

Author David Charles Manners explains how his ancestors influence his writing

Judy Darley, *Essential Writers* – May 6, 2009

David Charles Manners is the author of *In the Shadow of Crows*, a story of love and loss set in India. When he isn't writing, he teaches Shaiva Tantra Yoga at Glyndebourne Opera and has an international reputation as a physical therapist and teacher. He lives in Sussex but travels to India frequently, where he has a home in the hills of North Bengal. He talks to EssentialWriters.com about the influences of a childhood imbued with legends.

What inspired you to become a writer?

I grew up in a home filled with stories, every item of furniture and flatware, every picture and parlour game imbued with eagerly recounted familial legends. Dinnertimes were accompanied by tireless tales of great-grandmothers made mistresses of kings and great-grandfathers collecting albino moles for queens; great-uncles kidnapped on their honeymoons and great-aunts drowning in the Serpentine.

Bedtimes were lulled with histories of relations who killed a royal consort in his nightclothes, befriended the Elephant Man and the real 'Dorian Gray', travelled to Mount Athos with Fortnum & Mason saddle bags and a soda siphon, or who kept Cromwell's head in a box to frighten the children; histories of relations who died in madhouses, on sea voyages, in ice storms and polo matches, who caught the plague or were eaten by cannibals.

Mine was an inspirational, if eccentric, ancestral legacy, with a family tree that included the likes of Madge Kendal, Lily Langtry, Robert Byron, Margaret Rutherford and Stephen Tennant, "the last professional exquisite". When still a child, my intimacy with the lives of such characters undoubtedly motivated me to haul my grandfather's cumbersome Indian typewriter into my favourite apple tree, to settle amongst its branches and tap out stories for my younger brother.

Little could I have imagined, thus perched amongst the sparrows and the wasps, that I had already commenced my path to publication.

Did you receive any formal training?

I found the education system into which I was necessarily forced brutal. I therefore credit none but my grandmother for the inspiration of her enthusiastic and idiosyncratic turn of phrase, and my mother for her vigorous passion for vocabularies, poetry and pedantry in grammar.

How did you make the transition from being a yoga teacher and physical therapist to being an author?

Over the years, whatever the nature of my employment, I have never stopped writing, therefore there has been no sense of transition.

In addition, teaching westerners the mountain tradition of Shaiva Tantra Yoga requires a very concise and unobtrusive, yet influential use of language. There are states of deep relaxation towards which the student must be guided and, at times, provocative philosophical concepts that require judicious elucidation.

The physical therapy I practice is predominantly undertaken with classical musicians and opera singers. The nature of their work and the pressures of public performance frequently demand of me an awareness of the psychological impact of the words I employ during a session. This sensitivity to language has undoubtedly played its part in the development of my style of and confidence in writing.

What inspired you to write *In the Shadow of Crows*?

A small, broken, extraordinary women named Bindra, one of that vast underclass in India who come and go without leaving any bureaucratic evidence of their lives, and yet whose experience and wisdom merit remembrance.

Encouraged by wonderfully supportive friends, I allowed myself to respond to what proved to be an irrepressible urge to ensure that her story was told, and wrote obsessively, even having to be reminded to eat, drink and sleep. Three months later *In the Shadow of Crows* was finished.

Did you face much rejection initially?

A well-read niece, whose opinion I greatly respect, was the first to review my work and assert it worthy of a wider audience. I scoured the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook, underlining names, scribbling down addresses, and began posting apprehensive letters to formidable agents.

My first two approaches were unsuccessful, but having no real expectation of acceptance I was not especially troubled by these initial rejections.

It was, therefore, with great surprise that my third approach brought the offer of a contract - but only on the condition that I removed Bindra from the tale! "After all," they asserted, "leprosy is such a downer."

I concluded that my untiring passion to write would forever remain a private diversion directed at nothing more than familial entertainment.

My fourth submission led to lunch in North London with an enthusiastic new agent and an invitation to join her list. I was so shocked at her offer that I could not be sure I had really understood and had to ask her to repeat it.

Within months I was signed to Reportage Press, with part of their profits from the book contracted to projects I co-run among the very people with whom Bindra once lived.

How did you come to co-found Sarva, the charity for ostracised individuals and communities on the Indian subcontinent?

My co-founder, Bernard Davies , and I have connections with India that date back two centuries, with ancestors, grandparents and even parents having lived and grown up on the Subcontinent. Over many years, we have had the privilege of developing a very personal connection with its peoples and cultures.

While the levels of deprivation and injustice frequently encountered are hard for the uninitiated to imagine, we have been especially moved by the plight of people shunned by society because of caste, deformity or disease - most notably leprosy, by which some twelve million people in India are affected.

We have also observed the work of various charities in India, and have at times volunteered our assistance. These experiences revealed to us certain fundamental flaws in approach that sometimes actually further diminished the self-sufficiency and self-respect of the recipients of their altruism, or on occasion even perpetuated the very abuse and cruelty from which these people required protection.

This led us to found Sarvashubhamkara, a registered charity with a Sanskrit name meaning 'he who does good to all'. For ease of pronunciation in Britain, we use the abbreviated form Sarva.

With no political or religious affiliations, our mission is to aid the relief of poverty, sickness and distress, through the running of small and varied medical, social and educational projects, each specifically adapted to the needs of the individuals and communities with which we work.

We are also committed to advance the education of impoverished children and socially excluded young people through the award of scholarships for both schooling and vocational training. We are presently running projects in three leprosy colonies and are supporting forty-five children, seven of whom are now training as nurses.

What are the biggest challenges of balancing teaching yoga and writing?

I can honestly say that I am aware of no challenges whatsoever. I am in control of when and where I work, so the teaching never imposes on the days I dedicate to writing

I suppose I can credit the yogic training with the ability to sit for hours at the keyboard without ever suffering discomfort, and with a mind that can remain wholly focussed on the task at hand without the least distraction.

What has been the highlight of your career so far?

My 'career' as a writer has only just begun, so the highlight has to be the day I first held the bound book in my hands, my name embossed on a beautiful cover, and every page filled with words that had surged from head and heart. Bindra's story was finally told. She will not be forgotten.

What advice would you offer an aspiring writer?

Feel every word you write. If you don't, neither will your readers.

Edit by first reading your work out loud, then have someone read it back to you.

What are you working on now?

Some new writing project or other is always bubbling, whether poetry or short stories, an anthology or biography. In fact, in the corner of the study my grandfather's old bureau buckles with tightly packed manuscripts, most of which will never be read.

However, at present I am storming ahead with another book set in the Eastern Himalaya, on a subject about which I have yearned to write for years yet have long lacked the confidence to attempt. Perhaps the publication of *In the Shadow of Crows* has finally afforded me the beginnings of a whole new self-belief as an author.