



Read on . . .

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I grew up an army daughter, surrounded by the officers and soldiers of the Gorkha battalion that my father went on to command. This is where I first formed a deep and abiding respect for the men and women in uniform everywhere who selflessly serve their countries, prepared to make the 'ultimate sacrifice' if need be. *Good Hope Road* was born of a desire to pay homage.

In initial concept, the story began in the Sixties, weaving back and forth between the Korean and Vietnam wars. As I began the research process, however, I stumbled upon an account of the Bonus March, a startling episode of history and one with echoes in the present. Including this in the narrative would mean a shifting of time periods, to World War I and the years leading up to World War II. As I started to dig around for American volunteers at the outset of the Great War, I discovered a number of highly educated young men from privileged backgrounds who'd signed up with the French Foreign Legion starting in 1914, filled with noble ideals and determined to fight the good fight in this, the war to end all wars. There were African American volunteers too – Bob Scanlon, the boxer, and Eugene Bullard, who went on to become the first African American military pilot. It is all of their experiences that form the collective backdrop of James and Obadaiah's stories.

In terms of canvas, while the larger brushstrokes are those of the war, the details lie in the special kinship of the battlefield, in the unlikely friendship that grows between the two men. And

then, in the aftermath of the war, the backdrop shifts partly to the Bonus March, all the while maintaining the focus on James, now a decorated veteran still haunted by his experiences, and his son, Jim, who struggles to connect with his father. I hesitated a long while with post-war James, trying to get inside his head. It was the image of the Claude mirror that I went back to over and over. It is a metaphor for his altered self, his pale, leached reflection revealing the extent of the damage that the war has wrought.

While *Good Hope Road* is a work of fiction, it sits upon the foundation of much that actually occurred. David King, the brothers Paul and Kiffin Rockwell, John Bowe, the poet Alan Seeger, Henry Farnsworth, Edmond Genet and Victor Chapman are but some of the many American volunteers who left behind letters, diaries and memoirs detailing their time with the Legion. I am forever in their debt. In reading David King's memoir in particular, there was a strange feeling of things coming full circle. After the war, King actually moved to India for a while. Here I was, nearly a hundred years later, having made the reverse journey, from India to New York, and now reliving his days in the Legion.

It was while researching the Bonus March of 1932 that I first happened upon the story of Joe Angelo. While I've imagined his camaraderie with Mike Connor, a fictitious character, and indeed, all the details of his stay at the Anacostia camps, the accounts of his relationship with General Patton are based on reported facts. As for the March itself, I drew much from Paul Dickson and Thomas Allen's painstakingly detailed work, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic*. The New York Public Library proved, as always, to be another valuable resource. An especially treasured find was a collection of copies of the *BEF News*, the newspaper that was published by the Bonus Marchers. Their pages, fragile, tattered and falling to pieces, but bringing the

Anacostia camps to vivid life in accounts of a certain Rooster Curtis and the daily BEF cartoons.

Last, but not least, the fiery Major General Smedley Butler was cause for inspiration. His 'War is a Racket', extracts of which are quoted in *Good Hope Road*, dates back to 1933. Shamefully, over eighty years later, and in the aftermath of Iraq, Afghanistan, Kargil and more, his words still hold true. Our soldiers set off to war much fêted and praised, and frequently under the dazzle of media spotlights. When they return however, all too often it is to societies eager to forget, and ill-equipped to offer them adequate rehabilitation support.

We've made strides in the right direction, but we need to do so much more. Beginning, perhaps, with a better understanding, an improved accounting of the true costs of war. One that takes into consideration not merely the lost lives and damaged limbs, but the hidden internal scars borne by all too many of those who do make it home. One that assesses the impact not only on our soldiers but on the *families* of those who serve.

Good Hope Road is an attempt, however humble, to explore some of these themes.



IN CONVERSATION WITH SARITA MANDANNA

Q: *Good Hope Road* is a work of fiction that deals with real events in twentieth-century history. What came first for you, an interest in the Bonus March and an awareness that you would like to write about it, or a sense of the characters, of the Major and Obadaiah and their stories?

A: The first seeds to implant were those of the Major and Obadaiah – I began thinking of two men of very different backgrounds and motivations, and what the long years of war might do to them and their friendship. As for the setting, when I set out researching *Good Hope Road*, I wanted to place much of the story in the 1960s, specifically the years between the Korean and Vietnam wars in the US. I was giddy at the prospect of exploring the era – the music! the clothes! – when I happened upon a throwaway account of the Bonus March of 1932. I couldn't believe what I was reading. That was the turning point: I had to include the Bonus March in the narrative. This in turn meant shifting the canvas of the novel to an earlier period, to that of the Great War and the years afterward that led to World War Two.

