ENGLISH, AUGUST
AN INDIAN STORY
UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE

INTRODUCTION BY
AKHIL SHARMA
ENGLISH, AUGUST

UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE was born in 1959 in Patna, India. He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983 and at present works as a civil servant in Bombay. He writes novels on the side—when no one is looking, as it were. His family comprises one wife and two daughters. He enjoys diverse solitary occupations.

AKHIL SHARMA was born in Delhi, India, and grew up in Edison, New Jersey. His stories have appeared in The Best American Short Stories anthology, The O. Henry Award Winners anthology, The Atlantic Monthly, and The New Yorker. His novel, An Obedient Father, won the 2001 Pen Hemingway Prize.
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New York
SALMAN Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* was the first Indian novel to be widely perceived as a vital contribution to literature in English. Since that happened many Indian writers have gone on to become household names not only in England and America but all around the world: Arundhati Roy; Amitav Ghosh, with his historical novels; Vikram Seth, whose *A Suitable Boy* is a marvelous thousand-page-plus social comedy about arranged marriage. These famous authors, though, only begin to suggest the range of excellent English-language literature being produced in India.

To me, as an American writer of Indian ancestry and an avid reader of Indian fiction, one of the most striking things about so much contemporary Indian fiction is the way it presents itself as being representative—of the historical moment, of the social situation, of the cultural climate, of, above all, India. And perhaps it is this strange, but not unusual, idea that every Indian novel is, or should be, THE Indian novel, that Upamanyu Chatterjee had in mind when he gave the subtitle of “An Indian Story” to *English, August*, his extraordinary first book. A story and not the story, even if *English, August* tells a story that could only be Indian. Whether or not that was Chatterjee’s intention, there’s no doubt that his book stands apart from other Indian fiction by virtue of being so attentive to the particular. *English, August* is a story about a young man in a small Indian town, who has a very particular job in the
civil service. It’s a book about doing paperwork (or avoiding doing paperwork), going to teas with your boss’s wife, and overseeing village well-digging projects, as well as smoking pot, masturbating, and reading Marcus Aurelius. And if by the end of the book it turns out that *English, August* does indeed have much to say about India, that’s almost a happy accident. Because it’s the particularity of the book that makes it a work of art and gives such pleasure.

*English, August* does two things that are central to what novels have always done. It brings us news—about the way we live now; about the way others live now—and this is deeply satisfying. Almost as important, *English, August* offers us the pleasure of seeing what Upamanyu Chatterjee can do with language. Chatterjee is one of those rare writers who can be as funny as sad, as lyrical as plain. Let me quote a few passages:

Funny:

Kumar remained adamant about finishing the booze while watching the [pornographic] films. They [two men traveling for work] settled down in bed, with mosquito-repellent cream on their skins and incense in the air. Kumar was giggling with alcohol and the promise of titillation. The first shot of the first film showed a thin American black man with painted lips and white bikini, gyrating. He was cajoled into stripping by five white girls, demented with lust. They all licked their lips and one another until the black, with horrendous coyness, displayed his penis. Then the girls got to work. “See, see,” squeaked Kumar, trembling with adolescent excitement, “lucky black bastard . . .” Throughout the ogling he shifted in bed and intermittently muttered, “. . . this kind of thing never happens in India . . . Indian girls are too inhibited . . . bloody shame . . .”

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Sad:

[The protagonist, a government official, goes to a distant village to examine complaints of a well that has become silted.] He was relieved to see more people around the well. But something was odd, and he realized in a moment that it was the muteness of the village, there seemed to be no laughter and no conversation. The village did have children, but they were all busy. Women were tying them to ropes and letting them into the well. After a while the ropes were bringing up buckets. He went closer. The buckets were half-full of some thin mud. The only sounds were the echoing clang of the buckets against the walls of the well, and the tired sniveling of a few children on the side. He looked at them. Gashed elbows and knees from the well walls, one child had a wound like a flower on his forehead. The woman who had come to the office was looking at him in a kind of triumph. He looked into the well. He couldn't see any water, but the children were blurred wraiths forty feet below, scouring the mud of the well floor for water, like sinners serving some mythic punishment.

Lyrical:

Then the rains came to Madna... Suddenly a roar and a drumroll, as of a distant war... The world turned monochromatic... Cloud, building, tree, road, they all diffused into one blurred shade of slate.

I said to a friend, also an admirer of English, August, that the book was, of course, a coming-of-age story. My friend
countered, not at all, it was a slacker novel. Both descriptions are in fact true.

We meet Chatterjee’s hero, Agastya Sen, at night in a car. He is driving down an empty street in New Delhi with a friend who is getting ready to roll another joint. Much is signaled and set up by this brief scene. To be a young man driving a car in India implies meaningful wealth, while the marijuana suggests rebelliousness and lassitude at the same time. These are children of privilege, young city sophisticates. We soon learn, however, that Agastya is going to be leaving Delhi: he has been accepted into the Indian Administrative Service, or IAS, about which he has very mixed feelings, and will have to start living in the sticks.

