

*'Charming, unusual, poignant, and magical!'*

GURCHARAN DAS

FREE  
PREVIEW

# THE BOOK OF PEOPLE

*Ten Life Tales from India*

*'Exquisitely written portraits of  
ordinary Indians living  
quite extraordinary lives.'*

TIMERI N MURARI

## JOSHUA NEWTON

*'This beautiful book contains.. the story of life itself - its mystery,  
its poetry, its tragedy. A gem of a book!'*

AKASH KAPUR

Advance acclaim for  
THE BOOK OF PEOPLE

Newton certainly enchants us with his detailed and exquisitely written portraits of ordinary Indians living quite extraordinary lives.

Timeri N. Murari, Author of *The Taliban Cricket Club*

Charming, unusual, poignant, and magical, Newton artfully weaves together travel, history, and legend – all without guile – reminding us once again why India is one of the world's greatest storytelling cultures.

Gurcharan Das, Author of *The Difficulty of Being Good* and *India Unbound*

This beautiful book contains far more than the story of ten lives. It contains the story of life itself – its mystery, its poetry, its tragedy. Joshua Newton is a sensitive and empathetic listener; his soulful prose wonderfully evokes a South Indian landscape. A gem of a book!

Akash Kapur, Author of *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*

*The Book of People* offers sensitive reportage and storytelling of a very high order. Newton explores the apparently mundane and near-invisible lives to reveal delicate and life-affirming hues of the extraordinary. Charming and touching at once.

Sandipan Deb, Author of *The ITians* and Founding Editor of *Open Magazine*

A book that reveals the endless possibilities offered to a writer by everyday life. In this collection of the real stories of nine unknown men and a woman, Newton discloses deep truths about Indian life and manners. Subtly woven and very well written indeed.

Jaishree Misra, Author of *Ancient Promises* and *A Scandalous Secret*

Moving stories of extraordinary people focus on the life and work of a martial arts master, a lifeguard, a masseuse, a naturalist, a vegan chef, a thatcher of roofs and others. A book of poignant and sparkling vignettes depicting many facets of life. Detailed and poetic!

Gail Omvedt, Author, Scholar, Sociologist

Josh's evocative stories paint extraordinary portraits of 'ordinary' people from a colourful and vibrant region of India.

Raju Narisetti, Founding Editor of *Mint*

He weaves ten strangers into a single collection and paints the real lives lived in the South of India - be it that of an islander, a naturalist or a masseuse. A splendid debut!

Aniruddha Bahal, Author and Cofounder of Tehelka.com

The book of Newton is powered by the pathos and poetry of lives redeemed from their everydayness by a writer who shatters the idyll most of us are trapped in. *The Book of People* announces the arrival of the newest talent in narrative non-fiction from the subcontinent.

S. Prasannarajan, Editor, *Open Magazine*

*The Book of People* is about men and women you would pass by on a street without a second look. Newton is a painstaking hunter of the great literary game: the magic of the ordinary. A great effort!

C.P. Surendran, Poet, Novelist and Editor-in-Chief of *Daily News & Analysis*

A remarkable crossover where truth acquires the poetry of fiction! People who would have lived and died beyond our notice get a lease of literary life. Reading *The Book of People*, I felt the thrill that must have gripped the world when New Journalism appeared first in the sixties.

Shreekumar Varma, Author, Poet, Playwright, Columnist

Newton's work reminds me of Nelson Algren's *Notes from a Sea Diary: Hemingway all the way*. It is lucid and delicately written with a great love and longing for a region's past. A brilliant book with an immense love for people and places!

Susan Visvanathan, Novelist, Social Anthropologist

*The Book of People* is a fine tribute to being human. Newton's narratives, written with the compassionate detachment of a social anthropologist, transform the mundane details of everyday life into riveting explorations of very ordinary, nearly invisible people. I...was sucked into the flow of his descriptions. Fishermen who 'texted' their families through telegrams the way we use SMSs today; how sardines and seagoing crows reveal where tuna may be fished; a gluttonous chef who rediscovered better health through better food; and many others. Every word and insight is a feast!

C.Y. Gopinath, Author of *Travels with the Fish* and *The Book of Answers*

**THIS PREVIEW VERSION OF THE ACTUAL BOOK HAS  
PORTIONS OF FIVE CHAPTERS PLUS  
THE AUTHOR'S NOTE IN FULL.**

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THE  
BOOK  
OF  
PEOPLE

TEN LIFE TALES FROM INDIA



JOSHUA NEWTON

English Language

**The Book of People**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

# The Way of the Native

I finished this book too late to begin saying: “This book was born as I was hungry.” Yann Martel started his *Life of Pi* with that very line in 2003 – a line that perfectly summed up my journey too. I was hungry to turn the writer in me into an author. Mine was a classic chutney of needs: the angst to prove it as a writer; the wish to begin a noble career on that line; and then the worries for daily bread. Bread. *Idli*. Curry. *Choru*. To win them day after day by writing, the only craft I fancied I knew.

Like almost everyone in town, I was raised in the native language – local school, local college, a local university degree. Thus, writing in a matured language came as a narcissist wish – the wish to mature. But, my grammar was shaky and my vocabulary just about average. Learning anything after college wasn't just a popular idea.

My journalism course was a fair start. But, to get equipped in the language, I had seas further to sail. *Indian Communicator*, a small, now defunct paper gave me the first bylines in English. It was a break. It led me to write one piece after another.

Soon, a bunch of boys appeared in our town's main square with bundles of old American and British magazines spread out on the pavements; old and dumped. These magazines turned out to be a wonderful aid. *Time* and *Newsweek* came for ten rupees and *Conde Nast Traveller* for forty. For me who couldn't afford fresh subscriptions, they turned out to be a cheap library of 'instructive' reading. At home, I tore out some of the best news stories to read and mark out words and usages unfamiliar to me. Unfamiliar but desirable words; words as lovely as some red-lipped girls.

Soon, I got busy catching trains, chasing jobs. There weren't as many jobs in Kerala to pick in the early nineties as now, let alone writer jobs; English writer jobs? You mean Disneyland? Almost all publications in Kerala were in Malayalam. Except the two newspapers that already employed full-timers who seemed to hang on till their pension dates. Freelancing was unheard of in these parts. We had no mainstream non-fiction writing in English. Hell, where would anyone go and write anything – on the compound walls?

English, for the non-native users, had been a fine ladder to escape their native backyard; a spiral dream stairway to reach the superior West. Yet, in many ways for us, it was also a disquieting facility. We generally shied away from the climb the language demanded, from its dizzying challenges. Obviously, there wasn't much of everyday verbal use of English in the town I lived. A typical Kerala for instance, shied away from English for not knowing how to love it. Back in those days, some even nurtured a neurosis around Malayalam, the local language, constantly worrying it was being impaired by the spread of English. We remember a local elected representative who used to go about painting tar on signboards marked in English.

