

Narrative Planes

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Rana Dasgupta's debut novel, *Tokyo Cancelled*, stands out from the crowd for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it's not, strictly speaking, a novel at all. Dasgupta himself describes it as a "story cycle", a term which hints at the fascination with traditional modes of storytelling that permeates a book in which the action - such as it is - takes place in the definitively contemporary setting of an airport terminal. When snowstorms ground their flight to Tokyo, 13 passengers experience a moment of hiatus in their lives. Stranded beside the baggage carousels in an echoing arrivals hall for a single, lacuna-like night, they huddle up, passing around packets of peanuts and final cigarettes until one of their number suggests that "when you are together like this stories are what is required". And so the night is passed: "Simple," Dasgupta writes, "just like that."

About the stories themselves there is nothing simple. Rich, strange, pulsing with colour, they leave iridescent trails that criss-cross the globe like a flight map. A tailor sews a robe of surpassing beauty for an ungrateful prince; a Japanese entrepreneur risks all when he falls helplessly in love with a doll; Robert De Niro's lovechild explores the magical properties of a packet of Oreos; in a Paris gripped by plague, an immortal changeling is touched by death. The stories are thematically linked, but discrete; the characters and setting of the framing device, meanwhile, are tenebrous, and accorded minimal space. Why did he choose to present his stories as a novel at all?

"Paradoxically, the more the world becomes interwoven the less it seems possible to tell a single, representative story of it - yet the connections are real and lived," he says. "So how do you narrate this? I was trying to find a narrative structure that would have the form of a network, one that could admit the distances between places, but could also hint at the metaphors and analogies that connect them. As for the necessity of presenting a night of storytelling rather than 13 raw texts: at one level this is a nod to a tradition of other story cycles; at another, it serves to compress the narrative's time even as its space spreads out across the globe. Finally, I think it stages the production of "literature" as something that normal people do. If it seems fantastical that a collection of travellers might tell such stories then this raises the question of why it is so much easier to stomach the idea that Chaucerian illiterates might do so. One reason is the creeping institutionalisation of culture: only "writers" write, only "artists" make art, and everyone else can only consume. These stories aren't presented as non-negotiable outpourings from on high, but in a setting of people who are both artists and audience. By embedding them in life, by leading readers into a world that is rather like our own but where everyone tells stories, the book issues a challenge: for more storytelling."

Stories have always mattered to Rana Dasgupta. Despite having waited until his mid-30s to produce his first novel, he has written compulsively for as long as he can remember. Of the writing bug, he says "It's always been there. I've done other things in my life - academia, corporate jobs - and I expected over time that such things would replace writing as the best expression of myself. But it never happened. So I had to give up other things and focus solely on that."

With the literary world on the lookout for a next-generation Rushdie or Seth, it's no surprise that much has been made of Dasgupta's Indo-Anglian literary heritage, and not without foundation: there are strong Rushdien echoes in the tone of the framing narrative in particular. While Dasgupta points out that he was born and brought up in the UK, it was not until he moved to Delhi four years ago that he decided to give up his job in PR and write full-time. Although *Tokyo Cancelled* appears on the one hand to reject the primacy of location (the storytellers find themselves "in the Middle of Nowhere, in a place ... like a back corridor between two worlds") he nevertheless confesses that he found Delhi "a stimulating place to write," and the city's influence can be felt throughout the book.

The third story, a twisted reworking of the Sleeping Beauty myth with a surprisingly touching dash of incest thrown in, takes place in Delhi; but it is the first tale, ostensibly set in "one of those small, carefree lands that used to be so common", that really evokes the atmosphere of India's capital. A prince (kitted out in designer jeans and Italian sunglasses) charges a tailor from a remote village to sew him a silk robe of great magnificence, which the tailor then delivers to the royal palace. Arriving in the city, he is galvanised by the exhilarating bustle, the pageant of "sparkling brassware, colourful fabrics, beeping alarm clocks and novelties for tourists", and thinks to himself "What wonders can be achieved here!". But when his fortunes turn, the city appears to him as "one enormous backstage, long abandoned by players and lights, where dusty costumes and angular stage sets lay scattered amid a dim and eerie silence". Anyone who has visited Delhi will recognise the city's twin faces, and acknowledge its capacity to mutate in a moment from one to the other.

