

Book
Club
Kit

a novel

Latitudes *of* Longing

Shubhangi
Swarup

Q&A with Shubhangi Swarup

*What inspired you to write **Latitudes of Longing**?*

As a child, my mother would tell me stories of an emerald green archipelago in the Indian Ocean that was actually mountain peaks jutting out of the sea. She had grown up on those islands, and filled me with their natural history. These were the fairytales that intrigued me the most.

The seed of the novel was a sense of disbelief in things we cannot see. There exist patterns, connections, and truths in nature that are beyond human grasp. Things like the presence of marine fossils and shells in high-altitude deserts or the abundance of gems in Myanmar speak of a profound geological violence that connects these disparate terrains and cultures.

To research the novel, you spent seven years travelling to all of the many locations where the book is set. What did that involve? What moments from those travels stayed with you?

I wrote my first few chapters sitting all alone in a supposedly haunted guesthouse in the Andaman Islands. It was my first time there, as I hadn't been to any of the regions in which the novel is set.

I realized that one didn't need to believe in ghosts to be afraid of them! I started to write, if only to distract myself. The ghosts seeped into the stories, often entertaining me. If there is one thing the novel has taught me, it is to listen.

The research was wide, from documenting solitary confinement in Burmese prisons to envisioning earthquakes that could tilt entire mountain ranges. I owe a lot to Mr. Aung Htaik, the modest owner of a popular teashop in Yangon, Myanmar. He was among the student revolutionaries who were released in a political amnesty in 1980. He took it upon himself to see my research through, and, in addition to sharing his own experiences, he also doubled as my translator in conversations with other senior ex-prisoners. There were moments in the interviews when I would break down, overwhelmed by the details of torture. And he would always look out for me in his silent ways. He would offer me a plate of samosas or mooncakes, pour me some more tea, and then gently pull me back into the conversation.

I landed in situations where I had to spend a day with an opium farmer, learning how to extract it from the poppies and stuff it into pipes, and discussing the presence of yetis on the Siachen Glacier with Indian army officers. In Kathmandu, conducting workshops with the dance bar waitresses wasn't enough, so I had to find other ways to fit into the dance bar scene. So I posed as a pimp, and went about interviewing people for a fictitious dance bar in Mumbai. I don't know if it's a sign of my success or failure, but I was offered a job as a dancer myself!



Posing on stage in dance bar, Kathmandu

Q&A with Shubhangi Swarup (CONTINUED)

Latitudes of Longing took seven years to write, and each draft was a revelation. As I probed deeper, the fiction I wrote started to reflect in my reality in strange ways. My research trips to Kathmandu preceded the 2015 earthquake, and I had spent many hours visualizing a powerful one hitting the city. So when the Pokhara earthquake actually took place, I felt a strange guilt. I cancelled an impending visit to the city, and decided to change the story a little.

In the novel we encounter all kinds of ghosts, from colonial Englishmen to extinct creatures. We even have the ghost of an extinct ocean, the Tethys, wandering across the pages. Why did you want to bring those characters and personifications into the story?

Our creation myths and folk stories bestowed narratives to the insentient by anthropomorphizing them. By doing so, the stories engendered a nascent understanding and respect for the ecosystem. The ghosts add layers of natural history, evolution, and geology, and help the reader connect dramatic moments with similar ones across time and space.

Among all the ghosts and supernatural creatures, the spirit of Tethys haunts me the most. I wrote the novel with a great awareness of water, as that is what all these geographies were in the past: A mighty ocean.

Some of your research was personal—the two main characters in the “Islands” section are inspired by your grandparents.

Yes, my novel begins with a couple living in the Andaman Islands, immediately after Indian independence. They are inspired by my grandparents, who found themselves in similar circumstances, an unlikely pair stuck on an exotic island far away from home. My Nana [grandfather] was India’s first Commonwealth Scholar, a graduate in Botany from Oxford University. Much to the dismay of my devout vegetarian grandmother (a math and Sanskrit geek), he had even tasted horsemeat!