Kerala had almost no writers in English other than the newspaper reporters, no think-tank that expressed itself in English, no writing courses, and no visible daily communication in English on the intellectual or the aesthetic plain. No writing grants, no mentors, no knowledgeable teachers to teach the craft of writing. This is more or less still the case. Yet, in the air these days, is very much a yearning to be modern. Finding the language a hard route, our young ones rather choose to frequent the malls for burgers, black colas and foreign gadgets – an entertaining route to 'being English', I suppose.

Not surprisingly, the writings on Kerala in English came only from writers living outside – from the natives who had escaped Kerala or the visiting travel writers or even the Delhi-Mumbai editor-writers who arrived in our towns in search of 'lesser societies' for some fanciful time. Thus, they informed us in English that

our *Theyyam* was a god and Mohiniyattom was our traditional dance and that our fish molly was ‘sheer bliss’. For decades, like the imports of political ideas from the north, we had to bear such written verdicts in English on the celebrated ‘Kerala culture’ also from outside.

As a writer bearing the angst, as a representative of the fed-up readers, I wanted to read something truer from Kerala in the language I loved most; something scooped out of the lives of the natives of whom I am one; something I could unapologetically read as ‘life writing’.

To carry this unfulfilled wish for many years, to remain in my faith, all of that was hard. Fifteen years later, I found a believer. It was a long journey. My day came when this man who ran a chain of resorts in his own inimitable way, nodded to my plan. That morning, Jose Dominic sat in his office on Willingdon Island and listened to my wish. A book that explores a culture through its people unknown – that was the idea. He was a good reader. Slowly, he leaned back in his chair and said in a deep, rasping voice, “I’m with you.” He said I could do stories on his employees or freelancers. I begged for a grant to support my writing. He agreed. It would be scraping by for two years, but then the book would happen; my joy was boundless. People make fascinating subjects; wherever and whoever.

I had a model in *The New Yorker’s* Joseph Mitchell, who in the sixties chose fishers, bartenders and drunks from the Fulton fish market to write about. I also had a fund-support model in Alain de Botton whose book *A Week at Airport* was supported by the Heathrow airport to write on the travellers, window cleaners and baggage handlers. And thus *The Book of People* was born. The research and interviews together took about eight to ten months. Then a year to write. There were some of them I met and talked and chose not to include. Whenever I fumbled, I dipped into Mitchell’s *Up in the Old Hotel*, Naipaul’s *A Turn in the South* and Rick Bragg’s *Somebody Told Me*. They were my guideposts.

This is what I believe: Our daily lives do hold moments of poetry. I’m not sure which part has won in this book though – the poetry or the rawness. Everything narrated is factual or based on facts. Personal life stories are woven in through their day jobs. Obviously I stand the risk of being called a *faux naïf* examiner, somebody observing his own people as a foreigner and getting away with it. That’s okay. My interest was in drawing material from my own people to create something non-local, a kind of work that will resonate with readers anywhere.

As you know, India has produced not many books of creative non-fiction (also called literary non-fiction). Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City* was one. Katherine

Boo, Akash Kapur, Sonia Faliero and Aman Sethi had written one each. That was pretty much of it. While all the works above examine the politics and the social dimensions of the subjects, I chose to focus rather on the human side of the themes. By then, I had outgrown my teenage conviction that everything in life was political. My fresh challenge was this: What if the ‘common man’ I’m portraying has no political interest or political colours? What if I could figure out elements more significant than the superficial politics of life? Couldn’t there be something more dramatic to the life of a butterfly park man than his caste shadows, for instance? The work was daunting at times. There were too many facts to deal with in the first place. Thousands of notes in my bag, long hours of taped conversations, hundreds of everyday facts as trivial as the times of their bath to the colour of their nails and as profound as their pondering of suicide. The human conditions, when examined closely, humbled me.

Tomy was the one who taught me what happens at the sea when men go fishing and precisely how a fish is caught. I also found through him how sorrows are hidden within each of us. Radhakrishnan taught me everything on lakes I know now. But the bigger lesson was, why and how people are swallowed by silence. Though Narayanan talked for days to me about *sattvic* food, I could see later that he was actually brimming about his own behavioural changes, his own stunning transformation. Koyamon, the pious Muslim on a distant west coast island and Ramanathan Chettiar in a dusty, hot Tamil village are all symbols of the continuing human angst about the idea of righteousness. Beneath the colour and quotes of this book lie such human aspects deep and hidden.

At the end of the day, I guess this is a native’s tribute to his own people. By arriving from nowhere to tell his people’s stories after wishing for it for long, perhaps the native writer is sharing his own joys and sorrows and dreams. For me, this enquiry into people and their micro-cultures offered a rewarding journey. I hope you would feel the same. Thank you.





# In a Watercolour World, an Islander Finds Himself

*In which Koyamon comes to terms with his strange island in the Arabian Sea*

*The man, who went about his evening work, did not try. He was tired. He was also at peace under the orange sky. Events had exhausted him. He had not learned to think far, and in what progress he had made had reached the conclusion he was a prisoner in his human mind, as in the mystery of the natural world. [But] sometimes the touch of hands, the lifting of a silence, the sudden shape of a tree or a presence of a first star, hinted at [his] eventual release.*

THE TREE OF MAN: PATRICK WHITE

The sun warmed up the island too soon. The day was just rising. Strolling in the warm white soil, I asked the local help when it would cool down. "Evening," he said. We were walking, looking at the sea. A little later, the sea began to look livid. The blue sky turned grey. Too early for all this, I thought. The local boy said it might rain soon. He looked at the way the sea behaved and figured it was a sign of the western wind that brought rain clouds to the shores where we stood. The change in the mood of nature here had a method; perhaps everything here had a method. I did not know. I was just a day old here.

We walked towards the *odam*, a small local boat, paddled ashore by three young men. We hoped to see the fish they caught, if they had caught some. In the hull, in a pool of water were fish, five big ones, alive and slithering to get back to the sea, thudding on the wood and slipping on each other, unsure. "Snappers and groupers," said the local boy. He was standing by the boat, watching the fishermen. One of them clutched the fish with his thumb and index finger thrust in its eyes. That was a fisherman's way: once clawed in the eyes, the fish stopped wriggling and let anyone handle them. The young fisher started dropping the fish one by one into his ragbag. Then the sun left and the wind came. Our clothes hugged us as the wind kept blowing like there was no end to it. At once, the coconut fronds began a sharp and rattled chorus. Their deep, leafy whistling made me mindful of where we were: a small island among the lagoons of the Arabian Sea, somewhere between the shores of North Africa and South India.

