

JINI IN WANDERLAND



REALLY I WAS SEEKING SOME KIND OF CONNECTION WITH THE DIVINE. CALL IT GOD IF YOU WANT TO, I DON'T KNOW. BUT I WAS LOOKING FOR THIS CONNECTION WITH A HIGHER POWER, TO FEEL THAT I COULD HEAR IT.

Author Jini Reddy is in pursuit of the divine and explores this in her new book *Wanderland: A Search for Magic in the Landscape*. Ella Foote finds out more.

Author Jini Reddy is surprised I want to interview her, “I am not a wild, or outdoor swimmer,” she says when we meet virtually over Skype. “I admire outdoor swimmers. I love swimming and swim two-three times a week at a local pool. If I am experiencing any kind of emotional upset, I will go for a swim, I have missed it so much with pools being closed, so much more than I can put into words, but you understand.” I do understand and it is this yearning for the water, understanding and connection to it that I related to most in Jini’s new book, *Wanderland: A Search for Magic in the Landscape*.

Jini is an author and journalist. She was born in London to Indian parents who grew up in apartheid-era South Africa, and was raised in Montreal, Canada. She has written for a variety of magazines and newspapers and her first book, *Wild Times*, she describes as a hybrid, narrative, travel guide was published in 2016. Her new book, *Wanderland*, is about her pursuit of the Other and connection to the natural world. “I wanted my first book to be more like *Wanderland* but it wasn’t what the publisher wanted at the time,” she says. “So, the idea for my second book had been brewing for quite a few years. As a travel writer I had all these opportunities to meet people from indigenous cultures and I was always fascinated that for these people it was perfectly natural to have this deep reciprocal relationship with the forces of nature. I have friends who are authentic shaman and I had these vague ideas I wanted to explore.”

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Swimmers are often mocked for their tendency to get evangelical and floaty about their feelings, connections and euphoric sensations in and around water. When I interviewed Reverend Kate Bottley earlier in the year she said, “If you find me an outdoor swimmer, especially skins or winter swimmer, who hasn’t had some sort of spiritual experience in the water – they are fibbing!” Whether you are a believer in something greater than yourself or not, I do think all swimmers, without maybe even knowing it, often head for a swim to seek their Other in the water. “I have always seen water as a carrier of emotion, as a cleanser,” says Jini. “If I had to choose, if someone asked me to choose a mountain, jungle or coast. I would choose the coast every time. I love water, I find it incredibly healing. I feel like if I had properly learnt to swim when I was little, learning to tread water, I would be one of those people who goes into the sea and swims. But instead I get really anxious about being out of my depth.”

Wanderland follows Jini around the UK as she seeks the Other, following instincts, stories and crumbs of information she collects like treasure. One of the early chapters describes how she finds out about an illustrated map that leads to a secret, lost spring. I was instantly captivated in the magic and idea of plunging into a hidden spring with magical waters. “The first time I went to seek the spring I was with a friend and I couldn’t find it,” says Jini. “When I got home and spoke to Charlotte, who gave me the map, she said that perhaps I wasn’t meant to



find the spring that day.” As well as this first visit to the spring there were other ideas didn’t work out the either. “When I was planning the book, I had this idea to seek fairy circles in Cumbria, but logistically I couldn’t make it work,” she says. “I don’t have a car and so spent hours trying to work out how I would get from here to there. I also considered going to the quietest place in Britain, but someone said it wasn’t actually very nice there. So, while some of it seemed structured, most of it wasn’t. Before I set off anywhere I would do it in the spirit of the book, setting an intention. Asking the spirit of the land or whatever I was calling it that day to guide me and show me what I needed to see. I really took that to heart and was really sincere about it, which I think enabled things to happen, even though it didn’t always happen the way I wanted it to. I was open, very open. If I heard something or saw something, I would follow and see where it led.”

2020 WAINWRIGHT PRIZE

Wanderland has recently been longlisted for the 2020 Wainwright Prize, the prize celebrates the best in nature writing. Jini’s book stands out from the other nature books listed, perhaps because of the spiritual





← element. “I have to be honest, I often get bored by a lot of nature writing,” says Jini. “What I am drawn to is good story telling, I don’t find it as often as I would like outside of fiction. I read a lot of fiction; it helps me to write non-fiction. Nature writing can be very rich on description with not much story. Personally, I am not a birder, or wildlife expert. I am really into the shamanic side of life, that is what I am looking for in nature.” I ask Jini if she feels like she has found her Other as a result of her book. “Really I was seeking some kind of connection with the divine,” she says. “Call it god if you want to, I don’t know. But I was looking for this connection with a higher power, to feel that I could hear it. To have this relationship I think is a lifelong thing. The journey ended in the context of the book and I learnt a lot writing it. I discovered you can really invite in these incredible instances of magic, connection to higher power, spirit of the landscape or however you want to phrase it. So now I trust that, I really trust that it is possible, and it has expanded my field of perception, but I am always going to be seeking that connection.”

EVERYWHERE BUT BRITAIN

Despite being a London based travel journalist, before writing her first book, Jini would be travelling everywhere but Britain. “My love of Britain’s natural

Above l-r: Fingal’s Cave, Lindisfarne Dunes and St Ives

landscapes has certainly deepened and intensified as a result of *Wanderland*,” she says. “The first book amplified it a bit, but before I had almost no interest in being outside London. Abroad was more interesting at the time, but now I love exploring Britain. I can think of so many places I want to go to or revisit. Beaches I haven’t been to, coastal paths to explore, I love walking coastal paths because you can’t get lost!” As we talk our conversation moves on to how she feels as a non-white person in the British countryside. Jini doesn’t like the use of acronyms describing herself as British, Canadian, Asian. In her book she mentions being stared at on trains and we talk about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) conversations across the world. “It is fascinating, but very intense,” she says. “As a travel writer I am used to going somewhere and being the outsider. The countryside for me is just another version of somewhere else. I don’t have an inbuilt resistance

because of the colour of my skin, but at the same time it is something I am always quietly conscience of. I stayed in a bothy on Exmoor once and remember going for a walk to the pub. Before I went in, I did brace myself, I knew I was going to be the only person who looks like me, not only that but I am a woman on my own – an Indian woman on her own is even weirder! All I wanted was a cup of tea and the toilet and I found myself going into performance mode.”

Wanderland, a book about seeking magic and meaning makes me think about how we are all connecting and experiencing the outdoors differently as a result of the global pandemic. It feels serendipitous that Jini’s book was released during this period, coincidence? “Funny you should mention that,” says Jini. “I was having a conversation with a friend about this, thinking about divine timing. It is everything. Also, for me personally, my connection with nature has been amplified in the weeks we have been on lockdown. If you have been well enough to experience getting outside, the connection has been heightened and so I think the book has benefited from that.” Jini like many travel writers has been grounded for now, but she has a new desire to see more of Britain. “I have a hunger for this stretch of coast between Lelant and St Ives in Cornwall. I am hungry to get out.”

AS A TRAVEL WRITER I AM USED TO GOING SOMEWHERE AND BEING THE OUTSIDER. THE COUNTRYSIDE FOR ME IS JUST ANOTHER VERSION OF SOMEWHERE ELSE