

AD I never really wanted to do anything else but write, yes, I was never drawn in any other direction away from books.

MG And Kiran, I think it was quite different for you, your beginnings?

Kiran Desai It was different, and I actually am amazed that people can be born writers like that, that the first instinct is to be a writer. Because what I got from you [Anita], I think, was the instinct to be a reader. I remember telling myself that I would grow up and be a reader. And I suppose the conversation in the house was a lot of talk about, oh, publishers, always moaning, even at that time, ‘No one buys books, no one reads books’, that’s never changed, and I remember thinking, well, I would buy books and read them. But when I was around nineteen or twenty and I was a student at Bennington College in Vermont, which was very much known for encouraging the creative arts, with a writing programme started by Bernard Malamud — I think half the student population wanted to be writers. The moment I took a class, I was immediately so happy writing my first stories, which were called ‘Hair Oil’ and then ‘The Toilet and the Government Official’ — which took me far in life! That was the beginning. I remember being so immediately happy in the rhythm of writing which, I realised, was the rhythm of my childhood, of growing up in the house where the whole atmosphere of the house was a writer’s house, where the rhythm of writing was so strong. And then it felt like a home of sorts.

MG I think, Anita, that you’ve said you weren’t surprised when Kiran became a writer. I think you had a sense that she wrote very well.

AD Well, she used to write me the most marvellous letters from Bennington and I would always say, ‘Well, this is what you should be doing, why are you wasting your time doing other things?’, but she would completely ignore my comments. And I was very relieved and happy when she had professors who noticed the same talent and encouraged her to write and she listened to them rather than to me.

MG Were you ever tempted to discourage her simply because the path of a novelist is not easy?

KD Yes [laughing].

AD Well, I was so afraid for her, I was so frightened of all the rejections that I knew as a writer would come one’s way. I’ve had enough experience of that. And I certainly didn’t want her to go through that too. And I’m not sure if I said discouraging things, but I was always very afraid.

KD You never said discouraging things, but yes, there’s always that terrible worry of how difficult it is to lead a writer’s life.
MG I understand, because I have a daughter who wants to write and you have to strike a balance between being truthful and, also, maybe it’s good to be a little discouraging, because the truth is people must want to write very badly if they are going to be a writer.

KD Yes, you have to be very strong to be a writer.

MG To deal with the discouragement.

AD Success isn’t going to come easily, you must be aware of that, but you must want to write so passionately, so deeply that you will do so anyway.

MG Yes, I think that’s true. But because you’re very unusual as mother and daughter writers, is there anything that you could say about the kind of parenting that allows children to be creative? Because I know in one of Anita’s novels, Feasting, Fasting, there is an excruciating and terrible portrait of parents who suppress all creativity in their children. There’s this wonderful image of them always sitting on a big swing that seats two, so they always have to move together. And the children call them ‘Mama-Papa’—they are always ‘Mama-Papa’, ‘Mama-Papa’ . . .

KD I remember that swing [laughs with Anita].

MG Anita, you once said that your parents were not at all like ‘Mama-Papa’. I wonder could you say what it is that allows children to be like your youngest?

AD I don’t believe in driving children into creativity, I don’t think one can, but if you have a home that’s full of art, books, music, paintings, surely they will imbibe some of that. And I think that’s about as much as you can do really, just to provide it but not to push, because you might very well drive them away from that. And in fact, all four of my children, including Kiran when she was small, used to say ‘We never want to be writers, we watch you and you lead the most boring life of anybody we’ve known, and we will not live like you!’ So there was a resistance also and it’s amazing that Kiran got over that resistance and decided, well, maybe this is what one should be doing.

MG Kiran could you comment on that? How do you deal with rebelling against your parents?

