

The Beauties Of Most Splendid Po

By Inez Baranay

Elliott was always a step ahead. He had long ago decided to buy a property in Byron Bay, and had snapped up a vast bit of land on the beach years earlier, and now he was going to build on it.

It was as if he had known what would happen to the classical sleepy small seaside town surrounded by farming properties where for so long, apart from the local residents, the only people who went there regularly were surfers. The beach was magnificent, the waves legendary. Hippies followed, then their children, the ferals, though for a long time they were more likely to frequent the hinterland. Ferals favoured rainforests over beaches and you didn't find cow-pats with gold-top mushrooms on the beach. Later, other tourists and backpackers followed, and, a decade after Elliott's move, an increase of the 'can work from anywhere' crowd, with computers and modems, faxes and satellite dishes, and useful profits from selling up city flats. They settled near the beach and in the hills to write screenplays, self-help books and weekly magazine columns, to open juice bars and sushi bars, surf shops and furniture shops, to run a bed-and-breakfast or a massage clinic with isolation tanks and aromatherapy.

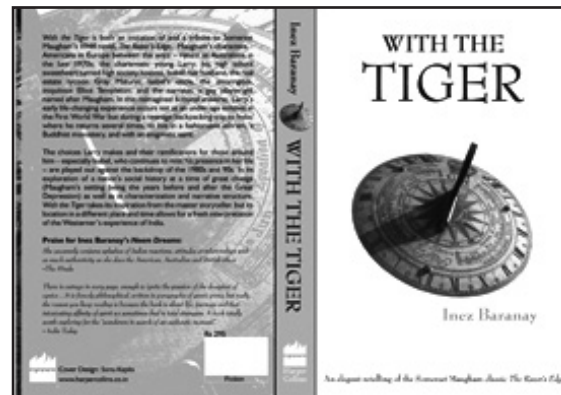
Byron was not that far from the border with Queensland, about an hour's drive south of it, a bit more before the good new road, but what a border it still

was. The idea of running up to Brisbane to see a show or buy household goods simply did not exist. It was as if you might risk your liberty or your integrity by going there, and what could you possibly want anyway? You drove ten hours - fifteen or more in those days - south to Sydney instead. Or flew.

'I'm ready for a much simpler life,' Elliott told me. 'I want time to enjoy the beauties of nature.'

Elliott of course had his own idea about what constituted simplicity, or, indeed, nature.

Having made so much money



through the Maturins, it wasn't hard for Elliott to find a spare half-million dollars to construct his new abode. 'So simple,' he would say, 'influenced by Asia and the Pacific, very appropriate to the new lifestyle.' This was Asia-Pacific plus appliances, lavish styling, and landscape gardening. From the house's surrounding wide verandas, guests gazed upon pavilions and pools, the Balinese garden, the Japanese garden, the Australian Natives garden.

It was made for the best parties on the North Coast and that's what Elliott gave. It didn't occur to me then that

Elliott's career at the time was somewhat like Isabel's, distinguished by giving parties.

Property developers and film producers came. The property developers, by the way, were soon advised in no uncertain terms that the area would always defend itself from the ghastly sight of high rises, franchised fast-food joints and un-aesthetic intrusions into the tasteful constructions that blended with the natural beauty of the area. Stars on huge Australia-wide concert tours came to Byron for some 'down time', Elliott gave parties for them. CJ Lonoff

at the height of her recording and video-art career bought property there. Elliott gave a party for her. (It was a long time before she managed to return.) CJ Lonoff's long-time personal assistant, Rye Bread, semi-retired, moved to Byron. Elliott gave a party. The moon was full, it was the solstice, or the first day of spring, Elliott gave a party. Easter, Anzac Day, the Queen's Birthday holiday, the Melbourne Cup, Elliott gave a party.

No one had orgies any more, not at Elliott's place anyway. All that was long past, and if people took drugs now they'd brought their own, but Elliott, as ever, catered copiously with carefully chosen wines, boutique beers, and lavish spreads, which these days featured local fresh produce and plenty of choice for vegetarians and vegans.

Once Louisa Bradley came to one of the parties. 'We met his sister,' people would say proudly, 'which was sweet.'

Of all his fabulous visitors, Elliott valued none so much as someone he called Rinpoche, a Tibetan monk.

Nature, 'eriod

The first party Elliott gave was for the blessing of his new house, featuring this Rinpoche. Isabel and Gray came to that one. 'We met Isabel and Gray Martin,' people mentioned whenever they could, 'they're actually rather sweet.'

For by now Elliott's Buddhism was part of his profile. His new front door had once opened in a monastery in Tibet.