Strangely, the wind, the sea and the rain that began to intimidate us were the only rightful elements of the region. Humans were the intruders. In an impossibly beautiful setting of green, blue and white, we simply looked out of place.

To the modern traveller, the quiet, stocky man named Koyamon wouldn't have appeared an intruder. He rather came across as the rightful emblem of the natives of the cluster of islands called Lakshadweep. Rightful for having been born here, for being a fisherman, a sociable host, a responsible father, a faithful husband, and above all a devout Muslim; a complete islander. I saw him first from the chopper as it was touching down on Bangaram, called by the travel brochures an 'uninhabited' island. As the metal blades sliced the air, dispersing a wayward wind, Koyamon stood close with his assistants, expecting me. He wore a statutory cream T-shirt and black pants, the uniform of Bangaram Island resort. He stood there without flinching away from the dust or puffs of wind. He appeared hard and methodical. As I learned in the next few days, the man had hardened in his own ways over the years and had forgotten to be bothered by others. His thick plastic sandals resembled tiny boats, curved in the middle from constant use. The man himself was sunk in his oversized uniform, with his old, whipped tee almost reaching his knees – a man minus the standard glee usually attached to tourist managers. His stern eyes were on my luggage. His sense of immediacy had to do with the sun and his urgency to get me to the cottage to do with my comfort alone. After lodging me in my room, Koyamon uttered a few words and vanished into the sun.

"I was born in Agatti," Koyamon told me later as we sat in the beach bar. The dusk had long settled. It was a little cold outside. The Arabian Sea lay around us. We heard the waves lashing. The night got more lucid than dark and the sky above us appeared artificial and decorated, studded with stars – hundreds of them.

"My father, Alyammada Fathaula, was a fisherman. So was my grandfather," he said. I sipped a beer. Fathaula was a fisherman with the Fisheries Department in Kavaratti, another island, where he caught fish and tutored others on how to fish. "Back in the sixties, the government went pleading with people to accept permanent jobs," Koyamon said. "My father took up the fisherman's job and went away to other islands. He and I were on good terms. We saw him every three years or so. Once in a while he sent us telegrams." Telegrams that said, "I'm fine here and how are you all there?" Each island had a telegraph office. Koyamon, the best educated son at home, took his family's messages to the telegraph office. Replies went this way: "We good; mother was fever; now good; I failed eighth class; will study well promise." M V Amindivi, the only passenger ship that plied here, carried letters too from families to fathers and back and forth among

these islands. Fighting and taming nature with the few facilities they had, men and women went on living on these islands for several decades, telegraphically connecting their emotions.

I kept listening and then looked up, wondering if Koyamon had noticed the stars. They were in hundreds, those spots of brilliance. He smiled quietly at my surprise: an islander of forty two years, a constant receiver of nature's rewards; calm and accepting, sitting and smiling at the non-native's wonder.

About two hundred miles from the mainland, the Indian coast, in the placid lagoons among reef lines and sand banks, lay twenty seven islands together named Lakshadweep. We were on one of them. This was the rumour: Many years ago – nobody knew how many – India's Malabar Coast rose above the sea in a strange and fascinating upheaval and formed these isles. It sounded like geology suddenly decided to play a brat; a tectonic shift perhaps. Around the first century AD, mariners in the East and the West had discovered what they called the 'monsoon trade wind'. Apparently, this wind helped them avoid the northern route through the Arabian ports. The sailors could move directly from Aden to Muziris, an ancient port in southern India, through the Arabian Sea.

Lakshadweep lay on this route. Sailors liked to take a break during the voyages. Thus, the islands became a resting place. Those who came to rest, found treasures: fish, tortoise-shell, cowries – the flat and curved yellow shells used as money in Africa and the Indo-Pacific – and of course ambergris, a whale secretion that made good perfumes. The sailors were mostly Hindus from the mainland and Sinhalese from the neighbouring areas. As time passed, they brought along their wives and their dance shields and their chicken and their children. Settlements were built. Trees were cut. Stoves burnt and trails of smoke snaked up. The quiet islands began to hear the kids, wailing at nights and giggling in the day. A slow, grand human colonisation was on.

Koyamon, a modern descendant of the settlers, was born before the arrival of the ship that delivered the mails. "Before the ship we had sailboats with cotton sails, the ones in which my father went to the deep seas," Koyamon remembered. "*Uppappa*, my grandfather, used to go fishing in an *odam*. Almost all families had such tiny boats to go fishing. When the times changed, they gave away the little boats and went to work in the factories in the mainland." Back then, Koyamon's family members, like other islanders, caught fish and turned coconut kernel into copra, the dried, oil-rich version of the nut. Koyamon's father had about two hundred coconut trees from which they got five or six quintals of coconuts. It was a family task. Men, women and children worked under the sprawling palms in



these distant islands to make a living; a tropical way of living. Nuts were dried in the sun. Husks were drenched in waterholes on beaches to beat them and weave them into ropes. Then they went to the sea in bigger boats to catch tuna.

Koyamon's father and other traders would sail with fish, copra and ropes before daybreak on the days of high tide, to Mangalore, an Indian market town. The journey took about two to four weeks depending on the wind's mercy. "One day, my father's craft got lost," said Koyamon. "Even the best man on the boat who could read the position of stars failed to detect the route." Upon the unusual delay in return, the sailors' homes fell silent. Koyamon remembered that no one at home spoke much in those weeks. His mother cooked for the children in silence or just slumped in the kitchen corner staring into the day. One evening, some kids playing on the shore caught sight of a sailing mast at the horizon. The news spread and they ran towards the coast. Koyamon's father and other sailors had returned from the sea unharmed. They had with them bags of rice, molasses, dried chilli, clothes and a few flat, rectangle metal boxes of chocolates. Koyamon remembered his father stepping out of a gloomy boat and walking up to him against the setting sun, with his widest smile ever. Everyone knew that some boats delayed like that had never returned.

The island and the sea were teaching the boy, the glory of survival.

He learned the need to tide over the daily challenges. He began wondering on the meaning of living on a small and insignificant piece of land, that lay far from mighty human endeavours of the urban lands. He felt small for having been born on an island that Buchanan, the British gazetteer, had long ago called 'wretched'.

Koyamon wished to escape.

"We were four kids and I was the third," he said. "I was enrolled in a government nursery school a mile away. Even at that age, we walked all the way to school. Everyone knew everyone. We never got lost. There was nothing to fear of either. No dogs, no snakes, no scorpions. When I got to the high school, I was given a bicycle." A family milestone.