The town Agastya soon finds himself in is Madna, and Upamanyu Chatterjee’s portrait of it is one of the great imaginative achievements of recent Indian literature. Probably American readers will have never seen a small town quite like this, one that by American standards would hardly qualify as small. The population could easily be in the high tens of thousands or more; the congestion and racket more akin to that of an American city. Its remoteness from the rest of the world, its claustrophobic self-containment, cannot be exaggerated.

Readers of this book will come to know Madna intimately. There is the dust, of course, which seems present in most books about India, but there is also the badly constructed statue of Mahatma Gandhi that is common to many town squares (often the statue is sculpted so blockily that Gandhi looks like a muscle-bound wrestler with glasses and a shaved head). The bedraggled country club that Chatterjee introduces us to is usually the social center of the town elite, a place where everyone seems aware of very fine distinctions in status. There is this and there are the local characters: the town doctor, the journalist who prints gossip, the police chief who loves pornography. Agastya is more at a loss in Madna than he ever imagined he’d
be, and he soon finds himself devoting much of his time to hunting for wild marijuana plants.

Agastya is one of the funniest characters in Indian fiction and one of the saddest. His mother died when he was a child, which may have helped to make him the deeply lonely person he is. Part of the reason that he cannot bear Madna is that his isolation there makes that loneliness unignorable. Talking to colleagues, Agastya even invents a wife for himself, and this stupid, conceivably self-destructive falsehood is not just pointless but poignant. Because Agastya’s life is littered with missing people: the dead mother, but also an absent father (off in Bengal, being the governor, it turns out; the father communicates with Agastya through letters that are both aloof and disappointed), a possible girlfriend gone off to graduate school in America, and a Hindu saint. Unsettled and restless in Delhi, Agastya is almost paralyzed with misery in Madna, where his colleagues repel him as grotesque, while such friends as he finds there strike him as even more to be pitied than himself. Because of all this, and for all his wisecracks, the question Agastya is struggling to put to himself is, Why am I so unhappy?

The way the question is raised and the way it is resolved connect *English, August* to the Western coming-of-age novel (it has been described as India’s *Catcher in the Rye*) while also marking it as distinctively Indian. The sense of inauthenticity Agastya suffers from feels very Western (so much so that one might be tempted to dismiss it for a while as a citified affectation). This inauthenticity, by the way, is what is captured by the novel’s somewhat puzzling title. Agastya is an old-fashioned kind of name—it comes from a mythological Hindu guru—which is why Agastya’s friends have taken the liberty of Englishifying it into August, or even, going a step further, simply calling him English. Agastya, in short, seems un-Indian to them, and to himself as well at times. That hardly makes him English, though, as he is perfectly aware. Inauthentically
Indian, inauthentically Western: in Madna this crisis of identity comes to a head.

What feels oddly and specifically Indian to me is the resolution of the crisis. The resolution is not the breaking away that Agastya has been contemplating all along, and it’s not a reconciliation. It’s not a renunciation either. It’s not even exactly a decision. In any case, Agastya does not surrender his independence or his native wit. But there is a change, an acceptance, that the reader cannot miss. An acceptance of necessity by virtue of which Agastya is set free.

There’s an Indian saying that if you want to keep a secret you should put it in a book. It’s all the more amazing, then, that when English, August was first published in India in 1988 it was an enormous best seller.

The reason English, August was such a popular success probably has to do with the Indian Administrative Service. In India to belong to the IAS is a little like being a movie star. Each year approximately two million people take the exam for eighty entry-level IAS positions. One of the lowest rungs of the IAS is district collector. Agastya is an assistant to a collector, though it is assumed that in time he will become one himself. A district is the equivalent of an American county, and the district collector runs or has great influence over the district’s judicial, police, and administrative functions. The IAS is considered to be honest for the most part, though there is a joke that if you become an IAS officer you can earn so much money through corruption that your family will have enough to eat for seven generations.

The first time I read English, August, I was living in a small town in India and working with various IAS officers. The book was so spot-on that it didn’t surprise me in the least that many
of them complained about it. I read the book over and over and found comfort in Chatterjee’s observations of the world I was living in, the sound of lizards plopping off the ceiling and falling to the floor, the squabbling among adults as to who gets to sit in the front passenger seat.

Chatterjee has followed *English, August* with three further novels (*The Last Burden*, which was published in 1993, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* in 2000, and *Weight Loss* in 2006) while continuing to pursue his career in the civil service. A character in *English, August* talks about how each language has a “tang” and that it is hard to translate this very specific flavor. That, of course, is true of the work of our best writers as well. Upamanyu Chatterjee has his own “tang” and it is like nobody else’s.

