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BOOKS

1940's Vedantic Novel Still a Hit

A meeting with Ramana Maharshi inspired Somerset Maugham's classic "The Razor's Edge"

By Mark Hawthorne, California

When he arrived in India in 1938, British author W. Somerset Maugham was hoping to find some inspiration for a novel he planned to write incorporating Hindu philosophy. After visiting many cities and meeting many holy men--he arrived in Chennai, where he learned of, as he would later describe, "a swami who was the most celebrated and the most revered then in India. They called him the Maharshi." Maugham jumped at the chance to meet him. Armed with an insatiable curiosity and a customary fruit basket, he arrived in Tiruvannamalai at the ashram of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi--on whom the author would later model the fictional guru of his book, *The Razor's Edge*.

Though Maugham did not learn of him until he was in India, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi had already gained widespread renown in the West through Paul Brunton's 1934 book, *A Search in Secret India*. When Brunton, a London journalist, visited Tiruvannamalai, he asked the Maharshi if the search for enlightenment is mere delusion. The sage's response--"First know the 'I' and then you shall know the

truth"--must have seemed as foreign to Western readers in the 1930s as India itself. But the Maharshi's teachings struck a deep chord with many non-Hindus, and each news story elevated his reputation for wisdom. The May 30, 1949, issue of Life magazine devoted a feature story to him with the headline, "Holy Man: Sri Ramana Maharshi has India's answer to most of man's problems." Life's journalist, Winthrop Sargeant, wrote: "Sri Ramana's views are extremely orthodox. His life of austerity, his renunciation of all worldly desires, his contemplative serenity, his unshakable peace of mind are all part of the traditional equipment of the Hindu sage."

Just before Maugham was to meet the Maharshi, he fainted in the Indian heat outside the ashram. He described the events in his 1958 essay "The Saint:" "I was carried into a hut and laid on a pallet bed. I do not know how long I remained unconscious, but presently I recovered. I felt, however, too ill to move. The Maharshi was told what had happened, and that I was not well enough to come into the hall in which he ordinarily sat, so, after some time, followed by two or three disciples, he came into the hut into which I had been taken."

Sri Ramana greeted Maugham and sat near his bed. "After the first few minutes," writes Maugham, "during which his eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face, he ceased to look at me, but, with a sidelong stare of peculiar fixity, gazed, as it were. He remained thus, motionless, for perhaps a quarter of an hour; and they told me later that he was concentrating in meditation upon me. Then he came to, if I may so put it, and again looked at me. He asked me if I wished to say anything to him, or to ask any question. I was feeling weak and ill and said so; whereupon he smiled and said, 'Silence is also

conversation.'"

Later in the novel, Maugham will describe his fictional version of Maharshi as "neither thin nor fat, palish brown in color and clean-shaven, with close-cropped white hair. He never wore anything but a loincloth, and yet he managed to look as trim and neat and well dressed as a young man in one of Brooks Brothers' advertisements."

Though ill, Maugham could not have been more pleased by this experience. The author had an abiding interest in the religious traditions of the East, and his writing is filled with spiritual themes and philosophical observations. Since much of his reason for being in India was to collect information on Hinduism, his visit with the Maharshi must have seemed too good to be true.

William Somerset Maugham was born in the British Embassy in Paris in 1874, and educated in England and Germany. After medical school, a successful attempt at writing led him to exchange a career in medicine for the world of letters and ultimately widespread fame for his plays, novels and short stories. His autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage* (1915) is perhaps his best-known work. With success came money--especially from his popular plays--and the opportunity to travel, which Maugham did widely. He was especially fond of Asia, where he found inspiration for many of his tales. Maugham wrote *The Razor's Edge* during the Second World War as a wave of interest in spiritual matters was spreading across the West. Books and movies reflected this interest, but Maugham's approach to *The Razor's Edge* differed by

examining Indian religious systems, which (as in books by Vedanta disciples Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard) were becoming more popular in America and Europe. Maugham derived his title from a passage in the Katha-Upanishad: "Like the sharp edge of a razor, the sages say, is the path. Narrow it is, and difficult to tread."