KD Well, you [Anita] were always very encouraging when I began writing, I remember, but also wary of how difficult it would be—and things are difficult, they’re always difficult, and writers always just have that personality too to make things difficult if they’re not already. But it’s so important to have a companion in this, you know, if I call you [Anita] up and say, ‘The publishers said this’, ‘That journalist said this’, to have someone say, ‘Yes, it is awful, it’s true, this is how they are’ is such a comforting thing. Or to have someone say, ‘Yes, it’s such a lovely thing’ makes you feel immediately happy.

And then I think something else gradually took over, which was learning the habit of writing. Living that kind of life already felt familiar, but once the habit of writing sets in, you are miserable and unhappy, which is the state of being a writer—but you long for that unhappiness and that loneliness in the end, because you realise that you’re lonely and that’s why you can write; you’re miserable in society, you say the wrong thing, that’s why you can write; and you begin to appreciate the awfulness of it, long for it. But I don’t think I would have managed to get that far if I hadn’t seen you go through a lifetime of negotiating this.

AD I knew that to be a writer you have to be a solitary person, you don’t write in company, you can’t. Although I’ve taught creative writing programmes, I always thought that they were awful and no one should do them—although after the writing is done, then it is important and necessary for it to be subjected to detailed and objective criticism, the kind provided by editors and critics.

KD That’s true.

AD I think you simply have to withdraw into the world you’ve invented and to be all by yourself while you’re inventing it. And yes, it’s very lonely and you can be extremely miserable, but it’s what you have to go through if you want to write the book that you want to write.

MG You’ve also talked about the idea of freedom and writing. Could you say in what sense is there freedom in writing? Because obviously the discipline of sitting at a computer is not in itself liberating, the length of a novel is not liberating, so where is the freedom, where does that come in?

AD Well, I’ve always appreciated that once you’ve closed yourself into this inner world, you’re totally free, there is no influence and pressure on you and the very important thing is to defend that freedom, to put up these walls around you and say ‘No, I’m not listening to anybody else, I’m not listening to any voices which aren’t of my choice.’ Of course, I was listening to voices in the books I read, which were greatly influential; but not to be moved by outer voices or friends or anything of that kind. And I was very lucky in that when I was young and I was writing, nobody knew that I was writing. If anyone heard that, ‘Oh, she writes,’ they would come to me and say, ‘That’s a nice hobby to have.’ So I was left totally alone and I was sometimes unhappy about that, but then I realised I had the greatest treasure, which was complete freedom to be myself by myself. And I think the younger generation find it hard to find that now. There are so many voices, so many pressures, so many expectations.

MG What do you think, Kiran?

KD I think it is difficult. I see it so much in New York where I live now, it’s not that closed world anymore, it’s a very
anxious, fast-moving world and it’s not just in New York — it exists on the internet, on blogs, it’s across geography. And I think it’s a world of fashion which makes it very hard to find your own voice and to concentrate on it. I think the New York writing scene is definitely a publishing world in which so much goes on one whim, another whim . . . that atmosphere’s not conducive to doing something strange or difficult or anything that takes a long time. To manage to write seriously in that atmosphere is extremely difficult and I find I deal with it by just taking a very, very long time. So I’m conscious of that world, but then time and more time passes and I feel less and less part of that world, more and more lonely all over again and try and retreat in that way. But in other ways, Mama, you always said that it was often very difficult too, you were completely isolated in that way. But in other ways, Mama, you always said that it was very, very happy to be here and that I want to thank Wasafiri so much for bringing my daughter and me here together. It is a rare and wonderful opportunity for us to travel together and, of course, both of us had travel on our minds, so I have chosen a passage from The Zigzag Way which is all about journeys from one end of the earth to the other. I thought I’d read the very last scene in which a young man visits a small village in Mexico and visits the cemetery on Halloween night — tonight — and has the experience of meeting a ghost there.