Q: How did you create Obadaiah's voice?

A: Obadaiah Nelson popped into my head fully formed – I can close my eyes and see him. I knew how he would react to situations, I just knew what he would think, he arrived on the page brandishing his particular perspective of wisecracking street smarts. What I worked on though, was how he said what he did. It quite terrified me at the outset, to be honest. I was very aware of being both the wrong race and the wrong gender, and I spent a great deal of time trying to make his voice as authentic as I was able, to capture the particular lilt and syntax of it without reducing it to caricature, or according him any less than his due. I studied African American Vernacular English (AAVE) grammar, read novels, both from the turn of the century and later, that centred around African American characters, consulted with a widely respected professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania and even watched reality television for current usage of AAVE, trying to capture the rhythm and flow of his dialogue.

Then, there were the other aspects of Obadaiah's character. His feel for music, for instance. Again, it was books that helped – Sidney Bechet's detailed, lyrical memoir for instance. I watched documentaries, read news clippings, sourced copies of songs that African American soldiers sang during the Great War and listened to grainy recordings on YouTube. I visited New Orleans and Paris (go ahead, twist my arm) and pored over old photographs. The more I understood his fictional background, the better equipped I'd be to act as his spokesperson. I don't know if I got him completely right, but hope I came close. This much I do know: Obadaiah Nelson is someone who will stay with me a very long while.

Q: How much research did you do before starting to write the novel? Did you find some of the scenes difficult to write, knowing that so many soldiers lost their lives during the war and that those who did return were traumatised by their experiences?

A: There was a significant amount of research that went into *Good Hope Road*, primarily because the story is woven against a backdrop of actual events. If you don't get the details correct, or at least the vast majority of them, the narrative will never sit quite right. Take the sections set in the French Foreign Legion, for instance. I tried to ensure that Obadaiah and the Major would be in the very sections of the Front that the French Foreign Legion would have been in during the time. The uniforms, the food, the bonhomie – all these came from multiple memoirs and personal accounts left from the war years. Gaillard is an amalgam of the Legionnaires I came across in these accounts. There was so much I wanted to include but couldn't for lack of space. For instance, Gaillard could balance an egg on its end. He knew to sing 'La Marseillaise' backwards and a hundred and forty ways to tie a knot . . .

All of the war scenes were difficult to write. Not just because of the suffering of so many, but also how do you really know what these men went through when you've not experienced the horror of combat first hand? How then do you do their stories justice? I'd play the sounds of shells on multiple devices, amplifying them in an attempt to mimic the sounds of incessant shelling. I stood out in the snow in summer clothes, and extrapolated the emotional disassociation caused by extreme sleep deprivation to the dissonance these men under constant duress must have experienced. None of what I did can ever begin to approach what these men suffered, but it was a starting point.

Finally, some of the lighter aspects of research involved the

sections of *Good Hope Road* set in the 1930s and early 1940s, other than the Bonus March, of course. The fascination with aviation at the time, the magic of Broadway, the beautiful clothes and haberdashery – I spent a good many evenings merrily going down rabbit hole after rabbit hole on the web, all in the name of research.

Q: The narrative strands interweave between France in the First World War and America in the 1930s. How difficult was it to create a balance between the two threads?

A: It was difficult and took some fiddling with, because of the difference in tone, context as well as setting, moving as the story does between the trenches of Europe and bucolic, verdant Vermont. After some experimentation, I settled upon a linear process, writing chunks of the sections set in the Great War, and then following those up with a sizable amount of the other portion of the story. The process of interweaving them came at the end. All the individual chapters were laid out on the carpet in the bedroom and then I began arranging and rearranging them in an order that switched between the two periods while still maintaining narrative flow. This was tweaked once more when my editor, the lovely Kirsty Dunseath, had a go at the draft, and then we were done.

Q: Could you tell us a little about your daily writing life? Where and when do you write? Do you have any writing rituals?