It was around then that Koyamon found out that if he became a doctor, he could escape from the island. But, schooling was not easy at all. He had failed twice in class six. In the eighth standard, he failed thrice. In the ninth, he failed twice again. And in class ten, he lost in the first attempt. With the help of a school tutor named Haneefa, he wrote the tenth grade again and scraped through by an absurd margin. By then Koyamon had turned twenty two. A student on the mainland



with better facilities and right tutoring would have passed out of school seven years earlier. The boy then realised that getting into a medical college by beating competent students from the mainland and then becoming a physician would be nearly impossible. Still he floated on the hope. “But my parents wanted me to get married,” said Koyamon. He was horrified. Pathumma, his mother, was amused that he insisted on graduating. Fish were in the sea to be caught and coconuts were plenty on the trees. Why study, my boy? She wondered. “I pleaded with them, but they said they wanted to see me married before they passed away,” he said. They died about twenty years after his marriage.

On these islands, the parents fixed marriages. Brides and grooms would know about it a few weeks before the day. Koyamon married Fatima upon giving two rupees, a packet of soap and a sari as *mahr*, the bride price. “Once married, I lost all interest in studies,” he said. He had reasons to be distracted. Fatima, the young and tender cousin he married, was beautiful. “She was sixteen and I was twenty two. I would go to her at nights at her home. When the children were born, following our custom, I moved out to her home.” Again, he tried to study science by joining a junior college. He failed. Koyamon wasted not a day more. He came home, picked the finest net, got on a small boat with others, and went to fish.

I was waiting for the rain. The rain did not come on that day of the wind. It came the next day and it came with a soft rumble in the skies, which you thought you heard from just above the ceiling of the cottage or its rear wall. Since the rain always came from one or the other side rather than from the sky, you called it the coming of the rains. That day it came from the sea, from the eastern side of the island, which all the cottages faced. The lagoon and the sea beyond looked tickled. Their surfaces went pitter-patter by the pouring. Their calm was plundered. Their elusiveness demolished, their flat facade severely tested, their green turning bluer and bluer. And the swish of the blanket passing over Bangaram drenched everything on it – the powder white shoreline, the beach umbrella huts, the canopy of coconut trees, the tender green *chundi* plants, the travellers' cottages, the old grass vegetation in the backyards, the workers' tile roof houses, the solar panel grids, the western border of plant growth beyond the abandoned lake and further away the blue distances; everything.

On other islands, the rains did more than drench. It sent men, women and children flurrying into shelters. It seduced them with fresh sounds and smells. It charmed them with a luscious mood of being indoors and listening, of waiting and allowing them to do nothing but boil water for coffee or sip a beer or whiskey (in the case of travellers) or cook for the day (the natives) or run about the rooms inventing quick games of convenience (the bustling kids who bunked school). Rain always brought people closer. It gave lovers an excuse to withdraw into the warmth behind shut doors. Men squatted on verandas talking about the weather. They sat and watched in silence the splash of the cold water gushing away to lower nooks. Then they watched the fall subside into final drips from the thatched roofs. In such hours of huddling, thoughts dawned in them about the variances of nature; its naughtiness, on being tamed, on the varied reflexes of humans at the advent of something as ordinary as rain.

Koyamon too was tamed by the necessities of life. “Soon after I failed my undergraduate course in 1987, I began fishing,” he continued his story the next day. “There was no point in staring at my fate and wondering when I would become a doctor. My family owned a small fishing boat. I went with a few young friends to catch tuna. If we had a good catch, we had a good time,” he said. In those days, before daybreak or at midnight, he would go with some men to this reef called Perumal Par, thirty miles north of Bangaram. It had a bigger lagoon surrounding its sandbank. “There’ll be a lot of sardines around that island by Allah’s mysterious plan for his people,” said Koyamon. “We caught sardines for bait. We put the live sardines in a wooden box in the middle of the boat, with tiny holes for the seawater to gush in and out so that the sardines stayed alive and we

Preview of Life One ends here.  
For the full version, please buy your copy.

# The Fruits of the Earth

*In which a naturalist feeds earthworms day and night so that they plough the earth fertile*

*Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth but that he may rise in the same proportion in the heavens above—for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light.*

WALDEN: HENRY DAVID THOREU

The bus ride was hard. Through a dry terrain, through the dust. Chitrakoot was a remote pilgrim village in Madhya Pradesh. It was evening and hot; around forty six degrees Celsius. Seven hours of staring at the speeding scrubland, dozing off and drying up on a rickety ride had finally brought him to the place. A strange and shabby village where on trees men nailed small triangle saffron flags. *Sadhus* moved around as if dazed in the heat. Anand had gone that far for a job of preserving medicinal plants. He had gone for the love of plants. A *sanyasi* gave him a banana and some fried rice powder and a glass of water. Then the man led him to Mandakini, a tributary of the River Ganga that flowed by. “As we returned from the river, drops fell on me. Rain!” said Anand. The southwest rain was on its way to the west. On that distant barren land, a rumbling sky and a light shower brought Anand back to his senses. He said it shook him up. “I realised the richness of my home state,” he said. As the rain stopped, birds began flying about. They looked as if born again. Even the *sadhus* looked glad. Anand suddenly felt secure on earth. He remembered in gratitude the lushness Kerala, his home state offered. He decided to drop the job in the north and return.

As I learned later, Anand was passionate about the immaculate gifts of nature even when young: rains, trees, climbers, creepers, tiny flowers, algae, fungi and more. He said he once wondered why the lovers of nature were *sattric* and hence good in nature. Then he learned the opposite: Hitler was a fairly good painter too. It toppled his perceptions of good and bad in humans. Nature, natural history and the *Bhagavad Gita* became his most engaging components. It was a potent mix, I thought. “I realised good and bad were different projections of universal truths,” said Anand. That was what he concluded. He had come to

accept the dialectics. But mostly, what he was looking for to seep his roots into, was a green space. When he found it, he said, he found a sense of serenity. A kind of serenity that made him walk for several hours every day as a naturalist at the Spice Village in Thekkady, paying regards and attention to the one-hundred-and-eighty-three species of plants and trees growing there. Twelve years after that trip to Chitrakoot, he had found his vocation. When Anand walked in here, it had rained. He did not remember the date of joining. He rather remembered that it had rained. Before that, there were three years of forestry research and another three years with the World Bank. This third job, his calling, had been going on for seven years.

Anand was a man of consistencies. He was also a tranquil man of understatements. He gave his replies in a soft, sure voice and stated sheer facts in small sentences. When pressed, opinions followed far behind. Around us, birds cackled, *koels* sang, squirrels chirped. We had taken a narrow wet mortar path forking west from the cottage route. It had rained again and we had umbrellas. The green was lush. We saw wild flowers in yellows and reds. By the paths were charcoal trees with black flowers. Bulbuls flitted from slippery branches and darted across our path to their nests. One and one more! Anand spotted a pied blacktail for me. As the evening went bluer, birds were setting off to roost. Somewhere in the foliage, one cracked, ‘...kwikwikwikwi...’. We kept walking through the cold evening. Once a wet, shivering fowl came along halfway, saw us, and crooned back into a bush hole.

