Memoir
October 2020
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The Girl in the Green Jumper: A Memoir
by Renske Mann

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About the Book

In 1959, Renske van Slooten, 20, fell in love with Cyril Mann (1911-1980), a penurious, volatile, unhappy London artist, who was more than twice her age. His paintings convinced the Dutch-Indonesian girl that she had discovered a genius.

She promised to dedicate her life to him as muse, model and money earner. Their struggles quickly threatened to overwhelm them. But today, with growing public recognition of his contribution to figurative art, she looks back with gratitude at their strange, creative partnership.

Renske, Cyril Mann (1963)

HOW IT BEGAN…. by Renske Mann

My memoir was born two years ago, almost by accident.

I had been invited to give a lecture to members of the Lightbox Museum in Woking, the first municipal art gallery to mount a retrospective exhibition of paintings and sculpture by my late husband, the London artist Cyril Mann (1911-1980).
Sixty years after we met and forty years since his death, how much would I remember of our life together, I wondered?

As an aide memoire, I began posting daily ‘vignettes’ on Facebook, telling friends on my own Timeline how and why Cyril’s pictures had evolved from the 1920s onwards. My illustrated posts explained how an artist’s output can be shaped by circumstances.

The response was immediate and gratifying: my stories and chosen paintings sparked a deep interest from followers, who would normally spurn a difficult-to-understand art book, Friends urged me to write a memoir, describing what life with an artist was really like.

As his widow and muse for the last 20 crucial years of his life, I’m in a unique position to explain his artistic development and tell our story: how we met – me barely turned 20, and him 28 years my senior. What made me fall for such an old man? Truth be told, to this day, I don’t know.

He was gifted, bolshie and his own worst enemy. Our relationship was one of ‘unequals’: I venerated him, never questioning that our lives would be marred by poverty, hardships and sacrifice so that Cyril could paint without financial worries, when he gave up his part-time teaching job.

Cyril and Renske at Bevin Court

As I moved into Bevin Court – the Islington Council block with his commemorative plaque – our relationship scandalised everyone: from friends and colleagues to the Dutch ambassador, who alerted my horrified, disapproving parents that I was in grave moral danger. It was 1960: I was cohabiting with a still-married man in a council flat. He and his first wife had never bothered to divorce.

When Cyril first showed me his paintings, I was convinced that I had discovered a genius. In my eyes he was “the British Van Gogh”. I promised to support him as his model and muse. I pledged to dedicate my life to him and end his financial worries. I did not know that Cyril was ill, mentally as well as physically. Soon after we met, he was diagnosed with manic depression and had a nervous breakdown. He was sectioned and our life descended into chaos. Despite the horrors of it all, I believed love would conquer all. I was undeterred.

Now aged 81, I want people to know what it was really like, living with an unstable genius, a maverick artist who dreamt of revitalising figurative art. After sixty years, I believe in him, perhaps more than ever before. The difference today is that thanks to Social Media, thousands of Facebook followers all over the world now agree with me and are asking me to write my memoir. They are astounded by Cyril’s ground-breaking originality and the beauty of his paintings. His time has come at last.

My heartfelt thanks to my editors:

Liz Hodgkinson, author and journalist, who was the first to see the potential of my Facebook vignettes and helped to turn disparate passages into a book format.

Mark Hudson, prize-winning author and art critic, who helped me with much of the art contents and wrote the introduction.
And to Dr Robert Travers and his son, Matthew Travers, of Piano Nobile Fine Paintings, the art gallery that has looked after the Cyril Mann estate for 25 years.

CYRIL MANN (1911-1980)

Cyril Mann is widely considered a leading British figurative artist of the 20th Century, yet fame eluded him in his lifetime. He deliberately shunned his art-world peers, promising one day to revitalise figurative art by doing the impossible: ‘pouring new wine into old bottles’.

Rebellious and contrary, he refused to follow any recognised style or school of painting. He shunned the company of his peers, who abandoned figuration and had switched to American-inspired abstraction. Cyril was his own worst enemy. Frustrated, he quarrelled with gallery owners, cognoscenti and anyone who could have helped him establish his reputation. In one respect, he never wavered: he wanted people to ‘see nature in a new way’, unique to him, just as his predecessors, Vincent van Gogh, Cezanne and JMW Turner had done.