The darkness had intensified because the candles had now burned low, or even gone out. The wind was still blowing and even though there were no leaves or grasses through which it could be heard to pass, there was a rustling and stirring all around. The praying and singing and murmuring by the graves was rising to a crescendo and the fragrance of flowers and copal and candles combined in a smothering cloud. Eric felt the need to be by himself alone, he knew he wouldn’t find the grave he had searched for here. Coming down the steps from the chapel, he went round to the back to see if there was an enclosure for the aliens separated and isolated from the rest [because he had learned that it was over here that his grandfather had once worked in the silver mines]. Of course, here too there was uneven ground, mounds of earth, crosses askew upon them, the threatening, admonishing shapes, barely visible in the night and thorns, stones, rubble. The long light increasing chill, the effort of staying awake all became overwhelming. It would only make sense to leave, turn back, return to the inn and the comfort of a warm bed, knowing he had made the effort and failed. Glancing up, however, he saw what must have been the first light of dawn because now he could make out the outline of the mountain.

In Kalimpong, the cook was writing on an air-mail form. He wrote in Hindi and then copied out the address in awkward English letters.

He was being besieged by requests for help. The more they asked the more they came the more they asked—Lamsang, Mr Lobhsang Phuntsok, Oni, Mr Shezoon of the Lepcha Quarterly, Kesang, the hospital cleaner, the lab technician responsible for the tapeworm in formaldehyde, the man who plugged the holes in rusting pots, everyone with sons in the queue ready to be sent. They brought him chickens as gifts, little packets of nuts or raisins, offered him a drink at the Ex-Army Thapa’s Canteen, and he was beginning to feel as if he were a politician, a bestower of favors, a receiver of thanks.

The more pampered you are the more pampered you will be the more presents you receive the more presents you will get the more presents you receive the more you are admired the more you will be admired the more you are admired the more presents you will get the more pampered you will be—[Kiran Desai continues to read this passage from The Inheritance of Loss. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006. 94–98]

MG Thanks very much Kiran. I believe Anita is going to read from The Zigzag Way, another book about journeys.

AD I want to thank Wasafiri so much for bringing my daughter and me here together. It is a rare and wonderful opportunity for us to travel together and, of course, both of us had travel on our minds, so I have chosen a passage from The Zigzag Way which is all about journeys from one end of the earth to the other. I thought I’d read the very last scene in which a young man visits a small village in Mexico and visits the cemetery on Halloween night — tonight — and has the experience of meeting a ghost there.

The darkness had intensified because the candles had now burned low, or even gone out. The wind was still blowing and even though there were no leaves or grasses through which it could be heard to pass, there was a rustling and stirring all around. The praying and singing and murmuring by the graves was rising to a crescendo and the fragrance of flowers and copal and candles combined in a smothering cloud. Eric felt the need to be by himself alone, he knew he wouldn’t find the grave he had searched for here. Coming down the steps from the chapel, he went round to the back to see if there was an enclosure for the aliens separated and isolated from the rest [because he had learned that it was over here that his grandfather had once worked in the silver mines]. Of course, here too there was uneven ground, mounds of earth, crosses askew upon them, the threatening, admonishing shapes, barely visible in the night and thorns, stones, rubble. The long light increasing chill, the effort of staying awake all became overwhelming. It would only make sense to leave, turn back, return to the inn and the comfort of a warm bed, knowing he had made the effort and failed. Glancing up, however, he saw what must have been the first light of dawn because now he could make out the outline of the mountain.


MG Both of these books are about journeys, and the journeys actually have a strong tragic component. The passage that Kiran read was very funny, but it’s also based upon a story that begins as more comic, but becomes increasingly tragic at the end. In Anita’s The Zigzag Way, there are various journeyers...
who come to Mexico, and it’s as if the ones who are accepted, by the people of the country and by the novel, are the ones who are genuinely looking for their history. The one who is judged harshly is Doña Vera, the woman who has come to escape her history, which is the history of Nazism in Germany and of the silver mines in Mexico where all of these miners, Mexican and Cornish, were oppressed. So these journeys are strongly political journeys which raise major themes.

