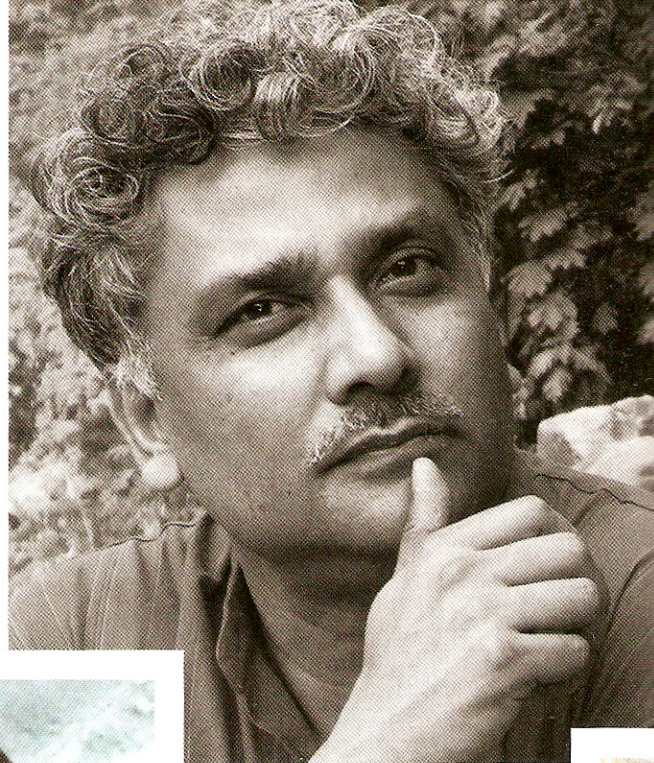


two lives

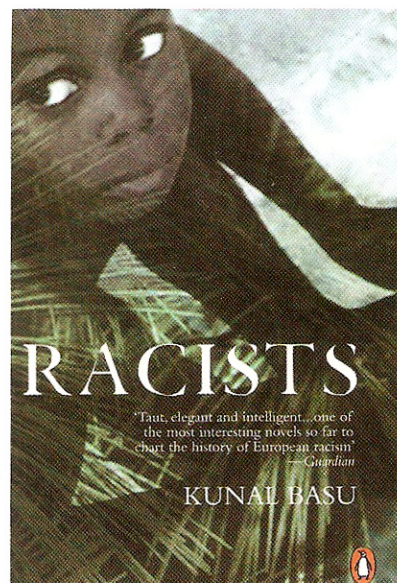
International marketing guru and a critically acclaimed novelist, **Kunal Basu** talks to **Bron Sibree** about his literary journey, the macho image of big business and the love story that inspired a film



For a while, Kunal Basu has been living what he calls “a double life.” By day, the director of Oxford University’s flagship advanced management programme writes award-winning articles about marketing, branding and corporate social responsibility. By night he pens remarkable, provocative historical novels like *The Miniaturist*, *The Opium Clerk* and *Racists*, all critically-acclaimed.

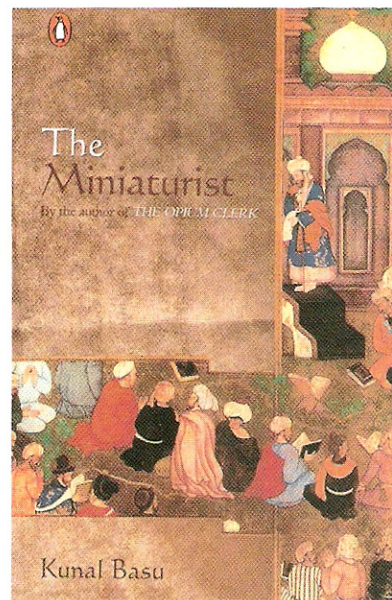
His forthcoming book, *The Japanese Wife*, is a collection of short stories that takes its title from a love story so unconventional it has inspired Bengali director Aparna Sen to turn it into a film. However, Kunal says fame comes with a high price tag: “I have no life. My colleagues at Oxford are quite puzzled by the fact that as a successful academic, I write novels, but I write eight or nine hours a day, including on weekends. I don’t holiday at all.”

