

## **Bright lights, big city**

Sharon Duggal

It's been a long time since I visited a new city abroad, one I have never been to before, but in March 2022 I visited Prague. The trip was part writing research, part much-needed opportunity to step off this rapidly diminishing island of ours. When I finally arrived, the city was a revelation, as cities often are, especially when our only previous connection to them is through the pages of books that have left an impact. In my case, these include Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), which I haven't read for many years but, as my visit coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the novel is set in the Prague Spring of 1968, it was at the forefront of my mind. I walked down Wenceslas Square past the many displays of solidarity with Ukraine and the visceral anti-war protests by the children and grandchildren of the city's inhabitants who were witnessing their own painful history being repeated. And then there are works by Kafka of course, whose fiction I read in my early twenties. His stories are full of anonymous cities and imagined topography so inextricably bound up with his own life in Prague that it's hard to separate real streets, buildings, bridges and viewpoints from fictional passages in his works. Prague is an atmospheric and hauntingly beautiful place, in the way only cities steeped in history and cultural referents are.

I am a city person. I enjoy visiting cities and some of my favourite books have cities at the heart of them: Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Carson McCullers's *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* and Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* along with many, many others. I am made of cities, and I write about the cities that have made me: Birmingham, the city of my birth and my youth, and the various adopted cities where I've lived or spent significant periods of time for one reason or another. Cities are full of contradictions: they are crowded and isolating; brutal and charming; shocking and stimulating; confusing, thrilling, messy, lively and alienating. They are constantly in flux, for better or worse, and in terms of human existence, they are multifarious. They are full of stories and offer much scope for any writer. I consciously tried to capture something of this in my second book, *Should We Fall Behind* (2020), which for me is very much a novel about cities. I do understand the attraction of writing about nature too, of desolate landscapes, the sea with its moods and its swings, the majestic beauty of great mountains, vistas across wide, open plains and the more gentle lure of rural hills and woods, dells and fields, but these are not places I am at ease in (and I know the reasons for this are manifold and complex), so they are not particularly places I am drawn to write about, for now at least. Even in my third novel, in which I am currently immersed, and which is meant to encompass wider geographical backdrops to the inner-city settings of my first two books, it is the urban scenes I am most keen to write.

About a year ago, my mum moved house. Since my dad's death a decade before, she'd been living, mostly alone, in a bungalow on a cul-de-sac in a dull and depressing part of town. Increasingly bored, isolated and in her mid-seventies, she wanted to feel as if she was fully alive again rather than waiting to descend into old age and death. So, much to the chagrin of some of my relatives, who think a bungalow on a cul-de-sac is more appropriate

for a woman of a certain age, she chose to be part of the city at much closer quarters by moving across Birmingham to a terraced house on an ordinary road two minutes away from a busy high street full of people of all ages and backgrounds and everything else the city has to offer. My mum, like Virginia Woolf's character Mrs Dalloway, is still able to be revitalized by the city despite her woes:

'In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life.'

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

Back to Prague – I arrived on St Patrick's Day and the American-Jewish hotel receptionist suggested I visit a pub called The James Joyce where a spirited band of traditional Irish musicians playing fiddles, flutes and bodhráns was in full swing. There I met an Indian man from Goa who'd grown up in Montreal and was now living in Prague with his Slovakian girlfriend. They gave me some top tips on where to find the best Indian food in town, and the whereabouts of a rooftop bar situated above a generic and fairly grim shopping centre well off the tourist track which, as promised, offered spectacular views of the city. You rarely get these kinds of interactions outside of urban areas and that's why I remain most at home in cities, and why I am continually inspired to put them at the heart of my own work.

## **Sharon Duggal**

Sharon Duggal writes novels and short stories. Her second novel *Should We Fall Behind* (2020), published by Bluemoose Books, was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's 2021 Encore Award, selected for *Between the Covers*, BBC television's flagship book show, and chosen as a *Prima Magazine* Book of the Year. Her debut, *The Handsworth Times* (2016) was the *Morning Star's* Fiction Book of the Year and selected as the 2017 Brighton City Reads book. Sharon's short fiction appears in anthologies including *The Book of Birmingham* and *Love Bites: Fiction Inspired by Pete Shelley and Buzzcocks*. She is currently working on her third novel.

Sharon grew up in inner-city Birmingham as part of a large Indian family. As well as being a writer, she is also one half of Radio Reverb's long-running *The Ruben and Sharon Show*, the UK's only regular radio show with a mum and son presenter team.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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