Anita, there is a passage in The Zigzag Way where two foreigners are talking about the responsibility of the visitor or of the colonialist. The exchange reads:

‘People, countries, if we think about our sins, our guilt it is a heavy baggage we carry. It is why over here people go to church so happily, every day, many times a day, whenever they pass by one.’

‘And those of us who are not believers?’ asked Eric.

Andre shrugged, ‘Perhaps we must forgive ourselves.’

‘Do you believe one can?’ Eric asked in surprise.

‘No. I think more is required, much more, sacrifice perhaps, like in the old days, animal, material, even human.’

Could you say something about that passage?

AD I think the basic idea of that book was starting new lives. Everybody goes elsewhere in order to begin a new life, in order to abandon their past lives, and that is what Nazi Germans, Cornish miners were all doing in Mexico, to start new lives. But in doing so they are building up this huge debt they owe to that country, because what does Mexico have to do with their past at all? And I leave this question unanswered really, because how much penance can you do, how much sacrifice can you make before that guilt is appeased? And perhaps you have to pick yourself up at some point and continue the journey and try to do it less guiltily.

MG There’s some suggestion in your writing which I find very interesting. There’s a tremendous awareness of people’s work, of the work that keeps the show on the road, sometimes by the servant, sometimes by women. In this book you talk about work as a value and Doña Vera, the woman of German fascist extraction, doesn’t work, and the women at the lecture look as if they’ve never worked in their lives, whereas the miners did.

AD Perhaps work is the way to redemption and work is central to our lives — but work which doesn’t destroy anyone else’s lives or territory.

MG Which is, of course, a complex thing. When I read Kiran’s Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard I realised that one of the great drives there is against too much work of a male competitive kind. There’s a great desire for freedom and play and anarchy and a kind of return to the world of nature.

Could you say something about this, Kiran?

KD Yes, that book was all about escape. It was my first book and I was learning how to write and I think that’s what writing also symbolised to me — leaving the world and somehow finding a way out in nature really. Not a desire to possess nature but a desire to let nature possess you. But with the second book I became much more responsible, realising that the first book had been so much fun to write but it didn’t feel entirely true, in that it didn’t reflect my own life which was, of course, nothing really to do with that. I didn’t talk about the journeys that had happened in my own life or that had happened in the past through the family over many generations. And the second book was very much an attempt to try and discover an honesty actually, to try and acknowledge the fact that people were journeying in very different ways. You know, we tend to all put ourselves in the same group as Indians abroad or Indians going to England or Indians going to America, but two very different things were happening. Some people were travelling really in the name of having more space, more freedom — you know, there’s that sort of Citibank way of travelling where you’re having champagne and crab in some board room. And then there were other people who were travelling in a very different way and that was, in a way, the larger story — that travel [driven by the need for work or money] symbolised a sort of trap. So my second book was a way to try and write about two different ways of leaving and why we leave.

MG Lukács, the theorist of the novel, had the idea that the novel is the form of transcendental homelessness, where the individual for the first time is different enough from his/her own village, from his/her own community to have a real story to tell and to be the author and the authority in the novel. Is there a way, Anita, in which you being half-German and growing up during the war when some Germans were interned in India, had that sense of being an outsider? If so, how did that develop your writing? And how, Kiran, does that come down in some way to you, or do you feel like a citizen of the world? What’s your identity now?

AD Of course I imbibed my mother’s foreignness, that state of being an outsider, but in a very subconscious way. If anyone had asked me this while she was alive and we still had a home together, I would have shrugged and rejected the idea and said ‘She’s not an outsider, she’s my mother.’ The realisation came to me later and quite subconsciously, because it certainly affected my writing. I know that again and again I have written, never about my mother, but always about this outsider character, who doesn’t quite fit into society. And at times maybe someone who was born into that society but still feels different from the rest and still is separate; and there are others who are obviously outsiders and will always be alien. And I suppose it instructed me in how to look at the world which I’d been born into from a certain outside angle.
MG Kiran, obviously not everyone’s mother is a novelist, but did you feel like an insider, like an outsider, like something between the two?

