

Inaugurating a new genre in contemporary Indian writing in English, *Real Men Don't Pick Peonies (On an Alpine-style Ascent)* is a novel about a Himalayan expedition. **Sirish Rao** the 22-year-old author speaks to **V. Geetha**.

**Real Men... is a novel about a Himalayan climb. Does it mean that this will interest only mountaineers? Who is the book meant for? Did you have a particular readership in mind when you wrote it?**

Mountaineering is a specialized experience. I mean, there aren't that many people who actually get to climb. The writing also has become specialized. A lot of it only interests other mountaineers because it is written in a way nobody else can understand. My book is definitely not specialist. For one thing the reader doesn't need to know, or even be interested in, the technicalities of climbing. That's not what the book is about. *Real Men...* also grew out of conversations with friends who don't climb and probably never will. It is a novel based on the experience of mountaineering. It talks about the meaning of this experience, about the narrator's relationship with nature and with other people. Like most novels, it is essentially about people and situations. So my audience is anybody who likes to read. As for whether climbers will like this book: I'd say that a lot of them would want a more realistic account with a lot more specialist detail. My book is a piece of fiction.

**You say your novel is written from a non-Western point of view. Could you elaborate?**

Almost all books about climbing have been written by climbers from the West. I guess for a lot of people, mountaineering or exploration itself is a "western" thing. I hope reading my novel will be a different experience for them. Most readers will probably recognize the characters on the expedition. Harry or Lal, for instance, are the kind of people they would know. So are mountain people like Dorjee the Cook and Pasang the tea leader. Characters like them hardly figure in climbers' narratives from the West. Most mountain men and women tend to be nameless porters, cooks and guides.

I am not saying that all western books on climbing are specialist or insular. There is been sensitive travel writing, for instance by early Himalayan explorers like Frank Smythe and Eric Shipton. These men wrote for a general readership. They opened the world of explorers and explorations to those who stayed at home. Unfortunately, most contemporary writing presents mountaineering as a racy, macho, extreme sport.

**Why do you call *Real Men...* a novel for young adults?**

I think young people will find interesting to read of an experience that could so easily be theirs, if they choose to explore it. *Real Men...* in its own ways is about choices, about what it means to be doing something that one feels for and wants to do, and not play along with what is conventionally expected from you. I am in this position myself. My own personal confusions, anxieties and questions have gone into the book. I assume that other young people are equally interested in these questions. In the novel, the narrator Vikram is at cross roads: sure about some things unsure about others; asking a lot of questions. He loves the mountains, but he has to struggle to discover his own way of relating to them. He is easy-going but some of his fellow climbers get on his nerves. He has a poetic feel for nature but he is flippant in a very adolescent way. This mixed up sense of being sensitive and brash, of being intense and

funny, is peculiar to being young and on the threshold of adulthood. You want to make your own choices do your own thing, and still you are not sure if you should entirely abandon and criticize the known familiar world. I've tried to capture this in my novel.

**But it is getting to be increasingly hard for young people to be this way: questioning, probing, wanting to retain a sense of their identity. Everything around them, especially the things put out by the media, seem to suggest that there is only one way of being young: one pick up a job, earns money, only to spend it on a certain sort of entertainment: pubs, discos, the latest "in" music, fast cars...**

I like having fun. I mean, I like seeing movies, dancing, whatever. But I don't want my life and what I can get out of it defined by one lifestyle. There are lots of other things that I want to do and think about. I want to find a way of life that is not dictated by other people's values. It's not very obvious, but what the media gives you is basically a set of conventional values that may or may not be your own. When young people do rebel, it seems to be against individuals.

**To get back to the question of writing for young people: how does one write for them? There are really no literary precedents. There are books for children, adventure stories, school stories and the like and from these, most children automatically graduate to adult fiction: crime, spy thrillers and so on...**

I don't know if I can speak with authority on this. I have written only one other book—which has a very different tone. It's a nature notebook for children called *Leaf Life*. *Real Men* is my first novel. I wrote it in pretty much the same language that I speak. I feel this is the language that people of my age can identify and feel comfortable with. There's that, and the theme that I am dealing with. I guess that if you were to keep close to themes which concern and interest young people who are on the edge of things and ready to take off, than what you write will interest them. I was quite taken with *Catcher in the Rye*, at the time I read it. It was real and thankfully contemporary. It was a relief to be able to read someone who spoke to you on your own terms. I have tried to do that in my own book.