“The last word on realism has not and never will be said,” he insisted. “I’ll build on the legacy of the Greats, but in my own way. An artist who wants to follow an ‘ism’ or be part of a group isn’t worth his salt.”

From his earliest paintings before the war, Cyril often embodied the sun itself with the enhancing and disintegrating dazzling light effects taking precedence over subject matter.

After six years’ War service, Mann returned to London in 1946, settling with his first wife, Mary and little daughter, Sylvia, in the war-ravaged area, later redeveloped as the Barbican. He was fascinated by the grim London bombsites all around him. As an artist, he was virtually unique in recording the city’s war damage. While critically acclaimed, these small, apocalyptic renderings proved hard to sell. His grim vision reflected an increasingly erratic and depressive nature. In 1960, he was diagnosed as bi-polar, struggling with mental breakdowns for the rest of his life.

An early admirer, Colonel Beddington of the famous Wildenstein Gallery, recognised the importance of Cyril’s post-war London scenes. He included them in a prestigious exhibition in 1948, called “Artists of Fame & Promise”. It was not a commercial success. Cyril then quarrelled with the one man who could have put him on the map as an artist.

Cyril Mann circa 1950 before he met Renske

In the early 1950s, the Manns moved into a gloomy apartment above a gold-bullion storage facility. For security, its windows were barred, obstructing daylight. From 1952 to 1955, the darkness forced Cyril to paint in electric light. This caused him to focus on shadow formations, expressed in strong line and heightened colour. Against the odds, it was one of the most creative, admired and influential periods of Cyril’s artistic trajectory.

His small still life pictures with their formalised shadows appealed to the influential art dealer, Erica Brausen of Mayfair’s Hanover Gallery. She had earlier discovered Francis Bacon. She offered Cyril a one-man show, but he needed many more paintings to fill her gallery.

It was not to be. In 1956, Cyril – now separated from Mary and his teenage daughter – was rehoused by Islington Council on the seventh floor of Bevin Court, where sunlight flooded through his unobstructed Crittall Windows. He abandoned his shadow paintings, newly inspired by the beautiful daylight in his tiny new flat, where his second wife, Renske, joined him four
years later. According to his biographer, author and Times art critic, John Russell Taylor, “light to him was such a physical presence that it was almost tangible…”

At Bevin Court, Cyril painted direct, without preliminary sketches. Nudes, flowers, portraits, metallic objects, everything took second place to his vision of the enhancing and disintegrating effects of sunlight.

Sunlit Nude in Green Jacket, 1963, oil on canvas by Cyril Mann (1911-1980)

“One day, people will admire my work for breaking new ground in figurative art,” he predicted. “They will admire me for conveying light as a moving, living force, as not even Turner had done before.”

Today, many of Britain’s favourite artists are figurative, including Bacon, Freud, Hodgkin and Hockney to name but a few. The tide has turned at last as people rediscover the beauty of nature in art. The time has come for Cyril Mann, too, to take his place among ‘the British Greats’.

Renske Mann: From Artist’s Muse to Gallery Director:

Renske Mann (nee Van Slooten) was born in the Dutch East Indies in 1939. Her family’s prosperous lifestyle ended abruptly in 1942, when occupying Japanese forces took her father prisoner to work on the Burma Railway for three years.

Dutch rule ended in 1949 when the colony was renamed Indonesia. This caused a second upheaval to the Van Slootens. Aged 10, Renske and her family were expelled by the first President, Dr Sukarno.

They travelled in troop ships to the ‘Mother Country’, which few of the 350,000 Dutch-Indonesians had ever visited. Destitute, the refugees arrived to a hostile reception in the Netherlands, where there were serious food, labour, and housing shortages after German occupation in WW2. Renske had missed vital years of education. She found it hard to settle in Holland. She left school at 15 with O-levels and a shorthand-typing certificate. Working in a typing pool, she longed to escape the repressive atmosphere.

Aged 20, Renske arrived in London to work as bilingual secretary for a Dutch company. A few months later she met Cyril Mann, a gifted unsuccessful artist who at 48, was 28 years her senior. They married on September 1, 1959, a week after Renske’s 21st birthday, when she no longer needed her horrified parents’ consent.

