

The writer with the light touch

CLARISSA TAN catches up with celebrated novelist and travel writer Vikram Seth who will be attending the Ubud writers' festival in October

VIKRAM Seth sounds rather jolly on the phone. He candidly admits he's forgotten about his interview. It's 9 o'clock on a London morning, and the writer is at home watching Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*. "It's a rather black comedy about him murdering lots of people. It's very, very good. If you can get it, get it."

Seth, famous for his charm and engaging personality, winningly says he is "working on nothing" at the moment. "I'm the sort who works very hard on something for years. And then there are years where I do nothing, just a bit of wool-gathering or whatever. I like doing nothing, if I can avoid doing something."

Come October though, he will be heading to Bali for the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. The Festival, founded in 2004 by the non-profit Saraswati Foundation, will also welcome the likes of John Berendt, whose *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* made him a Pulitzer finalist, and PEN/Beyond Margins award recipient Faith Adiele.

Seth's *An Equal Music* won acclaim in 1999, but he is perhaps best known for 1993's *A Suitable Boy*, which swept the WH Smith Literary and Commonwealth Writers prizes, and sparked an outcry when not nominated for the Booker.

"The Festival has been trying to secure Vikram Seth for a number of years," says Janet De Neefe, the event's founder and director. "Apart from being one of the world's finest writers, he is also a charismatic and exceptionally witty speaker – one of the best I have seen."

When asked what literary festivals are for, Seth displays more of that light touch.

"I haven't the least idea," he says. "There seems to be a huge plethora of literary festivals. I suppose it gets writers together, but you might wonder, to what end? Writers are supposed to write for people. I mean, what do we say when we meet each other – 'Have you written any good books lately'?"

Still, Seth admits there's value to the "hobnobbing and networking" that occurs at a writers' festival, and says he is more active

in attending them when he has just published a book. "When I have a book out, then I do feel I have to do the rounds. Two or three festivals a year is about the limit for writers, though. Otherwise, it becomes a merry-go-round and there's no time to write."

Seth says one reason he wants to go to Bali is that he has never been to Indonesia before. In fact, the closest he's ever got to that vast country is Singapore, which he visited several years ago.

Did he like the city-state? "I wasn't there very long," he says, then pauses. "I'm not trying to avoid your question. . . I remember it rained a lot and the skies were very grey because of forest-burning. Now, there's a connection between Indonesia and Singapore for you. Singapore was overcast. Are the skies like that now?"

Seth first made his name in travel writing. His book *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet* won the Thomas Cook Travel Book award in 1983, and is an account of how he hitch-hiked back to his home in New Delhi, after two years as a postgraduate student at Nanjing University in China, via Tibet.

In fact, Seth is a boundary-crosser in every sense of the word: he writes both poetry and prose (one of his books, *The Golden Gate*, is a kind of hybrid of prose and verse); speaks several languages (including, obviously, Mandarin, without which he wouldn't have been able to navigate China); and was studying for a doctorate in economics at Stanford before getting sidetracked by Asian Studies and the 8th century Chinese poet Wang Wei.

"He's a wonderful poet, very simple, very moving. He talks about friendship, about nature. And nature in a way that's different from Wordsworth and gang. And I thought that even in translation he has such a wonderful tone of voice that I was attracted. I wanted to learn the language."

Seth also takes calligraphy lessons from a Chinese master in London, but says he hasn't gone back to China since 1989, "before Tiananmen".

When asked if there's any reason why he hasn't revisited the country, there is a pause. "I've been busy with other things," he says.

"I'm sure that sooner or later I will go back. We shall see."

Does he find that there is a huge gap between his first encounter with the country, via the sublime works of Wang Wei, and what's happening in China now, the escalating capitalism, the economic boom?

"There is that," he says. "But you can't really regret that people's standard of living has risen. The same thing has been happening in India. Being an economist, or rather a lapsed economist, I have to see the gains in it, as well the loss."

"But there are great dangers. Clearly, there's a danger of ecological calamity, and there's a danger of great differences in income. Now, when you balance that with the general prosperity. . . I don't know. My opinion of it is not more valuable than anyone else's."