**Yes there is an unmistakable hybridity to the novel which is the stuff of contemporary youth experience: from Cindy Lauper to Skanda Purana, wisecracks to Wordsworth.**

Well, this is how most of us are. This is how we live. Nobody in urban India today is really steeped in some pure ethnic thing, whether Indian or Western or whatever. There is a strange, interesting mixture of worlds here, and you find yourself living in many different cultures at the same time.

**How is this different from the kind of media-inspired global culture, which is everywhere?**

I mean, the media is market-driven. It promotes a youth culture which is more a lifestyle than anything else. Finally it is a set of instructions—buy this, do that wear this, you'll be cool. So once you have a society feeding up on these messages, what you end up with is a flat, featureless culture in which no one can really recognize themselves. In India, we still live with differences and hybridity in a very unselfconscious way. For example, the van driver in *Real Men*... paints a Coco Cola slogan on his van., not

because he wants to be hip, or global or anything, but because its all over the place and he picks it up, just as he picks up other things such as “Speed thrills, but chills”. He is not thinking consciously about this. His mind is layered with a variety of messages that come from all over the place, but he still remains himself in a very basic way.

**This hybridity is most visible in the way people speak in your novel. There are different sorts of registers, ranging from Harry’s Americanisms to Sen’s flowery prose...**

That’s something I really love about the hybridity in India – the way language, especially English, communicates. People manage to get to the essence of something in their own odd ways. I’m always looking out for interesting accents and weird phrases. Many of these have found their ways into the novel.

**Which brings one to the question of fictionality in the novel: are the characters real or made up?**

Some of the characters exist in real life but they have been exaggerated and changed. I hope these guys don’t recognize and themselves. Other characters have been invented. When I began writing I found it difficult to get away from the reality of my experience, I was reluctant to completely change or dump situations and characters. But once I had done that, broken away from the urge to be factual and begun to tell a story, the narrative and the characters began to have a life of their own.

**And the end of your book is a scrap book that takes you through the whole story again, visually. Is that also fiction?**

Again, it’s half and half. Some of the pressed flowers and photographs in the scrapbook come from an actual expedition. Other parts of it were put in to connect with the stories.

**Onto some thing else now: the characters in your novel are all male. On the other hand your tone is not compulsively masculine. Do you think that girls will find the book interesting?**

Well, the mountaineering theme does have macho connotations, but as you see from the title, *Real Men...* takes an ironic look at the whole macho thing. Vikram, the protagonist is not entirely at ease in the macho world. He’s pretty uneasy with the aggressive way in which some of the other characters relate to nature. And for another, relationships interest him as much as action thrills him. Perhaps the reason why *Real Men...* is not an overtly masculine novel is because it acknowledges the emotions and the inner life of the protagonist. As to whether girls will like it, I am not all that sure that the stereotype of girls wanting to read about emotional lives is true. I know quite a few girls who enjoy travel and adventure. But even going by the stereotype, this isn’t a hardcore adventure novel.

**Can one take it then that the book looks at the gender question from a critical male point of view?**

You could say so; mountaineering has always been a male sport. There are few women climbers, but not all that many. Mountaineering language is also macho and militaristic:

virgin peak, assault, peak attack. Men's attitude to nature in general, seems a bit like their attitude to women. For the most part, it's a very strained idea of a relationship.

**What is your idea of a relationship with the mountains?**

I feel that a relationship with the mountains demands an understanding of the natural world. By this I mean being neither sentimental or aggressive, but maybe shifting your self away from your own center. You cannot come away from the mountains unchanged as a person and hope to have a relationship with them.

**Have there been others who have felt this way?**

Of course. For instance, I have been inspired by Frank Smythe, a British climber and explorer of the thirties. To him mountaineering, was not just a sport, he had a deep relationship to the mountains, to nature. He saw climbing as means to an inner journey. And this led him to question both climbing as well as his other assumptions about the world.