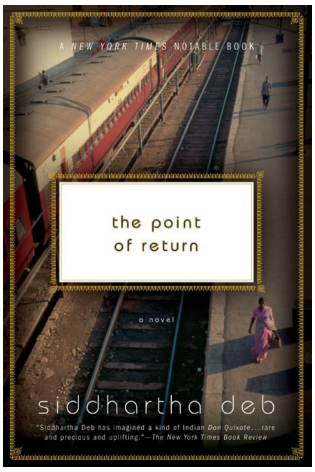

Siddhartha Deb

The Point of Return
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In what ways did your work in journalism prepare you for the experience of writing your first book of literary fiction?

Journalism taught me to write against a deadline and showed me that there were extraordinary stories in seemingly ordinary lives. Fiction allowed me to build on those experiences, taking up the stories and the inner lives that journalism couldn't hope to capture because of its limitations of time and space.

What is the historical context of the fractured relationship between tribals and nontribals in northeastern India that you explore in *The Point of Return*?

The British colonial rule was superb at fostering divisions upon people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, class, and caste, and this is the point from which the fractured relationship originates. Add to that mass migration to the hills by Bengali Hindus fleeing their original homeland because of the partition of India in 1947 and the insecurity of the hill people because they are marginal compared to other groups in India, and there you have all the elements of a bitter misunderstanding.

What were some of the special challenges you faced in writing a novel that progresses in reverse chronological order?

It was a remarkably enjoyable thing to do, because it imparted momentum to the writing. But I had to make sure that the reader wouldn't be bored in spite of knowing what happens at the very beginning of the story, and I had to find less obvious ways of creating tension and conflict, particularly in the way the characters behave.

Your description of the relationship between Babu and Dr. Dam feels exquisitely personal. Would it be wrong to characterize *The Point of Return* as inspired by some of your real-life experiences?

The external details are drawn from my personal life, from the experience of growing up in a beautiful small town gradually riven by ethnic divisions, and from seeing my father's difficult trajectory from a peasant background to an upright official who never had much money. But my relationship to my father was nowhere as troubled as that of Babu's, and our lives were much fuller, much more gentle and warm and mutually reinforcing than the relationship depicted in the novel.

Why haven't postcolonial conflicts in northeastern India received the same level of international attention as conflicts in regions like Kashmir and Sri Lanka?

It is a remote and extremely complicated part of the country, and not easily understood by the usual Hindu-Muslim binary the international media (and for that matter the Indian press) is comfortable with. The region is a mix of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and animists, and it demands a nuanced understanding and sustained engagement, things that are in short supply in most of the Indian and Western mediA:

In *The Point of Return*, Babu alludes to Tagore and Kipling. What authors have influenced your style as a writer?

A:W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, with its fragmented narrative structure and its obsession with memory and the lives of seemingly unremarkable people was a book that proved important for me. It released the ideas and stories that were pent up inside me, while Virginia Woolf's exploring, incisive, and fierce sentences kept me going once I had started on the novel.

What is your next writing project?

I'm finishing a novel that is set in a distant, border region of India, a narrative full of drifting, itinerant characters who are obsessive storytellers, characters who rise like ghosts from the periphery of India and reveal that what appears to be the border is in reality the invisible centre of the republic.