

## BOOKS

# Golden age

Five authors tell *Vogue* about a magic number—the year in their lives that defined their journey with words. By AARTI VIRANI



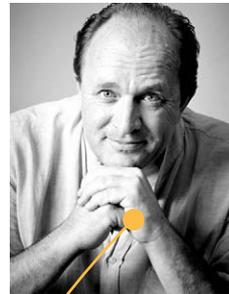
### At age 21 CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

I was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley, a fairly recent immigrant to America, swinging between extremes of elation and trepidation. That was when my grandfather in India passed away. I could not go home for the funeral; there was no money for me to make the expensive journey. My grandfather was the first storyteller in my life. He had shared with me, on lamp-lit evenings in our ancestral village, wondrous tales that lodged deep inside me to reappear years later,

transformed, in novels such as *Sister Of My Heart* and *The Palace Of Illusions*, and my newest, *Oleander Girl*.

A few days after my grandfather's death, I lay in bed with my eyes closed, trying to conjure up his face, the way we do with people we love. But I couldn't. In shock, I realised how much of my childhood I was forgetting as I was getting busier with my American life.

I could only think of one way of stopping this erosion, one action against forgetting: writing. I started tentatively, with a poem about my grandfather peeling oranges for me when I was a child. The joy of creation, the satisfaction of having honoured my grandfather—those feelings stayed with me a long time and caused me to attempt other pieces, to join a writer's group, to get better and to ultimately get published.



### At age 46 WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

I've worked in an office for about six months of my life. Though it was a lovely job at a fantastic literary magazine, it taught me I didn't want to be in an office ever again.

Since then, I've followed the Tamil Tigers, interviewed drug barons in the North-West Frontier Province and messed around with mujahideen in Peshawar.

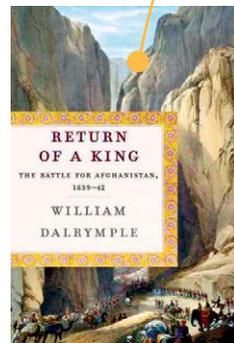
But when my daughter was born in 1995, I stopped the war zone stuff. I turned myself into a historian

and went to libraries. There is a real thrill to archival work but it was terribly exciting to get out and get shot at again and I consider this a turning point.

While travelling in Kandahar, Afghanistan, for my newest book, *Return Of A King: The Battle For Afghanistan*, two years ago, I nearly got killed after a sniper shot through the back window of our car. It wasn't quite scary enough to make me question why I was there but enough to give me a rush.

I enjoyed doing all that the *Boy's Own* stuff, though I probably did a lot more of it than what was strictly necessary for the book.

My wife, Olive, said she hadn't seen me buzzing like that in about 20 years. I was surprised by how much I rediscovered myself—I rediscovered a little bit of me that hadn't had an airing in a while. >



## At age 23 NELL FREUDENBERGER

In the spring of 1998, I was finishing a stint teaching high-school English in Bangkok when my American boyfriend invited me to accompany him on a fellowship in India—a country I knew only from novels.

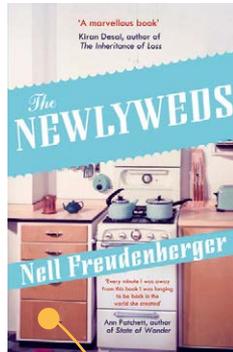
The fact that we didn't meet other Americans travelling by second-class train up and down the country in June and July made our exploration feel that much more serious.

We started in Calcutta and went across the Hindi Belt: Bodh Gaya, Varanasi, Khajuraho, Orchha, Gwalior, Agra, Delhi, up to Shimla and Manali, and then back down at a furious pace to Hyderabad, Hampi and Mumbai.

We thought we were more genuine admirers of the country than the scruffy Australians and Israelis we encountered in our guesthouses: more serious, more educated, more respectful. We had,

after all, graduated from Harvard. I'm making fun of myself, and rightly so, but there was at least one sensible thought I had that summer.

I knew that this trip was unrepeatable, that I'd hit a sweet spot between education and adult employment, between the old world of months-long escapes and the new one of being constantly in touch. My parents had divorced a few years earlier, but I'd had the safety net of college beneath me then. At 23, with no job, no family I recognised, and nowhere to be in September, I felt as if my life had finally started.



## At age 29 AMISH TRIPATHI

About nine years ago, I was oscillating between atheism and agnosticism as my family and I watched a TV programme about the ancient Persians. We discovered that Persian demons were called "daevas" and their gods, "ahuras". It was the exact opposite of the names Hindus use. Their gods were our demons and their demons, our gods. Who was right? What is evil? It was that last question that formed the genesis of 'The Shiva Trilogy'—the books were just a vehicle to convey my philosophy, a fictional adventure.

I couldn't afford to quit my banking job at the time and so I wrote my first two books on my hour-and-a-half commute to work in the back seat of my car, surrounded by Mumbai traffic. For those seven years, between working and writing, I did nothing else. The process of writing changed me and made me a calmer individual. [It's made me realise that] it's always the journey that matters more, the destination is just a fleeting moment.

"At 23, with no job, no family I recognised, and nowhere to be in September, I felt as if my life had finally started"

—NELL  
FREUDENBERGER



## At age 14 TANIA JAMES

Some may say a cemetery is no place for an eighth grade field trip, but my English teacher, Ms Loignon, felt differently. I remember wandering the grassy avenues of Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky, tentative, a little spooked. My assignment was to choose an epitaph, and build a short story out of the few facts and verses provided by it. Together, our stories would make a classroom anthology, modelled on Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. I don't remember which epitaph I chose, but I recall being drawn to the smaller tombs, the shorter spans of life. I loved *Winesburg* and the prospect of writing a story and the volumes of mystery beneath the worn stones.

In all my sixteen years of schooling, this assignment glows brightest in my memory, not because I was proud of the story I wrote, but because it felt as though, through writing, I was tapping into a continuum of lives and deaths, imagining my way into the mind of a child not much older than myself. It was exhilarating. So, for introducing me to that form of writerly exhilaration, which I've been chasing ever since, I have Ms Loignon to thank. ■