Not that the peripatetic Calcutta-born author and academic would have it any other way. “Writing fiction is not a hobby, it’s the reason I wake up each morning,” he says. Even when he was on set in the Sundarbans during the filming of *The Japanese Wife* last year, he lamented the interruption to his next novel. But there’s no denying he is delighted that Sen has made the film, which stars Rahul Bose, Raima Sen, Moushumi Chatterjee and Japanese actress Chigasu Takaku, and he is looking forward to its international release later this year. Set in Kolkata, the



Sundarbans, and Yokohama and Tsukuba in Japan, *The Japanese Wife* tells the love story of a Sundarbans teacher, Snehemoy, and Japanese woman, Miyage, who meet as pen-pals, marry and maintain a powerful bond of love across the years, though they never meet.

Ethereal, haunting and otherworldly, Kunal insists it is, “almost a ridiculous story – friendship, marriage, then never meeting. But when Aparna listened to it in Oxford, she said, ‘I love this. Don’t mention this to anybody.’ And I laughed because I wasn’t planning to, but later I realised she wasn’t joking.” Indeed, what attracted Aparna to the story, she explains, “was the innocence and sheer improbability of two ordinary people with their extraordinary love that transcends all geographical and cultural barriers. When Kunal casually

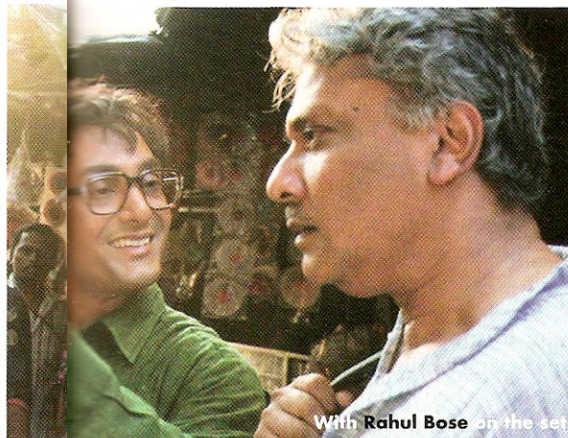


narrated this story to me and I knew at once that I had to make it into a film.”

Even now, on the eve of *The Japanese Wife*’s launch, Kunal declares, “I don’t have a clue why I thought of this rather strange love story. I think I might have heard of an Indian village teacher marrying a Japanese woman and spun the story years later from that strain of memory.” Memory is a potent force in all the stories in this collection, ranging from one about an American rock queen coming to India and falling in love with a Punjabi businessman (*The Grateful Ganga*), to *Miss Annie*, which tells of a Russian prostitute who meets a band of revolutionaries in Calcutta;

in *Father Tito’s Onion Rings*, a Yugoslav priest’s potent memories of the Nazi Holocaust drive him to intervene between Hindu and Muslim rioters in Kolkata. Nothing is what it seems in these disparate tales, yet almost all are about unexpected love and accidental gifts.

Kunal refuses to put limits on his imagination, as his previous novels attest. “I’ve always resisted the themes of cultural dislocation that NRIs mostly write about. It has never arrested my imagination. I’m really excited by inter-civilisational exchanges and I wanted to write inside-out stories, which are not simply about the memories or discoveries of outsiders who visit India, but also about the Indian



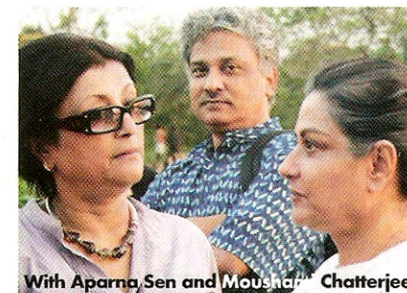
With Rahul Bose on the sets

castes, and how these engagements bring out, from the deep crevices of their minds, their loves and losses.”