Before all the other parties, there had been this joyous day of ritual. The house was bedecked with garlands, and an altar with his very best Buddha statue was erected. The Rinpoche came and gave blessings, fragrant smoke wafted everywhere and bells chimed. And then, something Elliott

had not quite foreseen, the Rinpoche called for rice, and went about not only the area around the altar, but all over the house, where the polishing of the floorboards had only just been completed, strewing handfuls of rice. There was rice in the swimming pool, rice all over the garden, rice all over the decks. 'We're still picking rice out of mats and couches,' he told me later. 'But, he said with satisfaction, 'we got rid of any past energies', which meant the undesirable psychic shadows of previous residents on the land or of, longer ago, any disgraceful business of dispossessing any people who had been there first.

'I heard he got in some kind of

eastern magician to purify the place,' said the woman who sold me bread and milk.

'They're saying the land is worth three times what he paid for it,' said the man who filled my car with petrol.

Excerpt from *With The Tiger* by Inez Baranay. This novel is a rewriting of the Somerset Maugham novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944). In her essay on the next page 'How the French Riviera became Byron Bay' (p. 18), Inez reflects decisions she made when writing.



How the French Riviera became Byron Bay



Novelist Inez Baranay reflects on decisions she made while writing her last novel

Why did Elliott buy his land at Byron Bay? I had to find an Australian equivalent for the French Riviera where the original Elliott Templeton bought his own land, or villa. The original Elliott Templeton was created by W Somerset Maugham in *The Razor's Edge*, the novel that arguably began the craze for 'spiritual India' a decade before The Beats.

When I came to write my adaptation, or imitation, I decided on following the pattern Maugham created. Each of *With The Tiger's* characters are based on their corresponding character in *The Razor's Edge*.

Elliott is a type that continued to flourish on fashionable fringes. Some people have always been able to divide their time. His snobbery and his kindness, his pretensions and his loyalty, his decadence and his spiritual hankerings are beautifully balanced in Maugham's version, while his sexuality could barely be hinted at. In *With The Tiger* he had long ago busted out of the closet in time to enjoy the best years of gay life in Sydney.

Although as famous for travelling as for writing, Somerset Maugham increasingly spent time in his own villa on the French Riviera and added hosting parties to his famous accomplishments. Maugham employed the Riviera for a scene in which his narrating character

and Elliott eventually find themselves *catching up*, as we'd now say. Somerset Maugham's narrator, Mr Maugham might be identified with his author but does not mean to reveal more about himself than his on-looker-ish part in the story. He's a kind of professional confidant, a good listener, someone everyone tells their secrets to.

The narrator of *With The Tiger* is called Will Maugham; he's a popular gay playwright and cannot be identified with his author. Will has been seen in Riviera/Byron Bay before the catch-up with Elliott: many years earlier, he happened to run into the then much younger Larry Darrell. I can't remember now what they chatted about in Maugham's original, just that it was an occasion for the relationship-building conversation. Larry is a seeker of wisdom and truth whose quest is central to the novel. With most of his seeking still ahead of him, in *Tiger's* version Larry decides upon Byron to devote time to yoga and reading. Will takes him to lunch by the beach and they discuss the changes the late 1970s were bringing around them.

By the time the ever-more-prosperous Elliott decides on his Asia-Pacific designer estate, Byron is increasingly being settled by the likes of him, amidst the various castes of drop-out cultures and old school country folk. Like the French Riviera earlier in the century it was becoming a jet-setter-ish destination and one of those places increasingly populated by people who had only meant to visit. Even Will Maugham gets himself a humble writer's shack at Brunswick Heads. And writers both fictive and actual rub shoulders in social milieus high and low, and turn what they see into stories.

Elliott's captivating niece Isabel and

her good catch of a husband Guy Maturin are of course based on *The Razor's Edge's* Maturins, who after their most glorious period, were ruined by the Crash of 1929. In the 60-years-later story in *With The Tiger*, you may find recollections of the excesses of the 1980s culminating in the fall of disgraceful governments and scandalous property developers.

I have never lived in Byron Bay but I have stayed there many and various times since the early 1970s. Some Sydney friends and I rented a rambling old holiday bungalow with verandahs at Watego's beach for, memory says, \$80 a week all up. We marvelled at the wide placid streets with their quaint painted bungalows and at the stunning natural backdrop. The Lighthouse first was seen through the benevolent lens of some psychedelic sacrament and we did marvel but our life was city life and we returned to Sydney the next day. It would be years before I'd find myself in Byron again.

In later, that is more recent, years, I attended a ceremonial conference opening event by the Lighthouse. Near the end of *With The Tiger* the narrator and Larry go there together, grimly subdued, to enact a silent, un-pre-mediated ritual. I watched them do it, writing it all down while living in quite different places: Canberra for a while, Gold Coast for a longer while. Multiple layers of memory make of this a memory as much mine as my other memories are, as on that high peak of Australia's easternmost point, Larry casts their dead friend's ashes out to the sea.

Inez Baranay's latest novel Always Hungry will be published in August by Press On/Arcadia. (www.inezbaranay.com)