KD I grew up in a very cosy way, I think. There were four of us children in a big household. I was also reading your [Anita’s] work while I was growing up, so as the books came out I read them, and I think they brought a completely different perspective of India, because they were looking at the society we lived in from another, often very critical, point of view. That whole landscape was also in my mind, I’m sure, absorbing it as I grew up. My first experience of really feeling like an outsider was when we left and it was just the two of us going up to the mountains to this town called Kalimpong which I write about in The Inheritance of Loss, and then we were strangers on a hillside that was completely different. It was my first growing up moment when I realised that I was not the centre and my story was not the only story — there were many books on the shelf. And then we left very quickly for England and then the United States and I think I became even more acutely aware of that fact — and all my work, I think, has also been about being outside, not fitting in. Perhaps that is just one of the qualifications for being a writer in the first place, but I find that’s true about everything that I have written.

MG Can I ask, what was the first novel by your mother that you read? And which one is your favourite?

KD The first one I have a clear memory of was Fire on the Mountain. It was a long time before I re-read it and I remember I wrote Hullabaloo and someone pointed out that the themes are parallel to Fire on the Mountain, and then I thought about it and I thought ‘Yes, so close.’ And that was also true of The Inheritance of Loss. The book I think I love the most, perhaps it’s because I’ve re-read it also very recently — I like all of them for different reasons — is The Zigzag Way, because I was there while you [Anita] wrote it, we were both there in the same place and I was watching you so happily write it. You were going to all the libraries, we were together in Mexico and I think maybe in a way it was your happiest writing experience. But Baumgartner’s Bombay, for its huge canvas, for elevating this non-hero into a heroic status, for all that enormous depth across the world. I think that’s a book that I’ve learned so much from.

MG It’s a quite wonderful book, and it was a departure in your work, wasn’t it, Anita? Can I ask, what do you like best about Kiran’s writing?

AD Well, each book is such a surprise to me. I never see it while she’s working on it. Only when she’s completed the manuscript. And it’s always so amazing to me, I sit there thinking, ‘What, this is what you were thinking, this is what you were doing?’ And the first book of course, made me laugh out loud, just out of sheer delight and the joy of reading this wonderful book. The second book I could see had many much darker twists, but I knew where they were coming from, I could understand them, I think. Some of it was very familiar material to me — all the part that’s set in Kalimpong — some of it was totally unknown to me, like the part she set in Harlem, in New York. So it was entering into her world and being surprised at every turn, sometimes laughing out loud and sometimes being shocked.

MG Although I have other things I want to say, I’ve got to open it to the audience.

Q1 I read The Inheritance of Loss while touring India, exactly the same regions, Calcutta, Kalimpong, Gangtok, Darjeeling, and I could see where the anger and the harshness came from, it was part of the landscape of the people. From an objective point of view, the hinterland of your imagination is clearly rooted there, Kiran, and this also applies to your mother, because in Fasting, Feasting, for example, we had the spectacle of the Indian student who goes to America and he’s exposed to realities there which are so totally different to his own. But the picture you paint is a very harsh one. Are there no redeeming features at all?

AD Maybe it’s harsh because the lives that she has written about are very harsh lives, but what redeems them is the laughter, the ability to laugh, which is necessary if you are to survive and, to me, the harshness and the laughter are so intertwined, I really can’t separate them.

KD Yes, people are always telling me The Inheritance of Loss is a such a harsh book, but it was much harsher actually, I edited the worst bits out, you’ll be glad to know.

Q2 It’s more damning than V S Naipaul.