As a grandchild, I was an intimate witness to their companionship, and it intrigued me. How did it all start? How did they fall in love? My Nani is in her 90s now, and my Nana passed away two decades ago. But their companionship remains in ethereal ways. I was keen to explore the idea of soulmates in my fiction.



In the Andamans

Q&A with Shubhangi Swarup (CONTINUED)

You've said you owe a lot to folk stories, creation myths, and the tradition of oral storytelling. But this novel—and your research—are also heavily based in science. How did you reconcile these two divergent efforts?

I wrote *Latitudes of Longing* as a creation myth based in science. Creation myths share their preoccupations with the physical sciences, in the sense that they're all obsessed with the question of how it all came to be—the planet, the universe, and our relationship with it.

My quest for stories with nature at the center led me to both folk tales and creation myths, where nature is an important character. The winds, the ocean, the grass or a mere sparrow don't just form the background, they are active agents in such tales.

I studied the sciences like narratives, and sought the scientific thinking within traditional narratives to reflect on the overlap. So even though I have ghosts in the novel, their descriptions are scientifically accurate. I make references to evolution and the planet's development throughout, and they are all based on research.

What was the most difficult section to write, and why?

I found the “Snow Desert,” the final section, the most difficult to write. The character of Girija Rana refused to be what I wanted him to be. I wanted him to be a soldier, and I wanted him to die a tragic death. And each time I lifted my pen to do so, he refused.

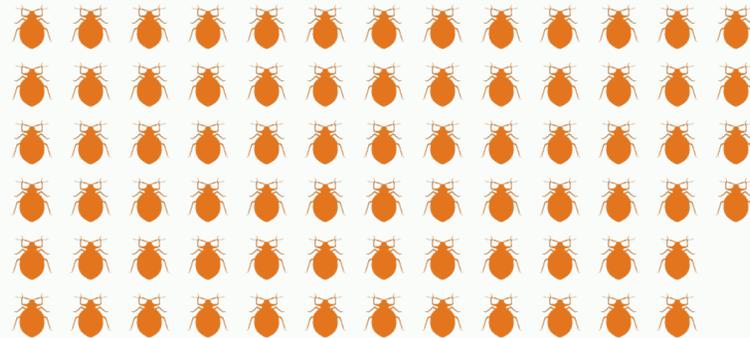
I remember writing in my diary one day, asking why this was so? Why was the character I wanted to kill so intensely alive? A few hours later, I found the answer, when I found myself in his circumstances. Like him, I found myself hanging on for dear life as I fell off a high cliff and onto a bush, the only one at that height. Dangling from one leg, with enough time on my hands to observe all the surroundings, I realized that I had mistaken a new beginning for the end.



