

# The Edge of Bali

Author's Introduction to the new edition 2012

We gathered early in the day at the office of Sanskriti Kendra, the artists' retreat in the southern outskirts of New Delhi in October 2002, ready for the slow drive through unpredictable traffic to the city for an event called "India in the Australian Imagination". A fellow Australian artist also staying at Sanskriti Kendra, Emily Floyd, was getting text messages from Melbourne on her mobile. That's how we first heard about the bombings at Kuta Beach in Bali.

Sanskriti Kendra's buildings and grounds, its architecture and garden designs faithful to the most charming of indigenous forms, its museums of terracotta and brass, provided a base for writers and artists to do their work, meet each other and local artists, recover from or prepare for the India outside, get taken to Delhi art events, set out on research trips.

I had previously spent time in Delhi doing research for a novel set in India about the clash between globalisation and tradition; I'd endured cheap lodgings, making my often arduous way alone, to find women and men in media, politics, activism and science who would talk to me. By now, any information gathered had been subject to narrative needs and, the novel completed, I was preparing for new fictions and enjoying the more comfortable present.

The puzzlement and shock of the distant and still unverifiable news from Bali was set aside for the seminars and socialising of the two-day program at a New Delhi cultural centre. That day an Indian academic gave a paper on my novel *The Edge of Bali*. First published in 1992 the novel was by then ten years old. She spoke of the novel as a fictional trilogy about metaphorical journeys, about self-discovery, identity and existence. My work was beginning to be read in India; the preceding years included a

period as a Writer In Residence at the University of Madras and some conference panels to do with post-colonial literature, the new Englishes, that kind of thing.

Whether they had read the novel or not, the audience was ready with lively questions and challenges, usually in a warm spirit of like-minded feeling, cheerful calls for more literary miscegenation. But I recall one disputatious scholar bent on indictment, focussing on what he'd heard about the love scenes in *The Edge of Bali*, accusing me of not knowing of India's superior traditions in the erotic arts. Had I seen the rock carvings at Khajuraho? They proved that I had no qualification for writing anything about lovemaking in the Orient.

I had not ventured into the inner life of Balinese characters in *The Edge of Bali*; my choice was to treat tourism as a culture in itself and to represent Bali through the tourists' experience. It is one way to be 'inside' Bali, being a tourist. And yet the novel's not *Inside Bali*, it is *The Edge of Bali*. So many ways to feel edgy, to be on the edge of things, to be edged.

The three main characters all have reason to wonder, to greater and lesser degrees, about the Balinese gaze upon them; Marla even provides her conjecture about what the women selling goods in the market might say about the foreigners who shop there. But however much the three quests take Marla and Nelson and Tyler deeper than they had counted on, whatever efforts each of them makes to know more about Bali and its people, they remain necessarily unable to channel the worldview of those born and raised as Balinese.

In the years since the first publication of *The Edge of Bali* I'd been writing other books set outside of Australia. I'd learnt more about the way the marks made by post-colonial theory had been marked in turn by its subgenres, spin-offs and fallout. A Western writer would soon be unable to set her book in the non-West without the certain accusation of Orientalising, for people had been made nervous about the Western gaze on non-Western reality. Identity politics raged among the texts and writers were told they had not permission to speak of anyone who was Other.

I had paid attention to such questions in my recently completed novel *Neem Dreams*, the cause of those many journeys of mine into many literal and metaphorical areas of India itself. Imagination can take you further into a culture where you share a language; trans-national class values are as strong a link between people as shared national and local cultures. That day at the seminar in Delhi is where I met the commissioning editor who became responsible for publishing *Neem Dreams* the following year, 2003.

People in Australia were reeling from the destruction in Bali, the losses suffered, the evidence of unfathomable violence and hatred, the suspicions and the investigations. No-one had seen it coming. The area most frequented by Australians had been targeted, and by nationality the largest number of those killed had been Australians. Australians had been Bali's most numerous tourists for a long time, whether they went for the surf, the sun, the rich culture of ceremony, the natural beauty, the retreat from everyday life or to pursue artistic, business or relationship interests. Bali was relatively close, and therefore cheap to get to, which was either a bonus or the main reason. For everyone who moaned about it being spoiled there was someone who loved it as it was now. The sense of safety, welcome, familiarity, of a place made to provide pleasure and ease, was brutally shattered that day, and it took some time to understand, or make more complicated, what had happened, what it meant and what it predicted.