The novel's protagonist is Larry Darrell, a young American who returns from the horrors of the First World War deeply troubled. He rejects the trappings of material life and travels the world seeking answers. "I want to know whether God is or God is not," he says. "I want to find out why evil exists. I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die, it's the end." He eventually finds peace, and answers, with a guru in a South India ashram and converts to Vedanta. Larry's guru, Shri Ganesha, is clearly Sri Ramana--Larry reports that "Shri Ganesha used to say that silence is also conversation." When we see Larry for the last time, he is on his way back to the United States to live a life of "calmness, forbearance, compassion, selflessness and continence." Having given up his inheritance, he will settle in New York, he says, for its libraries, and drive a taxi. He declares that he has "never been happier or felt more independent in my life."

The Razor's Edge was an instant hit, selling more than half a million copies in the first month. Servicemen in the Second World War were especially attracted to the novel's themes of soul-searching and nonattachment. Countless readers, particularly disaffected young Americans, identified with Larry's spiritual odyssey, and it became for many their introduction to such Hindu concepts as karma and reincarnation. It is no coincidence that Somerset Maugham

narrates the story in the first person singular, with the author appearing as himself as a character in the plot. Maugham had long been a student of philosophy, and while not a follower of religion, he felt a deep respect for Buddhism and Hinduism. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Maugham explains his philosophy of life as a resigned atheism and a certain skepticism about the extent of man's innate goodness and intelligence."

Maugham's acquaintance, Christopher Isherwood, praised the book's religious tone--and was often regarded as Larry Darrell's real-life role model. Isherwood, a highly respected author, collaborated with Swami Prabhavananda of the Vedanta Society in the 1950s to produce some of the best-ever translations of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. Prominent saints from India embraced the story of one man's search for God. In a copy of Autobiography of a Yogi given to Maugham, Paramahansa Yogananda inscribed: "To Somerset Maugham, author of The Razor's Edge, which has done so much good in the world by spreading the seed of India's teachings."

Maugham's novel, still in print, has been adapted for two motion pictures, one in 1946 starring Tyrone Powers and one in 1984 starring Bill Murray. The book remains an inspiration, as a glance at recent readers' comments on the Amazon.com web site reveals. One reader wrote, "This is my favorite book ever. Although I am a teenager, I still can relate to the idealism and realism in this book." Another said, "If you are a person in search of some meaning to life, one only has to pick up this well-written novel and journey alongside Larry."

Hindus unfamiliar with the book may be startled by Maugham's clear grasp and explanations of Hindu philosophy. The following excerpts are statements of Larry to Maugham, unless otherwise noted.

Hindu Philosophy

"Advaita doesn't ask you to take anything on trust; it asks only that you should have a passionate craving to know Reality; it states that you can experience God as surely as you can experience joy or pain. And there are men in India today--hundreds of them for all I know--who have the certitude that they have done so. I found something wonderfully satisfying in the notion that you can attain Reality by knowledge. In later ages the sages of India, in recognition of human infirmity, admitted that salvation may be won by way of love and the way of works, but they never denied that the noblest way, though the hardest, is the way of knowledge, for its instrument is the most precious faculty of man, his reason."

On Reincarnation

"Can there be anything more stupendous than the conception that the universe has no beginning and no end, but passes everlastingly from growth to equilibrium to decline, from decline to dissolution, from dissolution to growth, and so on to all eternity?"

[Maugham to Larry] "And what do the Hindus think is the object of this endless recurrence?"

[Larry] "I think they'd say that such is the nature of the

Absolute. You see, they believe that the purpose of creation is to serve as a stage for the punishment or reward of the deeds of the soul's earlier existences."

[Maugham to Larry] "Which presupposes belief in the transmigration of souls."

[Larry] "It's a belief held by two thirds of the human race."

[Maugham to Larry] "The fact that a great many people believe something is no guarantee of its truth."

[Larry] "No, but at least it makes it worthy of consideration. Christianity absorbed so much of Neo-Platonism, it might very easily have absorbed that, too, and in point of fact there was an early Christian sect that believed in it, but it was declared heretical. Except for that, Christians would believe in it as confidently as they believe in the resurrection of Christ."

Karma

"Has it occurred to you that transmigration is at once an explanation and a justification of the evil of the world? If the evils we suffer are the result of sins committed in our past lives, we can bear them with resignation and hope that if in this one we strive towards virtue our future lives will be less afflicted. But it's easy enough to bear our own evils; all we need for that is a little manliness; what's intolerable is the evil, often so unmerited in appearance, that befalls others. If you can persuade yourself that it is the inevitable result of the

past, you may pity, you may do what you can to alleviate--and you should--but you have no cause to be indignant."