All around, were lush fruits of the earth. Yet, men went on to live in their own vessels. They had lost their sense of wonder. They had brushed away the mysteries of life. They had won certainties from the laboratories and had gone blind. They wore ties and pulled in shined shoes and clocked themselves into their boring deaths. It was kind of a half-a-life, a sleepwalk. Around them were mushrooms that bloomed; flowers that whisked away spiders; beetles that rolled up stones; rocks that grew; trees that gnawed; butterflies that hummed and worms that severed themselves to multiply. Wonders were dying unnoticed by the sleepwalkers. Yet there were a few who would walk astray to discover and remind. Souls like Anand, who walked mile after mile on the same path wondering why a tree stood where it stood. “I felt that trees were also trying to achieve something,” he said. “There had to be some purpose. A tree was trying to reach somewhere above the canopy for some reason, to do something. It was astonishing,” he said.

Anand believed every living and non-living being, which was compositions of mind and matter, had consciousness; on different levels. To him, life was a jungle of wonders. “Most of my classmates went other ways,” he said. “They went to

Preview of Life Two ends here.  
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LIFE THREE

# If the Sea is a Sigh, the Man is a Cry

*In which the fallen and the risen one speaks the language of the sea*

*'Fish,' he said softly, aloud, 'I'll stay with you until I am dead.'*

THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA: ERNEST HEMINGWAY

The sea was sure of itself. Huge, blue, sure. Sea, a deep and cold being that can't be held or hugged or kissed or axed; that won't succumb or reveal to you. The sea was never for man. Still it charmed many journeymen into its heart – some said it didn't have one – from Ulysses to Ahab to Vespucci to Peter Tomy.

The last one lived in a southern coastal town raised on the loose sand by the sea. Sand you could walk on and plough with your feet. He stood facing the hard, warm wind, blurting out his life tales; some from land, some from sea, some from hell. Hard, brown and sure, Tomy was a slice of the sea. If you held a ear close to his heart, you heard a roar as if his whipped heart – some said he didn't have one – was roaring to succumb, to reveal, to relent. If every sea was a sigh, every man was a cry.

They called him a lifeguard. At Marari Beach Resort in the coastal beach town of Alappuzha, Tomy strolled from six in the morning to six in the evening to guard the hotel guests from the long and sticky tongue of the waters, while letting them play as long as they wanted. Before becoming a lifeguard, Tomy had tried to take lives. Once, with a swish of his stony arm and once with the thrust of a twelve-inch blade. In the last instance, he had knocked on the door on a rainy night and threw his left arm around his mother-in-law as she stepped out and palmed her mouth and thrust the steel deep into her belly till the lukewarm liquid sprayed all over him.

She didn't die; she forgave. That cut him down. His fist went loose and his arms learned to hug. Eleven years ago, Tomy devoted himself to guarding lives. Guarding the resort guests and being with them on the beach was a game for Tomy. There he strolled to watch, keeping an eye on every man and woman



who loved to meet the sea. They trusted him as much as they distrusted the sea, because they knew Tomy knew well the language of the sea.

Tomy wore a pastel green uniform that had deep olive green collars. Tomy, five-foot-something, short and stocky; his chocolate-tint face holding a sheepish smile. His receding hair oiled and combed to neatness; Tomy transformed. As he smiled, his cheeks swelled like a pair of balls and glazed in the sunlight. There were tales in him not so shiny. When he spoke, the voice seemed gurgling straight from his tobacco lung.

“I was born near the sea,” said Tomy. Which meant freedom in many ways. A child brought up by the sea would get to play on the shore forever and got as toys the shore crabs, the dead weeds and the oyster shells thrown ashore by the mad, blue being. One did not wear slippers because there were none at home. One also didn’t change often, as there were just two or three hand-me-downs. One also got to eat plenty of fish with gruel, day in and day out, weeks and for months and then for years, fish after fish, because they were the only eatables brought home by the father after being out on the sea the whole day. One also got left out on some days from the mother’s call to eat, because the cooking pots in the kitchen would sit bottoms up. Tomy grew up in such luxury of nothings, breathing in the hot, salty air and a careless sense of being. It was just a life. We have heard them say the sea made men rough. Tomy turned into a hard thing even before he stepped into the sea.

The place was called Arthungal, where Peter Tomy was born. Peter was his father. Eliamma, his mother. “My life was one rough patch by the seaside,” he said. There was no sigh. Just the statement. “We were four – three boys and a girl. We lived in Chennaveli, close to Arthungal. My family owned a boat and a fishing net. That was our means of living. No one cared a damn about school. Some knew how to read and write. But no one cared what learning would do to the kids. I went to fish when I was ten or so. We knew nothing else. Fish a lot I got. As the sun went down, I sold everything at the tea-shacks on the beach. I had good money in my pocket even when I was young,” he said. His good money was twenty rupees. Sometimes, ten.

“My parents, elder brother Harshan, younger one Benedict and our younger sister Daisy...all of us lived off the sea,” said Tomy. “The boat and the net belonged to four families; my father and his three brothers. They went to sea together and shared the fish and money. I studied until fifth standard at Kakkery High School run by the Catholic Church in Arthungal. We never learned anything in English. If anyone spoke in English, we laughed. Once I went to sea and the money



Preview of Life Three ends here.  
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# In the Nightly Hush, a Boatman

*In which a boatman tells his life tale and goes to sleep along with the fish*

*The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of short day that comes and departs forever, but in the august light of abiding memories.*

HEART OF DARKNESS: JOSEPH CONRAD

Under a vast, bright, blue sky, at the steering gear of a sixty-foot teak boat, he sat on a stool holding the decorated wooden wheel of a traveller's vessel, guiding it through the lake. The lake was big and blue and quiet and allowed such human fancies. His balding head and his small, drooping shoulders as he sat motionless under the sun against the blunt lake gave a gloom to the man. Right above him was one big puff of cloud. Radhakrishnan seemed to be guided by the cloud, as if the silence in him needed any guiding.