After sixty years, Renske still doesn’t know why she fell immediately in love and what had attracted her to Cyril. When he showed her his paintings, she was convinced that ‘she had discovered the British Van Gogh’. With little art knowledge, Renske offered to be Cyril’s model, muse and financial support. She would help him for the next 20 years.

She persuaded him to give up part-time teaching and concentrate full-time on painting, not realising that Cyril was physically and mentally ill. After a severe nervous breakdown, he was diagnosed as bi-polar.

Renske knew that she had to work hard to make a success of a career that would provide not only for Cyril and herself, but their daughter Amanda, born in 1968, when he was 57. With her encouragement, she filled her educational gaps by passing A-levels and taking an Open
University degree. Her career in PR went from strength to strength, as she was appointed a director of Scholl, the international footcare-to-footwear company.

Following Cyril’s death, Renske and her current partner, journalist Marion Mathews, converted a derelict dairy in the then not-so-smart Holland Park into an art gallery. Operating as a charity, she and Marion ran the Gallery on a charitable basis for 10 years, until 1993, helping unknown, but gifted artists like Cyril to achieve that first difficult step on the exhibition ladder.

Now aged 81, Renske continues to write articles and give talks on Cyril’s paintings, using skills learned in PR but this time on social media, attracting thousands of followers and admirers worldwide.

Marketing support – The Piano Nobile Gallery and the Cyril Mann Estate:

To summarise the Piano Nobile Gallery’s (under Director Dr Robert Travers) input to the publication:

· The Gallery will hold an exhibition of Cyril Mann’s work in the gallery to coincide with the launch of the book and arrange to tour this exhibition to two or three museum venues in the UK, including the Courtauld Institute on Vernon Square. This happens to be directly adjacent to Bevin Court on which is mounted the memorial plaque in memory of Cyril and Renske’s time living and working in the building. The Gallery will also look into the possibility of the exhibition and accompanying book launch travelling to an appropriate museum in the Netherlands.

· The exhibition and book will also be promoted through the gallery’s extensive client base for the artist. The Gallery has handled and sold Cyril Mann’s work for over 25 years to private clients and institutions around the world and the Gallery’s Director Dr Robert Travers would expect a good take up of the book from all those who own work by the artist.

· The Gallery will commit to pre-buying a specified number of copies, at a suitably discounted price, from the publisher.

· The Gallery would be prepared to hire an independent publicist/PR firm, depending on the publisher’s own facility to promote and market the book.

Building a social media platform to support the book:

Renske has been steadily building up a huge following for Cyril Mann’s paintings with her Facebook posts about him and her life with him across 29 specialist groups, some public and some private.
Love and Malaria
by Laura Darby

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About the Book

Deep in the forests of Congo, a country that remains so primitive even in the 21st century that travel and communication within it is a shocking challenge for the urban bred, a team of young, passionate conservationists are holding fort against not just the forces of nature but also human greed and corruption. When a young Laura arrived in Congo, eager to take care of chimp babies that had been torn apart from their mothers, she had no clue she would find herself on a long, tough road where the milestones read Greed Junction, Corruptionville and Cruel Village. Baby chimpanzees are regularly snatched away from their mothers and sold for a pittance. Older chimpanzees are captured for bushmeat that is relished by locals. And all this despite the fact that chimps are a protected species. While government officials look the other way or warm their pockets with bribes, Laura finds herself battling not just an insouciant government machinery, but also goons and malaria.

The only sliver of light on this often dark horizon is Adam – her partner. Serene, patient and indefatigable, Adam quits his job to accompany Laura into the unknown. It’s a year of surprises and discovery as the two spend time together, unaware of the many moments – both tragic and ecstatic – they would be sharing. As Laura ventures forth - a lone force in a frighteningly alienated landscape - she discovers not just the horrors of malaria, but also the stupendous power of love.