The Absolute

"According to the Vedantists, the Self, which they call the Atman and we call the soul, is distinct from the body and its senses, distinct from the mind and its intelligence; it is not part of the Absolute, for the Absolute, being infinite, can have no parts but the Absolute itself. It is uncreated; it has existed from eternity and when at last it has cast off the seven veils of ignorance will return to the infinitude from which it came. It is like a drop of water that has arisen from the sea and in a shower has fallen into a puddle, then drifts into a brook, finds its way into a stream, after that into a river, passing through mountain gorges and wide plains, winding this way and that, obstructed by rocks and fallen trees, till at last it reaches the boundless sea from which it rose."

Meeting "Shri Ganesha" [Ramana Maharshi]

"When I got down to Travancore I found I needn't have asked for information about Shri Ganesha. Everyone knew of him. For many years he'd lived in a cave in the hills, but finally he'd been persuaded to move down to the plain where some charitable person had given him a plot of land and had built a little adobe house for him. . . . I found a young man at the entrance of the compound and asked if I could see the Yogi. I'd brought with me the basket of fruit which is the customary gift to offer. In a few minutes the young man came back and led me into a long hall with windows all around it. In one corner Shri Ganesha sat in the attitude of meditation on a raised dais covered with a tiger skin. 'I've been expecting you,' he said....Before he'd said another word I knew this was the man

I'd been seeking.... 'What have you come here for?' he asked. I began to tell him how I'd come to India and how I'd passed my time for three years; how, on report of their wisdom and sanctity, I'd gone to one holy man after another and had found no one to give me what I looked for. He interrupted me. 'All that I know. There is no need to tell me. What have you come for?' 'So that you may be my Guru,' I answered. 'Brahman alone is the Guru,' he said.

"He continued to look at me with a strange intensity, and then suddenly his body became rigid, his eyes seemed to turn inwards, and I saw that he'd fallen into a trance, which the Indians call samadhi and in which, they hold, the duality of subject and object vanishes and you become Knowledge Absolute. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, in front of him, and my heart beat violently.

"After how long a time I don't know he sighed and I realized that he had recovered normal consciousness. He gave me a glance sweet with loving kindness. 'Stay,' he said. 'They will show you where you may sleep.' "

On Yogis

[Maugham to Larry] "Is it true that the yogis acquire powers that would seem to us supernatural?"

[Larry] "I wouldn't know. All I can tell you is that it's commonly believed in India. But the wisest don't attach any importance to powers of that sort; they think they're apt to hinder spiritual progress. I remember one of them telling me of a yogi who

came to the bank of a river; he hadn't the money to pay the ferryman to take him across and the ferryman refused to take him for nothing, so he stepped on the water and walked upon its surface to the other side. The yogi who told me shrugged his shoulders scornfully. 'A miracle like that,' he said 'is worth no more than the penny it would have cost to go on the ferryboat.'"

Maya

"It's a mistake to think that the Indians look upon the world as an illusion; they don't; all they claim is that it's not real in the same sense as the Absolute. Maya is only a speculation devised by those ardent thinkers to explain how the Infinite could produce the finite. Shankara, the wisest of them all, decided that it was an insoluble mystery. You see, the difficulty is to explain why Brahman--which is Being, Bliss, and Intelligence, which is unalterable, which ever is and forever maintains itself in rest, which lacks nothing and needs nothing and so knows neither change nor strife, which is perfect--should create the world. Well, if you ask that question, the answer you're generally given is that the Absolute created the world in sport without reference to any purpose. But when you think of flood and famine, or earthquake and hurricane and all the ills that flesh is heir to, your moral sense is outraged at the idea that so much that is shocking can have been created in play. Shri Ganesha had too much kindness of heart to believe that; he looked upon the world as an expression of the Absolute and as the overflow of its perfection. He taught that God cannot help creating, and that the world is the manifestation of his nature. When I asked how, if the world was a manifestation of the nature of a perfect being, it should be so hateful that the only reasonable aim man can set before him is to liberate himself from its bondage,

Shri Ganesha answered that the satisfactions of the world are transitory and that only the Infinite gives enduring happiness. But endless duration makes good no better, nor white any whiter. If the rose at noon has lost the beauty it had at dawn, the beauty it had then was real. Nothing in the world is permanent, and we're foolish when we ask anything to last, but surely we're still foolish not to delight in it while we have it. If change is the essence of existence one would have thought it only sensible to make it the premise of our philosophy. We can none of us step into the same river twice, but the river flows on and the other river we step into is cool and refreshing too.

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