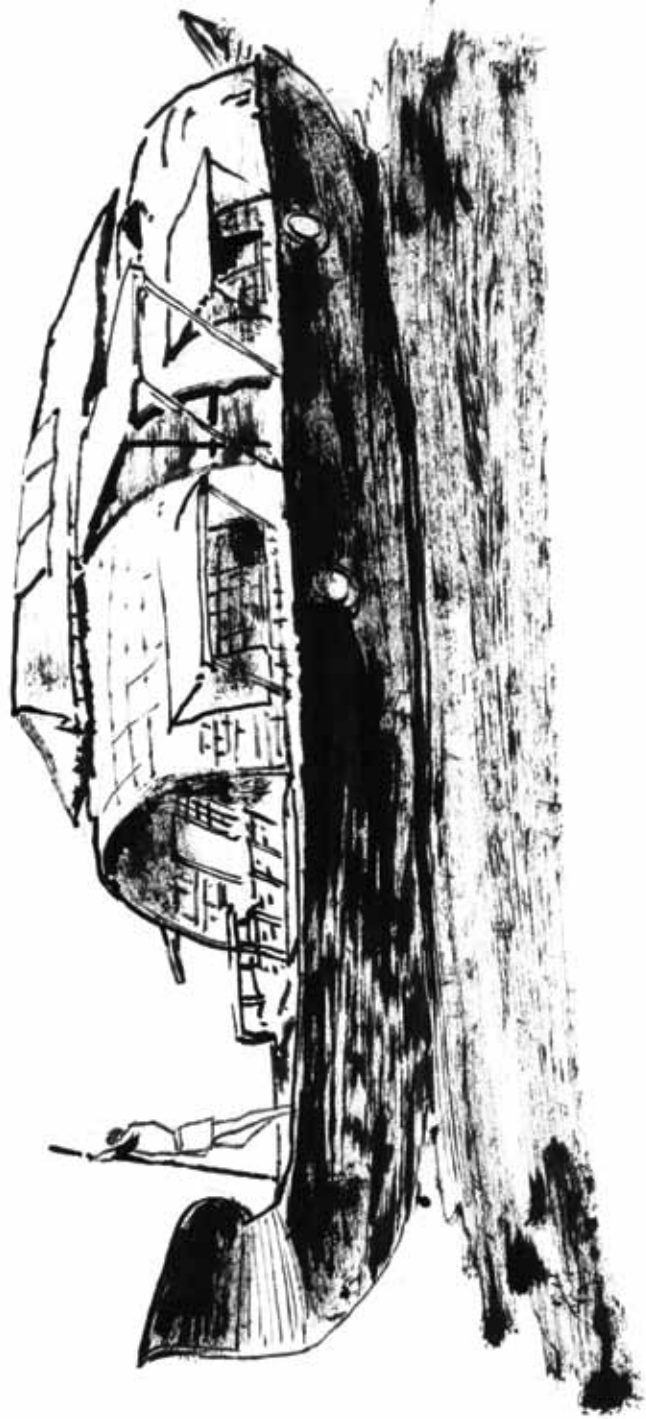
There was a strange calm in the man who sat facing the waters. The man could not be blamed. Imagine the vastness of all the water he had seen in his life. All the water that might have had another language in them for him, that spoke to him through their brittle surface. It could make any man go mute if he sat looking at them for such long hours through years, growing humbler, knowing that he was never getting away from this vastness. "Whatever hair I had went greyer and greyer till I looked older than I was," said Radhakrishnan. But in the first few hours, I did not see a cause for gloom. He knew the lake like a duck. He was only nudging the smooth wheel. His eyes were seeing without looking. The boat was on a motor and chugging on as he wanted in a careful way. And it was pleasant around, if not engaging. I did not see much effort. Maybe it wasn't the job; maybe it was the expanse. Radhakrishnan had grown and greyed more on these waters than on land. The thought was dismal. Yet I did not see it. I did not see enough then to see like him.

It was not a life of great strides or storms or anything. He was one of those boatmen born in a lake county. He went on doing everything with lakes or rivers

and kept at it without knowing much of anything else. His father and grandfather were boatmen. Radhakrishnan took over the oar from his father. His old man had a *kettuvallom*, a large freight boat in which they delivered bricks to traders in Alappuzha for a fee and headed back home to Karunagappally in Kollam where his two brothers and a sister lived with their mother. This was the family vocation ever since he could remember. “Back then there were no trucks or decent roads,” said Radhakrishnan. “Most of the heavy goods were delivered on barges and boats.” His father also had rowed and poled his boat with rice and jaggery and spices and molasses from Kochi to Thiruvananthapuram. The practice had been long abandoned. No one even remembered the water routes anymore.

Unlike the old barge oared with a twelve-foot bamboo pole by Radhakrishnan and his father, the new houseboat in which I was taken was propelled by a motor; a seasoned version of the old transporting boat remade for tourist pleasure. One that came with a matted floorboard with furniture to sit, dine and sleep. One with a European toilet and a washbasin with perfumed hand wash lotions and expensive towels. Houseboats had become an amusing mascot of Kerala’s water tourism that served visitors arriving every year; a clever reminder of an ingenious local mode of transport among the waterlogged villages. The one we went on was named ‘Spice Cruise’, painted in white on its hull. The wooden cruise was taking us through the routes that connected Kumarakom to Alappuzha and it was the day I got to listen to Radhakrishnan who steered it. We were plying across the Vembanad Lake.

Radhakrishnan had spent his life in Kerala’s western coastal belt. It was relatively flat and criss-crossed by brackish canals, lakes, estuaries and rivers called the backwaters. The Vembanad Lake, where he plied his boat, was the state’s largest. It flowed between Alappuzha and Kochi and was more than a hundred square miles in area. The journey on the lake was of course rewarding in a picturesque way. Vast paddy fields lined the lake. These fields were home to lots of freshwater fish: pearlspot, shrimp, prawn. In the water, algae and lilies bloomed. On the land, the natives, mostly farmers, grew paddy, coconuts, jackfruits, guavas, pineapples, cocoa and coffee. Hibiscus plants lined the hedges. They simply leaned over and offered a cool canopy. Dotted the deep green were its red and orange flowers. When it rained in June, little streams broke their flow beds to irrigate and turned the place into a cold blanket of tender green. More colourful was the oral history of the land that floated among the local people replete with myths and legends. Modern history, however, had been pegged on the arrival of the English farmer named Alfred George Baker in the mid-nineteenth century. Almost all boatmen had stories on Baker. He was the ‘Kari Saipu’ in the celebrated novel *The God of Small Things*, set in the region.



The boat we were on was lapped by midday waves. It seemed bound and intimidated at once by the lake's immensity. I was beginning to see. Like being on Conrad's Nellie, I felt '... meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring'. The midday light that spread over the blue vast was even and immense. There was always the wind. And it felt the same all the time. The cruise chugged on with a motoring rhythm, the kind that lulled us, parting the lake and sending a parade of wavelets to its sides and rear. It had by now taken a slow and conscious turn towards a less intimidating water lane bordered by strips of land or by hedges of hibiscus, as I saw it first. The vista got more defined, more postcard kind. The expanse was contoured by bank lines on either side, etched out by grass and shrubs and coconut trees rampantly springing off them. Again dotting hibiscus one after another. For the one who looked for events, there were hardly any. Once or so, a slender canoe with its rim pressed almost to the lake surface with the weight of five or six passengers crossed our path – riders from the watery villages off to the towns for grocery or local government offices to settle vital matters.