In Love and Malaria, her memoir about some of her initial years as a young conservationist in Kenya and Congo, Laura’s memories bring alive the frustration, the helplessness and the despair of a woman battling against a depraved and crumbling system. But these are also memories of caring for and loving baby chimps that are so similar to human babies. Of whipping up Thanksgiving dinners in the middle of Aketi, a remote village in the bowels of Congo, feasting on rice, fumbwa, maboke and maize and treating themselves to cool Fantas. Memories of nursing each other back to life and health as they lie burning under the noxious influence of Congolese mosquitoes. Memories of loving Adam deeply, unquestioningly and of receiving that adoration back. Of Hollywood-ish escapes in helicopters with the bad guys snapping at their
heels like rabid dogs. Of learning they had triumphed in their mission of securing the life and safety of their precious charges – the chimps. Often sad, sometimes funny and always compelling *Love and Malaria* is not just a memoir – it is a gentle yet compelling reminder of what determination and love can achieve.

**About the Author**

Laura Darby is a primatologist, techie, fervent conservationist, enthusiastic nerd and nerd enthusiast. She lives in Maryland with her husband, a pair of twin boys and her cats and continues to work to protect great apes.
Sister Nature
by Jess de Boer

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About the Book

The challenge of our generation is regeneration - and this is that story. *Sister Nature* follows the real life adventures of a Kenyan beekeeper-turned-farmer on a mission to counteract the gloom that clutters so much of today’s conversation concerned with the future of our planet - and the misapprehension of young people as bearers of such responsibility. From honey hunting in the last remaining pockets of rainforest in southern Ethiopia to planting gardens in the depths of Kenya’s largest slum, this story culminates in the arid lands of Northern Kenya where a mighty restoration project has begun to connect the people with the dust beneath their feet. This book embraces the concept of “The problem is the solution” and charters a fresh course for humanity away from a system fueled by excessive consumption and into the realms of epic re-design.

This is an adventure into restorative action. Confronting the challenges of our stagnant education systems, unsustainable food production techniques and the growing disconnect of our youth, merging fact and science with hard won wisdom in an easy to read tale of proactivity - and hope. It is a summoning call to get up off our chairs and out into the natural world where we must set our minds and hands to shaping our future that, by its very definition, remains wide open to interpretation.

This is an invitation to view the world through a different set of goggles.

About the Author

Jess de Boer is a farmer, beekeeper and lifelong student of the soil. Born and raised in Kenya, she is dedicated to promoting and producing sensible, ethical practices in agricultural and production landscapes. Jess’ first book ELEPHANT AND THE BEES was published by Jacaranda Books in London.
Annabel Mehta has fascinating stories to tell – all of them unusual, one of them absolutely unique…

More than fifty years ago, Annabel – then Lancaster – an upper-middle-class young Englishwoman met an and fell in love with an Indian student in London. When he left to return to his home country, Annabel left behind Swinging Sixties England to marry him and start family life in Bombay. Today, after years of work dedicated to improving the lives of the inhabitants of some of that city’s worst slums, finds her deeply immersed among the poorest in India. However, Annabel also has another very different role, one that is absolutely special – her daughter Anjali is married to Sachin Tendulkar, the greatest-ever cricketer in the country where cricket matters most. So Annabel is the loving mother-in-law to the most worshipped sportsman on earth. As a small indication of what that means, seven years after his retirement he has 30 million followers on twitter. For him no outing can be private.

This a story of India in several dimensions – the life of an English woman abroad, the grim reality of abject poverty seen at close quarters and an intimate portrait of “The Little Master” batsman and the extraordinary experience of being part of his world.

Annabel Lancaster was born in wartime Solihull in 1940, the youngest of four children of a Midlands businessman. Like most children of her upper-middle-class background, she was educated at a girls’ boarding school from where, as an exceptionally gifted pianist, she won a place at the Royal College of Music. But she loathed public performance and, having got involved with Rugby Club charities, decided to become a social worker. It was an unusual choice at a time when posh girls tended to become secretaries until they became wives.

The same was true when she got a job at the Lyons factory in 1962, assembling Swiss rolls in order to fund her Social Administration studies at the London School of Economics. There she met Anand Mehta, a young man from Bombay studying for a master’s degree in economics, who later returned to India to run the family business – and become an international bridge champion.
They fell in love and in 1966 Annabel married him, having arrived on a boat at the Gateway of India in Bombay, bringing her Morris 1000 with her. The young couple lived with his extended family in their bungalow in South Bombay and had two daughters.

Annabel began working for an NGO, Apnalaya, dedicated to improving the lives of the poorest of India’s poor in one of Mumbai’s most appalling slum neighbourhoods on the edge of the city’s largest rubbish dumps. She received an MBE for her charitable work in 2017.