Metamorphosis, in fact, is a leitmotif throughout *Tokyo Cancelled*. Almost every tale pivots around a moment of change: a seabird emerges from the throat of a sailor, a dying man sprouts roots and flowers, Isabella Rossellini's daughter is transformed into a shop on Madison Avenue. "I suppose I'm interested in the things people do to accommodate themselves in the world - the dark things, the glorious things," says Dasgupta. "Sometimes, transmutation is a way of dramatising the dream of a self of infinite possibility, sometimes it is about the terror of change, and always, of course, there is a dialogue between the serious questions of change and continuity in the self and the perpetual promises of instant transformation delivered by consumerist whisperers. I'm drawn to writing about characters who are not at the core of the system in which we live and who must sometimes imagine radical transformations of themselves if they are to survive within it. Transformations that might seem astonishing - fairytale - to those whose lives have been a natural, continuous accommodation with this system."

The theme of transformation is just one of the book's many nods to a fairytale tradition. Fabulous tropes - princes, towers, separated twins, third sons, forbidden rooms - feature in almost every tale, and much of the stories' wit comes from the adaptation of fairytale archetypes for a modern world in which celebrities are nobility and CEOs are kings. Why, I ask, did he choose to draw on the myths of childhood for *Tokyo Cancelled*?

"The infantilisation of folktales is a recent thing, contemporary with the emergence of modern ideas of childhood," he points out. "Now, children get their quick fix of everything that is uncanny, irrational and enchanted then cast it off in favour of a 'rational' adult self. How is such an astonishing division sustained? One commentator said about Disney World that its patent unreality helps us to believe that what we step into when we leave is 'reality' - yet sometimes we find ourselves glimpsing something in this outside world that is remarkably similar to the inside. When Alan Greenspan pronounces on the future of the US economy and sends people scuttling to prepare themselves for ill times, don't we also remember the witch doctor, the shaman, the prophet who descends from solemn communion and tells the masses that the harvest will be bad? I suppose what I'm trying to say is that *Tokyo Cancelled* isn't about 'updating' old stories - it's about a search for a language to describe my own reality. In the process of this search, folktales jumped out at me."

Dasgupta's reality is clearly a complex one: during the course of his tales he travels the world and leaves scarcely a theme unthumbed. Which of the 13 stories would he say, now, is his favourite?

"It's difficult, obviously," he hesitates, "but, possibly, the last." His final tale, *The Recycler of Dreams*, is set in Buenos Aires following Argentina's economic collapse, and tells the story of the love affair between Gustavo and Catherine Deneuve-lookalike Carla, which is marred by the fact that neither are able to eat. "I've been living with these stories for a long time, and this one continues to offer more on return visits," he tells me. "It was the most ambitious: an attempt to write about a difficult social theme as an internal, lived experience rather than as a macroeconomic phenomenon. It's a problem for literature to enter such subjects without resorting to cold journalese. I tried to represent the progress of abstract systems through the states of the body. I still like its feeling, its depiction of psychological states."

Having waited 34 years to publish his first book, Dasgupta is losing no time with his second, for which, he says, "novel" would probably be a fairly accurate description. He will not, however, be abandoning the concerns of *Tokyo Cancelled*. "The central character is a kind of contemporary prophet, visited by visions that he dictates to a woman at a typewriter," he explains. "It asks new questions - questions that were clarified for me by writing *Tokyo Cancelled*, and it is much more centrally concerned with the search for an adequate language." If Dasgupta's ongoing quest continues to produce books of the quality of *Tokyo Cancelled*, long may he keep searching

This story was found at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/mar/29/fiction.sarahcrown>