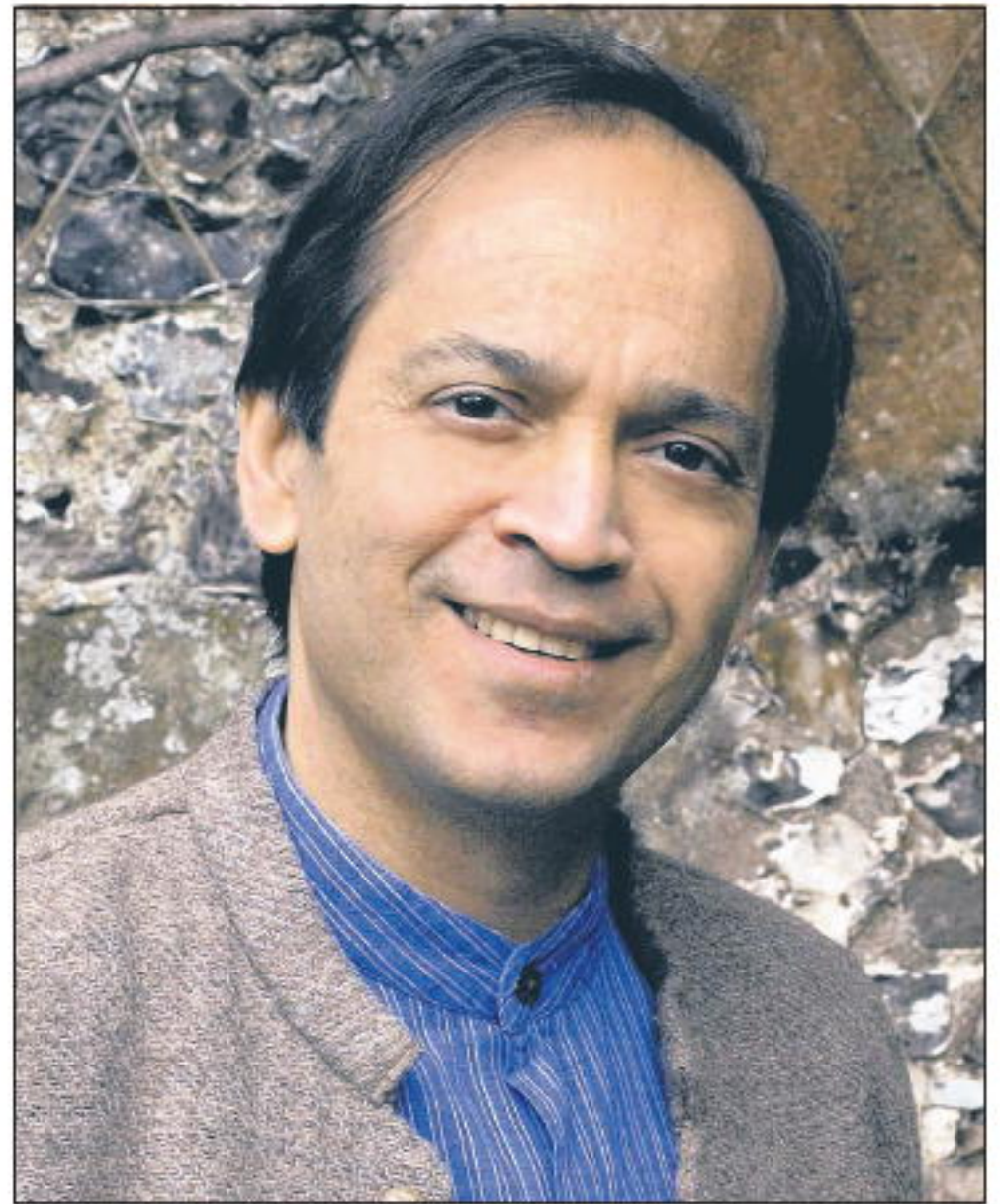
The kind of travel Seth likes best, he says, are those where you "just take off", and where the unexpected happens.

"I got to Brazil last year and then travelled further south, to Paraguay and Bolivia and so on, and then I realised that I couldn't use my credit card. I lived in cheap hotels and travelled around on buses and finally got to Machu Picchu. That's the kind of travel I used to do in my twenties. That kind of travel I like a lot."

Also last year, someone invited him on a sailing expedition from the north of Norway to Greenland. "I didn't realise you had to be part of the crew. I thought it was something like a cruise, and it wasn't like that at all. And it was really great."

"This non-cruise was supposed to take four or five days, but then the ice came down further south than we expected and we had to sail round and round in circles and the whole thing lasted about 10 days. Everyone was kind of green at the end of it. But speaking of green – we saw the aurora borealis."

Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, October 14-19; four-day festival pass: foreign visitor Rp 2.5 million; Indonesian Rp 400,000; Indonesian university/SMA student Rp 200,000 (10% discount for group bookings of 10 or more); daily pass: foreign visitor Rp 850,000; Indonesian Rp 100,000. More details at www.ubudwritersfestival.com

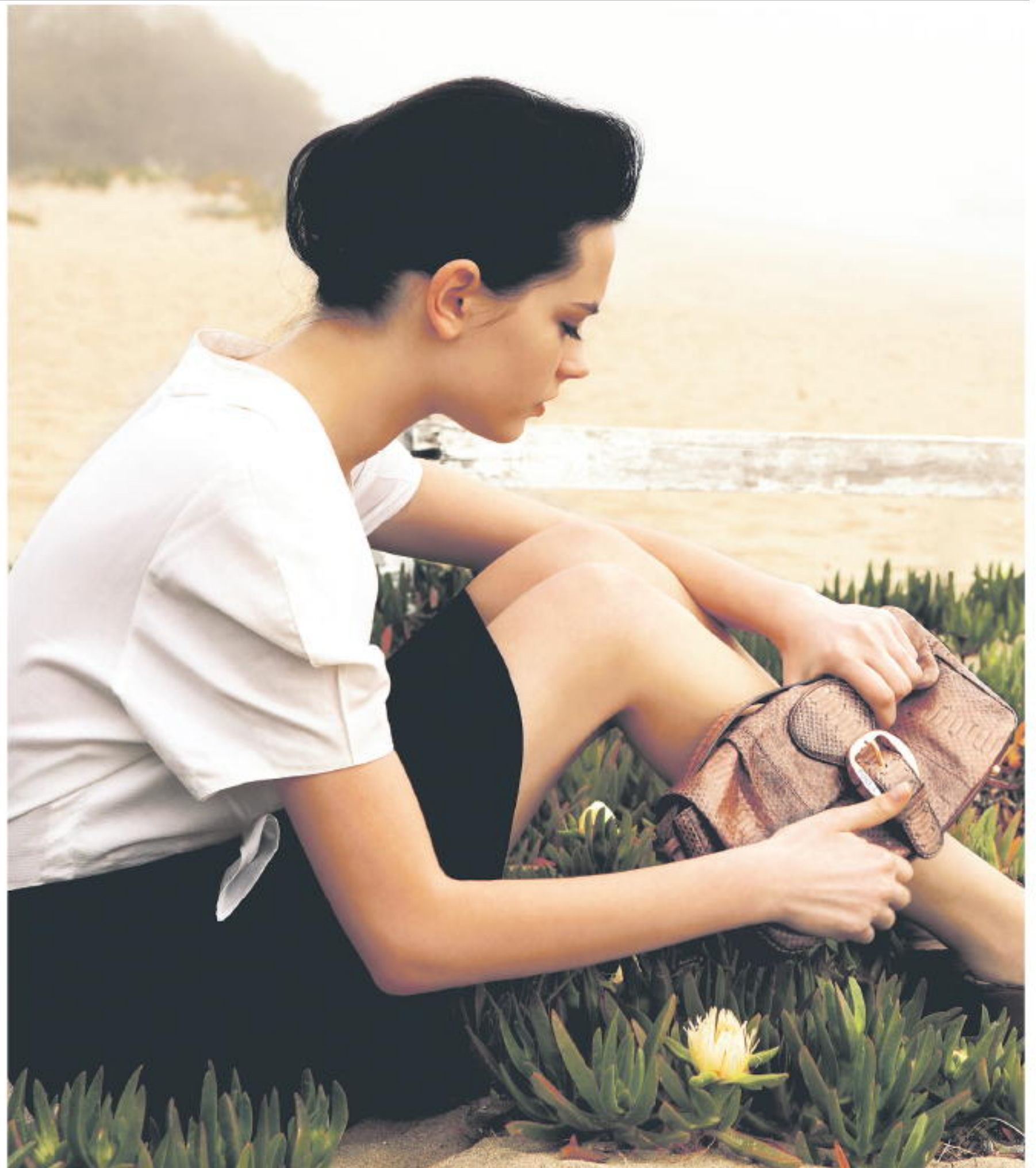


CAMILLA PANUFNIK

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– Vikram Seth about 8th century Chinese poet Wang Wei

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