One daughter died at the age of 6 as a result of an allergic reaction to a prescribed drug for an infection. In 1990 her daughter, Anjali, a medical student, began dating – in secret - a 17-year-old cricketer named Sachin Tendulkar, who was already playing for India. By the time they married in 1995 Sachin was the most famous, richest cricketer in the most fanatical, populous, cricket-obsessed country on earth – a son-in-law like no other. For the past three decades, Annabel has spent half her time in the slums, the other within the ambit of a sporting god, experiences that have given her a unique perspective on the extremes of life in the Subcontinent. In this book she will reflect on all things India.

**Foreword**

“*I made two major decisions in my life, both against the wishes of my parents. “I took the road less travelled by… and that has made all the difference.”* My mother loved Robert Frost’s poem, but she was less enthusiastic about my choices. Until years later.

Leaving England on November 1966 and taking the boat to India was my defining moment. But had I not abandoned the idea of becoming a concert pianist – my first, big, independent decision – I would never have gone to the London School of Economics and I would never have met Anand Mehta. And none of this would ever have happened.

I can picture the woman I might have become, dressed in a twinset and pearls, teaching my grandchildren to play Chopin Etudes in an airy drawing room in Worcestershire. Instead, I am wearing a bright-pink cotton shalwar kameez and a mangalsutra necklace. Today Anand, my husband of more than 50 years, and I are going off with our daughter, Anjali, her husband, the world-famous cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, to watch our grandson play cricket for the Indian under-19s at Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai.
Selected chapter extracts

Who am I?

I belong to that distinctly British genus of women who went to boarding school in the Fifties. I sleep with the window open; my hospital corners are second-to-none; I would still win the Tidiness Cup. My posture is excellent, even at the age of 79; I can knit badly and I can pack expertly; I can eat anything put in front of me. I seldom make a fuss and I have never made a scene. Occasionally I catch myself using the word ‘super’.

My father was a typically Victorian paterfamilias. Doubtless he loved his two daughters, Gill and me, but he treated us very differently from his two sons. We had much less attention. We didn’t need educating in the same way. Not much was expected of us. That would be shocking in Britain today, though such gender inequality remains the norm in contemporary India.

The LSE

The LSE was a revelation. It was so refreshingly multi-cultural and there were very few of the public-school types I’d been surrounded by my entire life. There were certainly no posh English girls like me. Hassan came from Pakistan; red-haired Barry Scott, whose father was a plumber in Leeds, was my best friend; Reg too was working class; Ravi was an Indian from East Africa and the first person I knew to make an arranged marriage to a girl from his village in rural Maharashtra. They had never met before she came to live with him and spoke not one word of English. Bert came from St Kitts and told me that whenever he played cricket and hit a six, it inevitably landed in the sea. We all used to go to the Friday evening hop at the Three Tunnes Bar, and one foggy night when there were very few people there, I met Bert’s friend Anand Mehta. We went to India House where you could have a meal for two and sixpence. It was the most awful thali with some rice, yellow gravy and mixed vegetables, but it was filling. The Indians were the chaps I was most drawn to. We had the same sense of humour.

Mothers-in-law

In England, mother-in-law jokes have always been an old-fashioned revue-show staple. Here in India, the relationship between the wife and her mother-in-law is never a joking matter. In India, you don’t just marry a man, you marry his entire family, and your happiness rests almost entirely with your mother-in-law. I was lucky with mine. My own mother-in-law was not. Her husband’s mother wouldn’t let her sing or play tennis or paint. Another woman I knew was not allowed to smile or laugh.

When Anjali met Sachin

Anjali began dating Sachin when he was 17. She was four and half years older. They kept it a secret, even from me, for two years. The rest of the world only learnt about them when they got engaged on his 21st birthday. Anjali has sacrificed her career as a doctor for her husband – a high price to pay. She subordinated everything to keep Sachin in the right frame of mind to play his best cricket. She has always known exactly what she’s wanted. Indeed, she was one of those children who, even at the age of two, was more poised and more mature than her own mother.

I once asked Anjali what carried her through those first years of their relationship when she was doing paediatrics and she said “I admired Sachin for all he had achieved and for going off and playing in front of the world, and he admired me for studying medicine.” She was the first
doctor to come into Sachin’s family and was treated with tremendous respect, as doctors always are in India.

