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Anosh Irani's story: born from history

By Marsha Lederman

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Anosh Irani moved to Canada to be a writer and never looked back; with his new novel, he's exploring his family's past and some tough truths about India

Anosh Irani carries around a picture of his grandfather in his wallet. The faded photograph shows a man in a short-sleeved white shirt, eyeglasses propped on his forehead, sitting in front of dozens of flowers. It was taken in 1992, shortly before he died, inside his flower shop, which was located in the lobby of the Taj Mahal hotel: one of the targets of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

Irani's weekly visits to the Taj as a child became the basis for an essay the North Vancouver-based novelist and playwright wrote for the New York Times shortly after the attacks. It was the most personal piece of writing Irani had ever published.

Until now.

Irani's just-published third novel, *Dahanu Road*, while not strictly autobiographical like the Times essay, is intensely personal: an epic tale of a family of Zoroastrians beginning with their departure under duress from Iran, and following them as they lead comfortable but troubled lives as landlords on a farm in India. It is the story of Irani's own people, derived in part from his own family's history.

"A lot of it is based on experiences of the place I know really well - stories from my mom and dad, stories that I remembered as a child," Irani says over a chai latte on a Vancouver patio, his huge brown eyes sparkling as he recounts some of his childhood adventures.

"But there also comes a point when you have to leave all that and just imagine. And you become a storyteller."

Irani has also just written a story inspired by his grandmother, the florist's wife. His play *My Granny the Goldfish* is about to have its world premiere at Vancouver's Arts Club new Revue Theatre.

Irani was born in Mumbai (he still calls the city "Bombay," partly out of habit) and as a child spent a lot of time in Dahanu, about two hours away, where his family owned a farm.

Dahanu is the setting for the novel: a lush, idyllic greenbelt that holds dark secrets, and for some - in particular the oppressed farm workers, the tribal Warli people, who once owned the land - represents a hell in paradise.

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The novel focuses on two characters: Shapur Irani, who in 1920 travels by donkey with his father from Iran to India to escape persecution and by the 1940s owns a fruit farm and has a family; and Zairos Irani, his grandson, who in 2000 falls in love with one of his workers, a married Warli woman.

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The story is dark, the tragedy arising from the clash between the land-owning Zoroastrians and the Warlis who work for them. The alcoholism, abuse, suicide and even murder that populate the novel all result in some way from this power imbalance.

The two protagonists try to change things, one in the mid-40s and one in 2000, but they are thwarted.

"They're too powerless," says Irani. "It's impossible for one person to do anything, or even two or three people. It's what happens when hope meets hopelessness."

In writing *Dahanu Road*, Irani read extensively to learn about his own religion, Zoroastrianism, and the history of his own land. He returned to Dahanu repeatedly to interview family members and visit sites that would become the setting for his novel. He then illuminated the facts with his own childhood memories, weaving the information to create a story spanning three generations.



Anosh Irani: 'There also comes a point when you have to leave all that and just imagine. And you become a storyteller.'

The fictional and real-life Irani families share more than their generic Zoroastrian last name. Like Shapur, Anosh Irani's grandfather (not the florist; his other grandfather) travelled from Iran to Mumbai on foot. Like the family in the book, the author's family grew chickoo, a sweet fruit, in Dahanu; and Anosh Irani, like Zairos, has an eccentric motorcycle-riding cousin.

Two of the incidents in the book actually happened, but Irani won't reveal which ones. "Some of those people are still alive," he laughs.

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Irani moved to Canada in 1998, at the age of 24, to become a writer, on the advice of a family friend. His first order of business was reading. Although his grandfather had taken him every Sunday to the bookstore in the Taj Mahal hotel, little Anosh was more interested in comics than literature. It wasn't until he moved to Canada that he began to read novels in earnest.

"I started reading a lot when I came here because I realized if I want to write a novel, I'd better read one."

He also read plays. As an intern at Vancouver's Arts Club, Irani had access to artistic director Bill Millerd's extensive library. Irani got to work reading (and alphabetizing, Millerd says) the collection.

Irani studied at the University of British Columbia, his tuition paid by Zoroastrian philanthropists, and by his parents - who took out loans and sold a family car.

Living in a one-room apartment and struggling to cope with what seemed like an absurdly wet climate, Irani reminded himself repeatedly of his vow: He would not return to India, not even for a visit, until he had published a novel and produced a play.

"[There were] dark nights when I wanted to kill myself where it rains and you're just alone and you feel sick because you're missing [your family] and the actual physical place. But when I look back, maybe it was a good thing. Because it just made me write."

Irani's first novel, *The Cripple and His Talismans*, came out in 2004 to strong reviews. His second novel, *The Song of Kahunsha* was also well received - and then became a CBC Canada Reads pick.

His play *Bombay Black* won a DORA Award for outstanding new play. And he was nominated for the Governor General's Award for Drama for his anthology *The Bombay Plays: The Matka King & Bombay Black*.

In his third play, *My Granny the Goldfish*, Nico, a young Indian student in Vancouver, is hospitalized and his grandmother arrives from Mumbai to help. With action in India and Canada, this marks the first time Irani has set a story in his new home. Both places, he says, have been essential to him as a writer.

"Bombay and Dahanu have been the catalysts," he says. "But Vancouver is the canvas."

Dahanu Road is published by Doubleday Canada. *My Granny the Goldfish* begins previews at the Arts Club's Revue Theatre on Friday and opens April 21 (artsclub.com).