—AKHIL SHARMA
To my parents
THROUGH the windshield they watched the wide silent road, so well-lit and dead. New Delhi, one in the morning, a stray dog flashed across the road, sensing prey. “So when shall we meet again?” asked Dhrubo for the eighth time in one hour. Not that parting was too agonizing and that he couldn't bear to leave the car, but that marijuana caused acute lethargy.

“Uh...” said Agastya and paused, for the same reason. Dhrubo put the day's forty-third cigarette to his lips and seemed to take very long to find his matchbox. His languorous attempts to light a match became frenzied before he succeeded. Watching him Agastya laughed silently.

Dhrubo exhaled richly out of the window, and said, “I’ve a feeling, August, you’re going to get hazaar fucked in Madna.” Agastya had just joined the Indian Administrative Service and was going for a year's training in district administration to a small district town called Madna.

“Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazaar fucked. Urdu and American,” Agastya laughed, “a thousand fucked, really fucked. I’m sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease.” The slurred sounds of the comfortable tiredness of intoxication, “‘You look hazaar fucked, Marma-duke dear.’ ‘Yes Dorothea, I’m afraid I do feel hazaar fucked’—see, doesn’t work. And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya. When I say our accents, I, of course, exclude yours, which is unique in its fucked mongrelness—you
even say ‘Have a nice day’ to those horny women at your telephones when you pass by with your briefcase, and when you agree with your horrendous boss, which is all the time, you say ‘yeah, great’ and ‘uh-uh.’”

“Don’t talk shit,” Dhrubo said and then added in Bengali, “You’re hurt about your mother tongue,” and started laughing, an exhilarated volley. That was a ten-year-old joke from their school-days in Darjeeling, when they had been envious of some of the Anglo-Indian boys who spoke and behaved differently, and did alarmingly badly in exams and didn’t seem to mind, they were the ones who were always with the Tibetan girls and claimed to know all about sex. On an early summer afternoon, in the small football field among the hills, with an immaculate sky and the cakelike white-and-brownness of Kanchanjunga, Agastya and Prashant had been watching (Agastya disliked football and Prashant disliked games) the usual showing off with the ball. Shouts in the air from the Anglos (which increased whenever any Tibetan female groups passed the field, echoing like a distant memory, “Pass it here, men!” “This way, men!” “You can’t shoot, your foot’s made of turd or what men!” (Agastya had never heard any Anglo say “man”). He and Prashant had been lazily cynical about those who shouted the most and whose faces also contorted with a secret panic in the rare moments when the ball did reach them. Then some Tibetan girls had come together and taken out a fucking guitar. “The Tibs and the Anglos always have guitars,” Prashant had said. Football had been abandoned. Then laughter and twanging. “It’s the colour of the Anglo and Tib thighs,” Prashant had said, “not like us.” Agastya’s envy had then blurted out, he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent. From that day his friends had more new names for him, he became the school’s “last Englishman,” or just “hey English” (his friends meant “hey Anglo” but didn’t dare), and sometimes even “hello
Mother Tongue”—illogical and whimsical, but winsome choices, like most names selected by contemporaries. And like most names, they had paled with the passage of time and place, all but August, but they yet retained with them the knack of bobbing up out of some abyss on the unexpected occasion, and nudging a chunk or two of his past.

A truck roared by, shattering the dark. “Out there in Madna quite a few people are going to ask you what you’re doing in the Administrative Service. Because you don’t look the role. You look like a porn film actor, thin and kinky, the kind who wears a bra. And a bureaucrat ought to be soft and cleanshaven, bespectacled, and if a Tamil Brahmin, given to rapid quoting of rules. I really think you’re going to get hazaar fucked.”

“I’d much rather act in a porn film than be a bureaucrat. But I suppose one has to live.”

“Let’s smoke a last one, shall we,” said Dhrubo, picking up the polythene bag from the car seat. “In Yale a Ph.D wasn’t a joke. It meant something. It was significant. Students thought before they enrolled. But here in Delhi, all over India,” Dhrubo threw some loose tobacco out of the window, “education is bidding time, a meaningless accumulation of degrees, BA, MA, then an M.Phil. while you join the millions in trying your luck at the Civil Services exam. So many people every year seem to find government service so interesting,” he paused to scratch his elbow, “I wonder how many people think about where their education is leading them.”

“Yet you returned from Yale,” Agastya yawned.

“But mine is not the typical Indian story. That ends with the Indian living somewhere in the First World, comfortably or uncomfortably. Or perhaps coming back to join the Indian Administrative Service, if lucky.”

“You’re wrong about education, though. Most must be like me, with no special aptitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not even really thinking. Try your luck with
everything, something hopefully will click. There aren't unlimited opportunities in the world.”

They smoked. Dhrubo leaned forward to drop loose tobacco from his shirt. “Madna was the hottest place in India last year, wasn’t it. It will be another world, completely different. Should be quite educative.” Dhrubo handed the smoke to Agastya. “Excellent stuff. What’ll you do for sex and marijuana in Madna?”