The lake, as we saw it, was a morphed being. It changed its hue and tone and character in different places: lead under a leaden sky, green under the canopy of trees on the bank, blue in the middle and sometimes black when it rained. It led one to look at it with rather distrusting eyes. White storks, little specks, some fluttering and floating now and then with their evanescent flashes, did bring life to the scene. To me, the value of it all came from the recognition that the description would have suited the region observed even half a century ago. The village life defined by these boat rides and bird paths and water stories offered the very same version of sights and sounds and smells of the old times. But for the noise of the motor, all other elements had a placid sense of continuity from the decades that had gone by. Radhakrishnan was a part of all this for the last fifty two years. A long-running familiarity in these water worlds provided comfort and meaning to natives like him. And to the visitors, the fresh ones, the exotic landscape offered novelty. In utterly contrasting ways, both were rewarded.

Radhakrishnan was not brooding on anything as I had thought. He said he merely sat guiding the boat through the familiar flow around him. Through his nonchalant life, lakes, one or another, had always flowed. A mere hand movement at the wheel was all one saw. But there was more to the man. Thirty four years ago, when Radhakrishnan was just eighteen, he did not have the luxury of experience. The boats had no steering wheels or motors or matted floorboards. There wasn't any glamour fastened to such boat life. It was a sullen way of living rather.

He had begun his boat life as a simple transporter of goods. On an old and dull

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# The Thatcher of Fables

*In which an old man thatches travellers' dens and lives in his own garden of fables*

*I had seen Jack as solid, rooted in his earth. But I had also seen him as something from the past, a remnant, something that would be swept away before my camera would get the pictures.*

THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL: V.S. NAIPAUL

The Empire had once nested in the hills where I was headed – Empire in the form of a few white families that lived and lorded the lands of the brown natives. The white man and his progeny had crossed the seas and upon arrival, fallen under a trance. They befriended the natives and had taken to romancing the pastures. They raised pepper vines and bamboo orchards, while intruding into and taming the lives of the dark and ancient people. Perhaps the windy hilltops almost always beckoned visitors and the visitors almost always turned settlers. They settled to rediscover in the twilight, the green paddy and the blue mangoes well before it all got clichéd by Asian-Anglian literature. Now the past had been erased and the visitor-settler families had left the country. Some paddy remained. Some mangoes too. The charms of the land still fragile, and intact, were left behind for the new visitors, the tourists.

I did not go there tempted by the hills or the paddy or the mangoes or the Empire's leftovers. My journey was to meet a native who had remained through these seven decades at the foothills. He had continued to charm the journeymen with an ancient architectural practice: thatching huts with wild grass. To me he was the remnant of a hospitable past; a curator of the native tradition that welcomed those from other lands. On a rain-wet bitumen road under the white fleecy clouds, through the mist, I reached the place. I had imagined a stern, large man, a man of the hills. Instead, I saw a puny man named Ravuthar. In him, I met a man of fables, a true-blue hero of *The Book of Job*. He lived by the rustic hills and dense jungles of teak and coffee and beasts of various kinds in a place called Lotus Pond. A few families lived there in a tiny, crowded colony by the woods; families that lived off the forest; off its waste wood, timber, grazing grounds and dry grass.

They called him *attha* or the elder. This frail man had something immovable in him, something rocky. However much he laughed along a joke or nodded or hopped off like a bird upon any invite to work, however tiny and malleable the man appeared, the deep metal in him took no battering. His faith in Allah was final and he smiled away your scepticism with his simple tales. His insistence on karma and its fair practices was indisputable owing to its fairness. His acceptance of the penury of Franciscan ardour was beyond reproach given his humility. With mere grass, Ravuthar raised an impenetrable roof above his convictions. When I said there were a few holes in the bar cottage's roof, he came along and showed the holes in my perception. We stood by the wooden bar counter of the resort and stretched our necks to look at the tiny pores once again. We saw a few blue dots of sky through the dry grass roof. I felt vindicated. He would not budge. "Not a drop would seep in," he said. I did not believe him. He said, "You look from an angle and you see light. Under those pores are other layers of grass to prevent anything coming in except those dots of light. If I add another layer, you won't see those specks of sky. But why overdo things?" He laughed in a way that allowed me to laugh at myself. Ravuthar made me look again at the dots of thoughts I brought along on karma, commitment, service, faith and life itself. *Attha's* grass roofs at Spice Village were mere fables. His truths lay beneath.

The journey into *attha* had to begin with the forest and the grass itself. Thin tender green shoots of grass. Six feet high, they stood swaying in the slow breeze against the blue spread. In clusters, they stood stretching up as if longing for the blue. In the deep and quiet jungles of Thekkady, they stood oblivious to the presence of elephants or bears or this puny old man. All three came in turn to devour or slice the grass. Men called it 'elephant grass'. The elephants and bears did not call it anything. They just ate it. Ravuthar too had eaten it. Once. When he wanted to know why the beasts loved it. He had plucked the most tender one – the thinnest baby-shoot masked by the matured leaves, greenest of all and fun to pluck – and taken it to his mouth with a smile and chewed on and felt a smooth wash of sweet juice spreading on his tongue. He had kept on chewing, filling his mouth with more juice and had come to know what made this grass endearing to the beasts of the jungle. "When I chewed it, I turned happy," said Ravuthar.

Eleven years ago, when he was sixty seven, Ravuthar stopped going to cut grass. For about fifty years he had gone to the jungle barefoot, with a sickle re-handled with a buffalo's horn tucked under his arm and clutching a plastic bag with an old aluminium lunch box which his wife filled with the previous night's leftover gruel along with an onion and a green chilli or two. He and scores of casual labourers, men and women, would go in teams or alone. They would go about



ten to fifteen miles into the woods for the grass. “We called it *pothappullu*,” said Ravuthar. “Since elephants ate it, some called it elephant grass.” To cut grass they would go to places strange to them, places with names like Karalupollakandam, Thekkinkaadu, Methakaanam, Mangalavedi, Karadivalavu and others; names that gave me images of vast and thick jungles, eerie and rumbling. There, from early morning till the light dulled away, Ravuthar would stand curved in the sun and go on slicing the grass from its dense cluster bottom with his sharp half-moon sickle. He had a method: with his fist, strong and supple, he gripped the neck of the grass in a bundle, parting it from the rest and kept the sharp razor edge of his sickle just above its roots where the stems were strongest, and in one clean swipe, he sliced it. “Men from the Paliyar and Mannan tribes cut grass with a swing of the hand,” said Ravuthar. “I sliced it by angling my sickle.”

