



The Great Beyond

Diana R. Chambers

I was born in a Los Angeles suburb — very quiet, very white. Even at a young age, I felt the lack, and I needed something to fill it. My eyes turned towards the great beyond.

To books. Thanks to my mother, I visited the library every two weeks and always came home with an armful. Sometimes my literary journeys took me to distant lands or back into the past. I became enamoured of Marco Polo. I yearned to break free of my narrow confines.

I did, finally, at UC Berkeley, with its wordly population. I sampled naan, tortillas, crêpes, music from Iran and South Africa, films from India and France. The summer before my junior year, I travelled to Europe and Morocco — my first foray into the great beyond. I wandered the Paris streets in dazed wonder. My schoolgirl French gave me a small entrée and, hungry for more, I vowed I'd return one day for a longer stay.

Likewise, Morocco stuck with me. I discovered the marvels of Islamic architecture, the archways and intricate tiles. And the bazaars! I spent my days exploring every twisty lane, getting lost, but always finding my way back to the same fruit merchant. In my tiny Tangier hotel room, I ate bag after bag of oranges; their mesmerising colour and flavour still dazzle my brain. Here, I learned to bargain and would later seek out the bazaars of Istanbul, Peshawar, and, of course, Delhi — explorations that found their way into my books.

Those first travels beyond the border transformed me. Back at Cal, I declared an Asian art history major. After graduation, I returned to live and work in Paris for two years. Three years later, fate brought me to India, which led to a trajectory that changed my life — and eventually to my historical novel, *The Star of India*, published Spring 2020 by Penguin Random House India.

For this piece, I was invited by the **Prabha Khaitan Foundation** and the Siyahi

Literary Agency to write about freedom and diversity. Sometimes I don't know what I think until I write it, but I can see from these few words how interlinked these concepts are in my psyche. I take great joy in crossing borders, especially on foot, as I did once between Soviet Georgia and eastern Turkey. Travel means connecting, and that's when I feel most alive and free. Even at home, I remain a citizen of the world.

However, this surreal Year of the Plague has shown the limits on our freedoms. As an American, I have sometimes (often) felt at odds with my culture. I am more outward-turning than many of my countrymen and women, and, during this pandemic, I've been disappointed by those who see mask-wearing as an infringement on individual rights. Certainly our freedoms have been infringed on — by the virus itself. We have all suffered, and all need to pull together.

Our only course is to live each day and look to the future. I will certainly travel again. After all, I have a 10-year Indian visa! I received it two years ago, for my first visit to south India, to research for another novel. We were there during Pongal, the harvest festival, and were invited to a special ceremony at our hotel in Ooty. I'd always wanted to visit this famed hill station because the Cooch Behar royal family in my novel used to go there every year. We arrived by the historic "toy train" — the Nilgiri Mountain Railway, one of the last narrow-gauge steam trains in the world, on one of the steepest terrains. The tiny cars were filled with holiday-going families, and everyone was in fine spirits. We shared food with our fellow travellers, and our carriage was visited by the station master/mistress who had helped us find scarce seats. Part of a renowned family of musicians, she performed a beautiful vocal that made me shiver and rejoice at our good fortune. It was a magical moment.

I always say I spent another life on the Silk




Road. My first web domain was *silkroad.org*. In those idealistic early days, I saw the World Wide Web as the modern Silk Road, linking diverse peoples and cultures. As much as we know the dark side of the internet, it has nonetheless brought us together in ways that don't require passports and visas. I had been on my way to France (for future book research) when COVID cancelled my trip. However, I see now that I have spent it in India!

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For the publication of *The Star of India*, I've connected via email, Zoom, and WhatsApp with many talented and fascinating individuals I'd have never met otherwise. Dedicated publishing personnel, agents, journalists, a descendant of the Cooch Behar royals, a film star, a director — and readers! While it is true that we are isolated behind closed borders, we nonetheless experience this horror as one world. Despite all our differences, we understand each other in quite a deep way now. Our lack of physical freedom has expanded our spiritual connections. We'll need to remember this period when we reconfigure our shared world into the new post-COVID reality.

Diana R. Chambers was born with a book in one hand and a passport in the other. She earned a university degree in Asian Art History and has travelled frequently to the region. Eventually, her road led to scriptwriting — and Hollywood, where she met Nancy Valentine and learned of her great love affair with the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Drawn to the dramatic historical period, Diana knew this was a story she had to write. Beside numerous screen- and teleplays, she is the author of *Stinger*, a spy thriller set in Afghanistan and Pakistan. *The Star of India* is her debut book.

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