A: I wrote most of *Good Hope Road* as a full-time writer. This was different than when I worked on my debut novel, *Tiger*

Hills – that was done in fits and bursts of time, mostly at night. With *Good Hope Road*, I took a couple of years off to write in earnest. For the first time in my adult life, I was home during the day. I'd begin writing around 7.30 a.m. at the dining table, with a view of the ivy-covered brick Victorian next door. There were breaks for (a lot of) food, working out (see note on food) and email. I tried to restrict email to once or twice a day, but failed miserably with that. Eventually, I found it easier to just keep email open so I knew what was coming in. I would answer when I was done with what I was working on. I'd keep writing until 7.30 p.m. or if the writing was going well, until it wasn't. If the writing wasn't going well – and I had a good many days of writer's block – then I'd spend the hours researching. After I went back to a full-time job during the day, I completed *Good Hope Road* late at night and on the weekends (with even more breaks for food).

I need to be absolutely alone when I write. It doesn't matter where, as long as I'm alone. I was sentimental about starting and finishing *Good Hope Road* on the same laptop. It was an old one to begin with, and during the course of the writing, the battery died, the power cord had to be replaced and the cover came unhinged. Still, that was the only laptop I would write on, my old, rickety faithful, all the way to the end.

Q: Who are your favourite writers and whose work inspires your own?

A: There are so many writers I admire, but there are a few that especially resonated as I wrote *Good Hope Road*. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy has been an epiphany of sorts for me. I read it in my twenties and that was my first exposure to the

Great War. It has stuck with me ever since. So too, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*, especially for the heart-rending bonds he describes between the soldiers at the Front. Jim Harrison, for the strength and beauty of his words. I'd dip into his novels as I wrote, seeking a male perspective, a brawnier rendering of phrase and sentence. Finally, Michael Ondaatje, especially *In the Skin of a Lion*. Part poetry, part prose, I browsed through it often, taking in afresh the luminosity of his work.

Q: What's next? Are you working on a new novel?

A: I'm beginning to ponder one. There is this period between finishing a novel and starting the next that for me is like a big gulp of fresh air. You are living in the real world once more, without fictional people whispering in your head. This past year after finishing *Good Hope Road* has been exactly that, and more. Gradually though, I feel something stirring once again. Something is brewing inside, what exactly, I don't yet know.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What drives James Stonebridge to sign up with the French Foreign Legion, and how do his beliefs change as the war progresses?
- In many ways, the friendship between James and Obadaiah is an unlikely one. Discuss the similarities and differences between the men and how they are able to support each other through the conflict.
- How important are memories in the novel?
- We experience the trenches through Obadaiah's account and the Major's journal entries. How far do their views of war differ, and do you feel that one voice affects you more than the other? If so, why?
- What does the Major see when he stares into the Claude mirror, and what significance does the mirror hold in the novel overall?
- There are a number of songs in *Good Hope Road*. What effect do they have on the characters?
- Were you aware of the Bonus Army and the protests in Anacostia in 1932 before reading *Good Hope Road*? What do

you think about the way in which veterans of the First World War were treated in America? Compare this treatment with the reception soldiers returning from war receive today.

~ How does Sarita Mandanna portray the emotional and psychological damage of war and its effects on ordinary men and their families?

~ *'Men eating, walking, marching together with little thought of race or background, recognising a deeper fraternity in all they had gone through together, in the scars, both exposed and hidden, that they bore.'*

Does anything surprise you about the way in which race is presented in 1930s America?

~ Trace Jim and Madeleine's love story through the novel. How does Madeleine help Jim to understand his father? What effect does the Major's journal have on Madeleine at the end of the novel?



IF YOU ENJOYED *GOOD HOPE ROAD*,
YOU MIGHT LIKE TO TRY . . .

A Place Called Winter by Patrick Gale

Regeneration by Pat Barker

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

The Kindness of Enemies by Leila Aboulela

A God in Ruins by Kate Atkinson

Summertime by Vanessa Lafaye

The Narrow Road to the Deep North by Richard Flanagan

Atonement by Ian McEwan

The Help by Kathryn Stockett

Testament of Youth by Vera Brittain

The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje

Goodbye to All That by Robert Graves

HAVE YOU READ *TIGER HILLS*?

'She knew her child was special, had known from the very day of her birth, the day of the herons ...'

1878, Southern India. As the first girl born into the family for over sixty years, beautiful, spirited Devi is adored by everyone. And when she befriends Devanna, a gifted young boy whose mother died in tragic circumstances, the two swiftly become inseparable.

Their futures seem inevitably linked until one night Devi meets 'the tiger killer' – and makes a decision that has heartbreaking consequences for generations to come ...

'Lavish ... Mandanna's fusion of history and romance makes for an aromatic blend' *Independent*

'An epic and extraordinary debut from an astonishing new talent' *Daily Express*



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