Being Sachin

Sachin went shopping with Anjali in Oxford Street and was mobbed by a crowd. Somehow, he got into a taxi and came home. I have never seen him so shaken.

Privacy and Modesty

Anyone who needs or craves privacy won’t survive in India. There is none. If you share a secret with an Indian woman she will tell it to her mother, who will go straight off to the Willingdon Club. Very soon the whole city will know it.

Sachin will not allow Anjali to swim in their own swimming pool in front of the servants… He doesn’t like her legs to be bare below the knee, though I think that now, at the age of 50, she is beginning to rebel…… You will seldom glimpse a cleavage in Mumbai, but the most modest women wear sari skirts that sit on their hips, midriff spilling over…

I love the ‘Namaste’ greeting, hands pressed together, palms touching, fingers pointing up, thumbs close to the chest. It’s called Anjali Mudra in Hindi and it means “I bow to the divine in you”. But what is most striking about it is that it feels intimate while strictly avoiding physical contact. It is a world away from the English thing of shaking hands or kissing on both cheeks or an all-embracing hug.

Poverty

A lot of Indians live shockingly blinkered lives. If your home is in South Bombay and your driver sticks to the main roads, you could well believe that there are few poor people in India. I knew a little beggar girl who lived on the streets nearby in Breach Candy and who suffered from congenital dislocation of the hips, a problem that can be operated on. I got the local orthopaedic hospital to agree to do it but because she was only 12 she needed her parents’ permission. They refused it – her condition made her more attractive for begging. The movie Salaam Bombay includes a scene in which children are kidnapped and mutilated to make them more effective beggars. It is entirely based in truth.

The Emergency

In 1975, the Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency that lasted for 19 months, in order to tackle the ‘internal disturbance’. It was the most appalling chapter in modern Indian history and I saw the full horror, up close and personal.

Is Sachin Out?

Whenever Sachin was caught or bowled out, it always felt as if the game was already all over. But it was more than that. It was almost as if he represented everyone’s hopes for the country itself. Somehow Sachin’s performances at every game of cricket reflected the state of India in the 1990s.

The poet CP Surendran once remarked that while other batsmen walk out to bat alone, when Tendulkar came to the crease, “a whole nation, tatters and all, marched with him to the battle
arena. Here were one-billion hard-pressed Indians with just one hero.” From the start of his brilliant career, Sachin has been treated by his fans as a living god. Hearing them fill the arena with their chants of “Sachin, Sachin”, at once so informal and yet so worshipful, still gives me goosebumps. These days he’s not even playing, though they still chant his name, knowing that he’s there in the stadium with them, just another spectator, just like them. But unlike them, he is a god.

**Death**

I have seen many dead babies chucked into the Ganges. My first intimate experience of death in India was seeing the ravaged little body of my husband’s cousin, crudely stitched following a post mortem and laid on a bamboo stretcher in our house. For Hindus, death is not the end but the beginning. I don’t see it that way

I didn’t want to see my daughter once she was dead. I don’t believe that a body has any meaning. I believe in nothingness. Death is the end for me. I wanted to remember Tara as she was alive. I didn’t want a cold kiss.

When I die, I would like my body to be thrown on the dumping ground.

**Old Times**

There is no such place as an Old People’s Home in India. Families take care of their elderly relatives. They are not left with strangers.

**About Annabel Mehta**

Annabel was born in Solihull in 1940, sent to a girl’s boarding school at ten and studied piano at the Royal College of Music before changing course to become a social worker. She met her Indian-born husband-to-be Anand Mehta while at the London School of Economics in the Sixties and married him in Mumbai in 1966 where she has lived ever since.

In the early Seventies she became a volunteer with an NGO working with the urban poor to improve challenging conditions in the slums, first as Treasurer and then as President for which she was awarded an MBE by the Queen. Her daughter's marriage to cricketing legend Sachin Tendulkar opened up a new vista in her life and created a heaven on earth for Anand.
About Georgina Brown
Georgina is a British journalist and theatre critic who has worked for *The Independent* and *The Mail on Sunday* for more than three decades. Since 2017, she has lived in Mumbai where her husband is a diplomat. She is on the board of Literature Live, the Mumbai literary festival.