KD Really? No! I really don’t think so. But there were difficult lives and I think I was also surprised by the anger I felt when writing this book. I uncovered it in myself and didn’t expect to. And I think it came from really drawing very difficult lines — I tried to maintain a sort of distance between the past and the present, drawing the lines back and thinking, maybe this isn’t such a brave new world, maybe there are a lot of old things going on but with different names attached to them. I found it a devastating book to write and I concentrated on a lot of funny bits and humour because I think you need jokes to survive — you know, often the best jokes come from the worst places.

Q2 This is a question for Anita. You now live in three different countries and I get this sense that there’s a tendency and a compulsion for writers to just be on the road. Do you feel it’s something that’s integral to being a writer? Is it something that one just has to accept and how do you deal with that? Are you settled?

AD I don’t see myself as living very much on the road actually, there have been long, long periods where I’ve just been completely...
static. I lived in India until I was forty-seven years old before I moved at all and, since then, I have moved more. But I’ve always made a still centre for myself. I’ve gone to Mexico often, but whenever I’ve gone there, I’ve first created a still centre where I can be with my thoughts and then set out to look and find and discover.

Q3 Do you find writing a cathartic experience? To explore different parts of your identity which you otherwise wouldn’t have the possibility of exploring in quite creative and imaginative ways? I think particularly of The Inheritance of Loss where you explore the dichotomy of having dual identities, of this journey of going to different countries and still maintaining who you are, which can be quite a complex and unsettling feeling, I imagine.

KD Yes, I think this is true for both writers and readers. I think we read also to try and complicate our sense of identity. But also the relief that I found eventually in this endeavour is that there didn’t seem to be a centre. It seems to me that both novel-writing and immigration are creative acts. It’s very wonderful to be a novelist while also being an immigrant, while also being someone who travels, because your sense of identity is endlessly complicated and you begin to wonder if it’s really a firm thing at all. It seems to get further and further undone, as does any notion of home or any idea of a centre in the past, which is a home, I guess — the past is a home for all of us in one way or another. But it all seems to vanish the more one goes along this path and, in a way, it is unsettling and upsetting but, on the other hand, I find that the truth of thinking another way doesn’t hold, for me at least.

MG Anita?

AD Well, I don’t think that my writing is directly cathartic, I don’t see it as that because I try to avoid writing about my own life as much as I can. I have no wish to write about it. But I think I write because in writing I am able to put things on paper, sort them out until they form clear patterns, and I’m able to look at my life and my experiences and everything around me more clearly on paper than I could if I were simply dealing with it. We all deal with our lives, but being able to withdraw and put it down on paper helps me to see more clearly, to clarify my thoughts — in that sense it is cathartic.

MG That question about exploring different parts of your identity was very interesting because it sounded like something Virginia Woolf said, that in art we find our unacted parts, the parts of ourselves we haven’t been able to live, by making characters or reading characters; and it reminds me of something Anita once said about labels, and not wanting to be labelled or fixed, either by critics or by the gaze.

AD That is something that writers really have to work at because you can be so easily pushed into a box by your publishers or by your readers and they start to expect a certain kind of book from you — women’s writing, historical, romance, science fiction whatever, and if you step out of that box you’re quickly told, ‘Oh you’re not supposed to be doing this, others are doing this.’ But as a writer I want to be free to write about other things.

Q4 I wanted to ask Kiran Desai about locating part of the story of The Inheritance of Loss in Kalimpong, because the Indian judge who is retired is living in an area which is also foreign, because it’s atypically Indian really. And in the same way the cook’s son is in New York, also living in a foreign land. What was the reason for choosing Kalimpong as the location for part of the story?

KD It’s a very interesting part of the country because its border is the North Eastern border which has always been contested and has shifted through the years before the time of the British in India and during and after. When I was fourteen or so, we lived there before we left India. And then I entered another territory that also felt borderless in a very different way, another place where I was forced to think about the same issues, and I realised that migration and immigration are not really just Western issues, although we tend to discuss them in that way — but every country has these issues, India being one of them. That’s an enormous topic. And you have to think, in both contexts, what does it mean when you’ve been in a place for several generations? Should your language be taught in schools? What happens when you don’t have political power or economic power? What does it mean to make these huge journeys? So all these characters are moving around, the judge being one of them, not only geographically but also through so many changes in time — and Biju as well in New York.