To fight wildfire, tribes had a practice of shearing fresh grass and spreading it to make a fire line. At some point, they began to use the same grass to thatch

their huts. Poor townfolk needing a cheaper dwelling borrowed the idea. A roof that cost them almost nothing – a visit to the jungle to reap the grass and a few days' labour. It kept the temperatures within the dwelling moderate in winter and summer; indigenous wisdom, cheap and priceless. It was indeed a universal idea. For centuries, tropical equatorial cultures had been fond of using thatched roofs. Hawaiians made hale shelter from local *ti* leaves and *pili* grass; Kenyans used sugarcane leaf roofs and East Anglians traditionally went for water reed thatching; the rural folks of Ballenberg in Switzerland chose straw thatching. The English countryside famously used thatched roof cottages. Yet, the use of thatch in Asian and African societies was said to have taken a beating owing to European colonisation. In recent times, green roof ideas are gaining acceptance once again around the world.

Ravuthar and men like him and what they did were back in vogue. Unaware of social fancies, here in these small hills the tribes have been using the method for several decades. They used clay, dung and grass to build and thatch huts. Though Kumily and Thekkady, the townships of Ravuthar, were taking to the idea of mortar modernisation, I found that the resort was still guarding the tradition. Holding an old sickle, Ravuthar stood on the frontline as its knight. "Grass was scarce this year," said Ravuthar. He pointed up to the hills. "A fast spreading plant species was stifling its growth. The hot weather killed the rest. Once we used to get grass two to three miles from the mouth of the forest. Then we had to go in for about five to ten miles. Now, they walk about ten to fifteen miles looking for grass," he said.

Fifteen miles.

For grass.

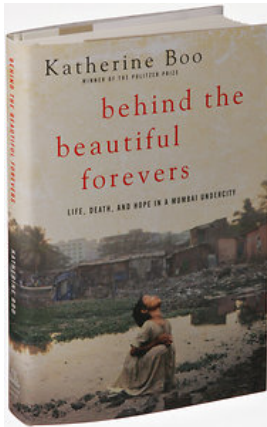
It was a pleasant day. We were walking in the hills. Ravuthar wore a soiled pale blue shirt; his labour shirt, old and hanging on him. He had folded up his *lungi* to walk at ease. He kept talking and watched my steps to warn me of loose pebbles on the slopes that could trip me. It was not a day of work for him. He had time at hand and had taken me up the hill to show me the grass, which had offered him his way of living. On the way, I saw him pluck a leaf from the cluster that stood by a few sapodilla fruit trees. *Pothappullu* was the longest grass found in the jungle. On flat surfaces, it grew up to even ten feet. Six feet was the tallest Ravuthar had seen. As a hardy species with enough silica deposited in its epidermal layers, *pothappullu* could thrive in dry scrub jungles. It needed fair open light. Under a canopy, in the wet, or in evergreen jungles, it simply died.

Preview of Life Five ends here. Five more lives are portrayed.  
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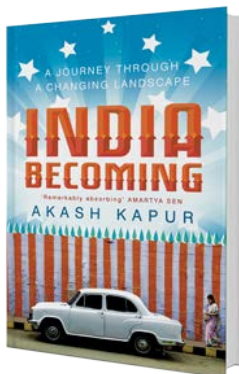
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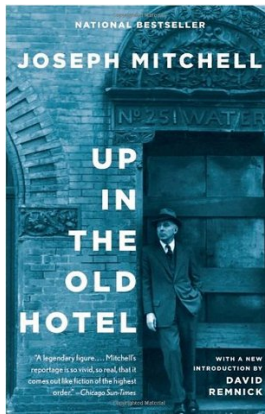
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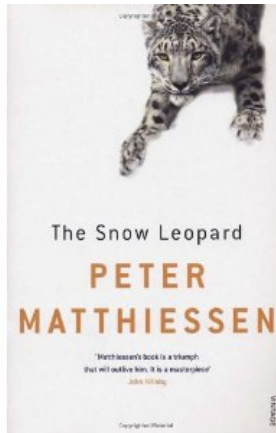
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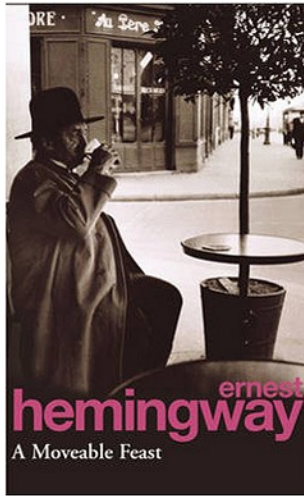
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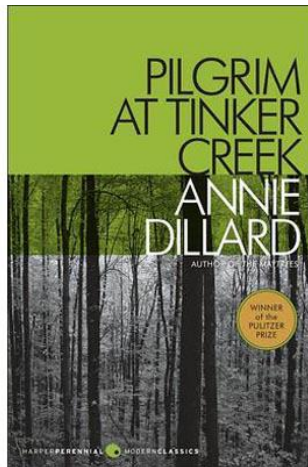
*Up In The Old Hotel - by Joseph Mitchell*



*The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen*



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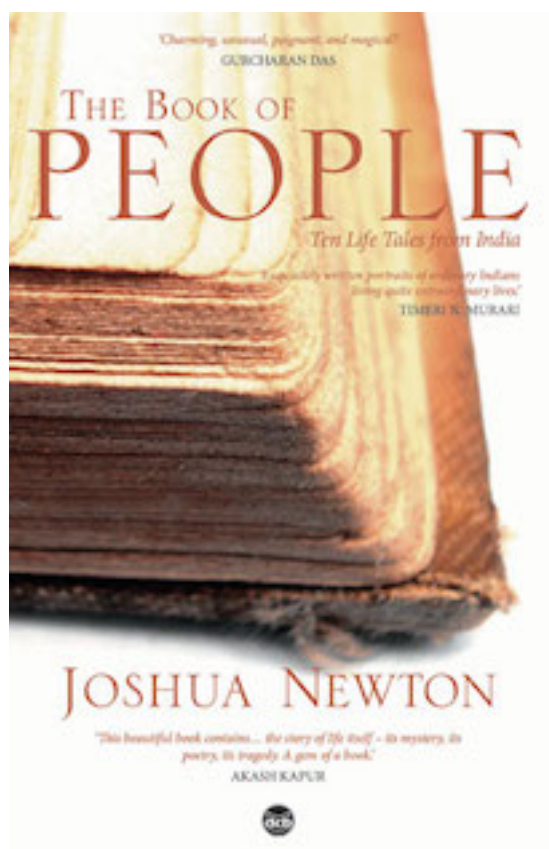
*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard*



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