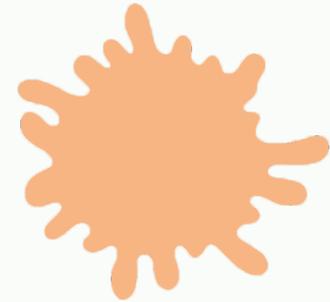
Rainbow in a snow desert

By the Numbers: Shubhangi Swarup's Research Experience

76
BEDBUG
BITES



1



CASE OF HOSPITALIZATION
FOR AMOEBIASIS AND
BACTERIAL DYSENTERY

1

INSTANCE OF MY CAR FALLING OFF
A CLIFF, AND ME LANDING ON A TREE



1

MARMOT
BITE

38 LEECH BITES



Pangaea politica

by Massimo Pietrobon



Source: <http://capitan-mas-ideas.blogspot.com.br/2012/08/pangea-politica.html>

Discussion Questions

1. A tree tells Chanda Devi that she has loved Girija Prasad in many lives. Do you believe in the concept of soulmates?
2. Chanda Devi says of the crocodile that eats a human, “We can’t punish beings for acting out their nature when we are the intruders.” Consider this quotation in the face of news stories of people being threatened by gorillas, crocodiles, tigers; when the people themselves intruded on the animals. Discuss both sides of the issue: Where does blame belong? Where does punishment belong?
3. “All of us are burdened by the twin destinies of saying goodbye to our loved ones and departing from our loved ones ourselves,” Girija Prasad says. “Let this not obliterate the greater destiny we all share—the fleeting moments we have together.” How does this quotation make you think differently about life? After reading this novel, did you find life more precious? Do you see death as less personal, or less tragic? Do you view death as a finality?
4. Girija Prasad’s death is both anticlimactic and extremely climactic: In quick succession, he gets an erection, laughs, and sheds a tear, before being carried away by the water. How is his life encapsulated by this brief yet poignant scene? Why do you think he ultimately decides to “savor the moment” and walk straight into the tsunami instead of escaping to safety?
5. “Memory was life reflected in a shattered mirror,” Swarup writes. What does this quotation mean to you? In what ways is memory an incomplete reflection of life?
6. While human stories are at the heart of *Latitudes of Longing*, sometimes Swarup will call attention to the stories of animals, insects, and other organisms that share Earth with us. Why do you think she does this? Did it make you think more deeply about our planet and the life it sustains for all species?
7. Share your favorite moment you’ve experienced in nature.

Discussion Questions (CONTINUED)

8. Like the author, do you consider the survival of human beings to be linked to the survival of all other lifeforms? Or do you believe the human race is capable of outliving all others?
9. “When human bloodshed seeps into the cracks of the land, the earth’s scabs and wounds cannot heal . . . they can only fester. Your violence and wars are like gangrene to the earth’s flesh,” says Apo. Do human actions, especially violence, impact the planet?
10. Some characters have more “noble” professions than others—Girija Prasad is an academic of sorts, while onetime revolutionary Plato and his friend Thapa trade opium and Bagmati is an exotic dancer. Swarup treats their stories with equal importance; their lives with equal meaning. Why do you think this is? What is her view of humanity?
11. Do you consider Mary’s killing of her husband a crime? Or was it a necessary compulsion?
12. “The freedom to live, even the freedom to die, was linked to his ability to forget,” Swarup writes of Apo. “But now that forgetfulness has set in as a natural process, it hurts him. Back then, amnesia was a deliberate act of hope. Now it is a sign of life unraveling.” Why would Apo wish for a sort of amnesia as a young person, but see it as an affliction as an old person? In what ways can forgetting protect us? In what ways can it hurt us?
13. Have you ever seen a ghost, or visited a haunted place? If so, share the story.
14. A fault line holds the stories together, instead of political borders. How does this literary choice shape the story?

Lemongrass Tea Recipe

“To value a lemon is to value the wisdom of all creation. In the jungle, you can squeeze it over leeches that have latched on and they shrivel instantaneously. You can squeeze it over bites and wounds as an antiseptic. And when you are dehydrated, nothing revives you more than an entire lemon, especially the rind.”

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups water
- 2 cups roughly chopped lemongrass stalks
- ¼ cup sugar
- Lime wheels for garnish (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Bring the water to a boil over high heat in a medium saucepan.
2. Add the lemongrass and boil rapidly for 5 minutes.
3. Reduce the heat to low and simmer the tea for an additional 5 minutes.
4. Strain the stalks from the liquid. Stir in the sugar until dissolved.
5. Serve warm, or chill in the refrigerator and pour over ice.



Source: <https://thewanderlustkitchen.com/addictive-fresh-lemongrass-tea>

Nature Conservation Resources

The Nature Conservancy

<https://www.nature.org/en-us>

The Nature Conservancy is a global environmental nonprofit working to create a world where people and nature can thrive.

United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

<https://www.epa.gov>

Our mission is to protect human health and the environment.

Ocean Conservancy

<https://oceanconservancy.org>

Ocean Conservancy is working with you to protect the ocean from today's greatest global challenges. Together, we create science-based solutions for a healthy ocean and the wildlife and communities that depend on it.

Integral Ecology Research Center

<http://www.iercecology.org>

IERC is a non-profit organization dedicated to the research and conservation of wildlife and their ecosystems. Founded in 2004, IERC has conducted and continues research on several sensitive wildlife species, with the ultimate goal of providing knowledge and understanding towards the conservation of these species and their habitats.