In writing about these private recesses in his characters’ hearts and minds, Kunal says, “I think I discover myself more. I gravitate quickly to strangers, and put myself very readily into strange situations and places.” Take his sudden visit to Cappadocia in eastern Turkey, which grew out of a vision that came to him while he was writing *The Miniaturist*. “In my mind I saw my protagonist, Bihzad, going to this bizarre landscape, and I researched a bit to find that it was eastern Turkey. I think what happens is that my own self reveals itself to me a bit more with each book. I’m able to enter worlds within myself, think about my past, relationships I’ve had, the life I’ve lead, in a better light than before. If I had simply stayed with the environment that I know and people that I interact with daily, I wouldn’t be

paying attention to things that were unknown to me. So these notions of exploration, discovery, strangeness and unfamiliarity are running themes in my life and my writing.

Born into an aristocratic Calcutta family – his mother is the famous Bengali writer Chabi Basu and his father is a noted publisher and founder member of Bengal’s ruling communist party – Kunal knew from a young age that his vocation lay in the arts. He painted and exhibited while at school, wrote and acted in films but also grew up with an acute awareness that at that time in India, educated unemployment was about 70 per cent: “India was a very different country then and I felt it absolutely incumbent upon me that I study a subject that would help find a job, rather than study that which was my passion.”



With Aparna Sen and Moushumi Chatterjee

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To this day Kunal loathes the subjects he excelled in – science and engineering. Despite winning a scholarship to the US to study engineering, he turned to management for his PhD because he felt it “(the) least destructive of the arts.” He proceeded to win numerous awards for his academic papers, and has been involved in senior executive education in 16 countries. Rated among the world’s top 100 management scholars, Kunal says, “I had no illusions that I was really an author rather than an academic, and that I would get down to writing as soon as life afforded me the opportunity, so I led a double life.”

For years he remained a closet novelist, penning short stories and

poetry in snatched moments until he hit upon the idea for his first novel, *The Opium Clerk*. Published in 2001 when Kunal was 45 years old, this allegorical colonial epic about a simple clerk who finds himself unwittingly embroiled in a nefarious trade, was inspired by a single sentence in “a dog-eared paperback” he’d borrowed while trekking in Thailand. Written during his sabbatical, it landed him a publishing contract barely two weeks after he’d put it in the hands of an agent. “I had no clue how to publish a novel. So I sent off the first 100 pages to six or seven agents, and when the person who is now my agent called me, it took on a momentum of its own.”

Indeed, after penning two more novels in five years, including *Racists*, his recent, somewhat controversial work about Victorian racism, Kunal maintains that the two disparate strands of his double life rarely connect. He, however, admits he has “learned some lessons over the years in writing about things that I feel deeply about.”

Take for instance ‘Beyond Selfishness’ the much-lauded academic paper he and two of his colleagues published in *Sloan Management Review* in 2002. Written well before the Enron scandal, it continues to receive unprecedented attention all round the world, and won him a Citation of Excellence Award. It made the case that a syndrome of selfishness has taken hold of our business institutions and societies, and preceded to challenge and deconstruct the flawed premises on which it has come about, explains Kunal. “It’s time for business to shed its macho image and to really integrate and be nurturing of society.”

Basu’s passion for a new kind of corporate social responsibility is palpable, and as he talks about his future research in the field, it’s clear that he will continue to live his unique “double life” for a bit longer. And there is his desire to help raise funds for street-kids in India. “As an Indian you cannot ignore the plight of people around you; otherwise, in my mind, writing becomes a kind of utter self-indulgence. Writing is a force for discovery, a healing force, and a force for joy.” □

The Japanese Wife, by Kunal Basu. HarperCollins India, Rs 295