The bombings drew a kind of line in the history of visitors to Bali, Australian visitors in particular.

Suddenly tourists stopped coming to Bali. For a very long time Bali had been occupied, infiltrated, subsumed and hybridised by non-Balinese, not least by other Indonesians with other cultural identities. The bombings were understood to be an extreme expression of disapproval of the practices and pleasures of tourism, whether bought or sold. The type of religious passion associated with such censure is not one associated with the Balinese, or, for that matter, Australian tourists. The Balinese

economy had long been made reliant on foreign tourism and now the Balinese suffered.

In response the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival was created by Janet de Neefe, a long-time resident and business-woman, and her collaborators. It was to be 'a healing and economic development project'. And so it was, and was deemed a success, and has since made its mark on the circuit of desirable festivals for writers and readers. Writers from many countries were invited, and Balinese and other Indonesian writers introduced to an international audience. I have come to believe that the work of translation or transcreation is this century's most important literary project. When a literature from another language is made available in translation, more of us can meet where language and imagination meet, where reality and meta-reality meet.

It was the Festival that finally brought me back to Bali in 2004. It had been fourteen years since I'd last been there, researching and dreaming of this novel, *The Edge of Bali* being the reason for anything I did there. I had walked and taken crowded, sweltering bemos in all directions to find women and men who would talk to me of their lives and work in Bali: Balinese, other Indonesians, foreign residents. I lived in Ubud because Marla did, and I went to Kuta and Legian to trace Nelson's and Tyler's journeys there.

Even longer ago, in the 1970s, I'd been a young first time tourist and had spent some weeks at Kuta, in that golden age of a past time. During the later 1986 trip I found I had to write a novel about Bali. It often seems to me that writing about things replaces the possibility of ever again reaching directly to the memory of those things.

The origins of *The Edge of Bali's* characters have long melted into that stew of memories, observations, fantasies, borrowings, stealings, mysteries and labour that create people on a page. Thinking about writing something long ago can make an author feel really fictional. The present day writer has become someone else; each book I wrote created its own author.

In 2004 I was seeing the changes to Bali, nothing I hadn't known about but here I was experiencing the roads with traffic, traffic lights, parking lots, malls, masses of development. More foreigners were living in Bali now, and the island was marketed to the high end of tourism. And the meaning and long term effects of the bombings were still a concern for both locals and visitors.

*The Edge of Bali* is rooted in its own time, around 1990, and could be read in part as about that moment. In some ways I don't think you could tell quite the same story if you wrote *The Edge of Bali* set today. At a glance, everything might look the same now as in 1990; people look the same, wear pretty much the same kind of clothes. While fashion in clothing has changed little, there has of course been a dazzling rapidity in technological advancement over the past twenty years. Mobile phones and going online have altered the ways people find things out or fail to, keep in touch or go missing, have access to information or get confused. Once you factor in ubiquitous internet and cell phone use, you are in a different universe. The technology makes possible new types of connections, new freedoms. There are more and more global cultures, and more influence of globalism on all cultures. Other people's ways aren't so strange any more are they? West and East, North and South, no-one should assume where you're pointing from.

What gives a greater sense of like-mindedness between people—nationality, culture, class, personal tastes, attractions? How are those categories used and abused? How does tourism change a culture and how does it retain, revive or re-invent it? Is there such a thing as more or less authenticity? Is authenticity a valid category? How can the practice and business of tourism be married to environmental concerns? Issues like that were raised from the time of the first tourists, are aired in *The Edge of Bali*, and remain in the present.

I am very glad that Transit Lounge finds this novel worth re-presenting to both its previous readers and new ones.

Inez Baranay

Istanbul, January 2012