Q5 I have a question to you both. Do you read other authors’ books while you’re writing your own and how much do other authors influence your own writing? And do some ideas come to you when you write a book that you decide to use for your future books? Do you just note them down and decide to use them later? How is the writing process for you both?

AD Well, of course I do read a lot for the sheer joy of reading, it’s what I love to do best. But when I’m actually writing a book, I try to restrict myself and not read books which will overwhelm or influence me too greatly so that I can keep to my own voice and not go astray. But when I’m not writing I tend to read more freely and sometimes I read around a subject, as when I was writing The Zigzag Way. The amount I read for that very small, slim book is almost unbelievable. I went through so many histories, so many biographies and travel books, in order to reduce them to this very small book. So I like to read around a chosen subject.

MG You’ve also said, Anita, that as your books have become more compressed, in a sense more fragmentary and working through images, that you’ve read more poetry.

AD That’s true. When I was younger I used to happily settle down to a book by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky or Proust. I felt I had all the
time to explore their words, but I no longer feel that. And there was a certain time in my life when I felt poetry gave me just as much reward, but compactly, reduced to very brief lines, a few images, a few metaphors. And I began to use that as a model for my writing. I was hoping to reduce my prose also to just a few images and metaphors that I needed to convey my thoughts.

MG Could you name a few authors who have been important to you just in case people in the audience would like to look at their work?

AD When I was a young woman I was reading all the classics, the Russian writers, the French writers, was very happy to discover the Japanese writers for myself, writers like Kawabata, who’s almost a poet really. And lately, well, every place I’ve been to I had to find the right authors for that era or for that place. When I went to the United States, I had to go back to reading Mark Twain because I felt that Huckleberry Finn best described this country to me, there had been no other book that described it so well, until I found Don DeLillo’s work. I admire him greatly. And when I went to Mexico I became very interested in the Latin American writers and now the writer I most look up to from that part of the world is Eduardo Galliano.

MG Kiran?

KD Yes, I also read very differently in different places and for different reasons at different times. In Mexico I read different books, in New York I read much shorter books that are easier to read. Up in the mountains in Kalimpong when I was writing my book I read very seriously — I read Dostoyevsky while the rain came down on the tin roof. But I also love Japanese writers very much, probably for what I cannot do — probably for jealous reasons. But personally for my own work it would have to be Rushdie, Naipaul, Michael Ondaatje, people like Amitav Ghosh, writers who have really helped my thinking.

Q6 I have a comment, which follows on from what Anita and Kiran have been saying. Growing up in India in the 1950s and 1960s, Anita Desai’s novels were very important to me because we had access to a lot of literature from the world – of course English literature that we read in India right from Shakespeare to the modern novelists of the time – but Anita Desai at the time was one of the only writers who actually held up a mirror to Indian society. Her books like The Clear Light of Day, In Custody, Village By the Sea made a very deep impression on youngsters growing up in India. We didn’t even have the language for the flora and fauna which Anita, in her novel Village by the Sea, uses, like the casurina tree or the curlew, because we’d only read about daffodils and snowdrops. So, Anita, thank you for sensitising us. I don’t think you know how deeply your work resonates with a lot of people in India, especially the early books which, in a sense, touched me even more deeply than some of the later work. I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for being one of the first serious writers who was able to talk about Indian society and the characters we wouldn’t know about if you hadn’t highlighted them – Hari, the little boy making his way from the village to the big bad city of Bombay and how he coped with it – long before White Tiger, you were there doing this. Thank you.

MG Well, it only remains for me to thank Anita for her kindness, because she wrote me some encouraging letters when I was a very young writer. A big thank you to Anita and Kiran Desai.