

Praise for Nagaland

Delightfully engrossing page-turner that provides a fascinating insight into *Nagaland*, its rich tapestry of legends, history and culture. Ben Doherty's intimate understanding of the Naga people is evident in the flair and passion of his writing. A riveting and poignant read.

– Nim Gholkar, author

With echoes of Rushdie and Garcia Marquez, *Nagaland* takes the reader on a lyrical exploration of person and place. This enchanting work of fiction explores a lesser known corner of India through the protagonists' gripping and wondrous journey, while revealing Doherty as a writer with serious talent.

– Nick McKenzie, *The Age*

I have come across some extraordinary real life stories of inspiration, love, and tragedy with my travels in India as a journalist. But *NAGALAND* is exceptional. Ben's skilful storytelling engages emotionally in the life of an amazing man, his defiance for the sake of love, and his devotion to place and to culture. In my opinion, it is a must read.

– Som Patidar, journalist

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A LOVE STORY FOR MODERN INDIA

BEN DOHERTY



EIGHT WORDS

The diary arrived addressed to me.

Wedged into my letterbox, its battered yellow envelope carried no sender's name, no return address. Ends crudely wrapped in sellotape, the package was postmarked with a single circular stamp bearing a date—19 December 2015—and, in tiny letters: Republic of India: Nagaland.

The diary itself was a small book, bound in brown leather and held closed by a long, thin twine wound tightly around its middle. Its creamy pages were filled, overfilled and seemingly without order, with drawings of birds and mountains and flowers; with hastily drawn maps and tightly scrawled verses of poetry—song-lyrics-in-progress perhaps—all written in the same shaky hand.

A feather—white with a dark brown, almost-black, horizontal stripe, I recognised it to be from a hornbill—served as a bookmark, attending the penultimate page. Now unbound, the book fell open in my hands here to reveal what appeared to be a journal entry. The script was Roman, written in the careful cursive of one writing something important, something permanent, but I could make no sense of it. To my inexperienced eyes only a handful of words were familiar: enough, only, to recognise the language as Tangkhul, one of Nagaland's myriad dialects.

But at the bottom of the page was a single sentence written in English. The letters ran haphazardly across the page: set down, evidently, in haste:

We live forever through our stories. Tell ours.

I recognised the plea. Instinctively now, I knew to whom this diary belonged. So why was it now here with me, on the other side of the world?

Part One

WALK WITH ME



WALK WITH ME

‘**W**e live forever through our stories,’ Augustine said, running a testing thumb over the newly sharpened edge of his *dao*. He turned to look at me, swinging the squat knife to his shoulder, the blunt edge coming to rest on his collar bone, the acute glinting in the weak sun of the mountains. ‘That’s why this is important, that’s what you must understand.’

Augustine had never spoken like this before: so expansively, so easefully. We’d met almost three years earlier at the height of India’s cruelly hot summer of 2011, and in the time since, we had slowly built a friendship in instalments—parties of mutual friends, gigs of bands we’d wanted to see, long drives stuck in Delhi’s unrelenting traffic. But little was simple, was predictable with Augustine. He was a person comfortably silent a long time, and guarded when he did speak. His was a character revealed by adumbration. Augustine would vanish often and without explanation even when he returned, weeks later. He’d simply been ‘busy’ or ‘around’, offering no clue as to where he’d been, no real concession he’d ever even been gone. Yet return he would, always.

He would appear on his terms. When I was struck by dengue, delirious with the break-bone fever and able to find a tiny measure of comfort only by lying in strange contortions on the cool stone floor

of my house, he materialised without notice, carrying a dark-green concoction made of papaya leaves and myriad undeclared spices. ‘My *Ayi*’s recipe,’ he said. It popped and bubbled in an old Coke bottle.

‘How did you even know I was sick?’ I asked him.

He shrugged. Augustine stayed, for days it seemed, silently pressing upon me another sip of the foul-tasting potion during my half-lucid moments of wakefulness. When I awoke properly after nearly a fortnight, well again but weak, he was gone. I wouldn’t see him again for two months.

Now, it was 2014, and we were in Augustine’s homeland, the land of the Naga. India’s brief-but-sharp winter had settled all over the north of the country, but it lay most heavily here. The fierce winds carried flurries of snowflakes too fragile to settle on the ground, but enough to dust the eaves of the houses and the branches of the trees.

We sat in the hard dirt outside Augustine’s ancestral home in the village of Ukhrul, high in the mountains of far north-eastern India, that forgotten teardrop of brittle, unyielding land wedged between Bangladesh and Burma. It was here, despite the cold and the wind, that Augustine felt most comfortable, felt most himself. Here he held court.

‘These are not just stories we tell our children and grandchildren; these stories are who we are.’

He paused and lowered his voice. ‘You are a journalist. You call them legends. But to us they are truth, they are history. They are destiny.’

Augustine was not usually like this. In low-lying Delhi where we had both lived, a few suburbs and several worlds apart, he was quiet. Not sullen, but cautious, almost timid. In the city, he spoke only when he had to, and as much as he needed to. And he spoke quietly there, so quietly he could barely be heard in that noisy place. He moved cautiously in the big city, walking with his shoulders hunched and his head bowed slightly, as though he felt he took up too much space in the crowded capital.

Here though, in Ukhrul, he was different. I have noticed it on each visit to this place. Here among his own people, he stood far

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taller, with his shoulders back and his chin lifted. He spoke powerfully, and laughed readily. He smiled so I could see his teeth.

Augustine and I met when our rock bands played together at the same New Delhi pub, one of the few that existed, and one of the fewer still that had live music. Augustine's band was on before ours, but it should have been the other way around. They were much better than we were. Three-quarters of the crowd were Naga, like Augustine, and they'd come to see him play.

I wasn't in India to play in a band. I was a journalist, a foreign correspondent with an Australian newspaper, on my second posting in Asia, and forever racing over a roiling, restless region—the far-distant corners of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma. Mine was the impossible task of 'covering' a home to one-and-a-half billion people.

When I was here, in this country, 'India Rising' was supposed to be my story. The emergent behemoth, with its tens-of-millions-strong middle class, the coming global superpower: that was the assignment from my editors. But inexorably, almost subconsciously, I found myself drawn to the fringes of India, the ragged, inchoate edges, the parts that remained fuzzy to understanding even as the rest of the country swung into the sharp focus of global view. I found myself filing stories on the disappearing language of Toto in the remote jungles abutting Bhutan, on a baby girl in Madhya Pradesh who couldn't grow because she was born when the rains didn't fall, and on children digging shiny stones out of mines in Meghalaya.

The more I learned over my years in India, the more I realised how little I knew. Everything that was true about India was also inescapably false. India was gloriously uncategorisable, proudly defiant of generalisation or stereotype. The more I grasped for its essence, the more it eluded me. There was no one India. The difference of India—that's what staggered, what captivated, me. Its divergence and dichotomy: from the hard-scrabble stone villages of Kashmir in the north to Kerala's tropical fecundity in the south; from the river deltas of Gujarat in the west to the grey-green hills of the Naga, where I sat now, in the far, far east. The difference was

akin to that of Scotland to... Poland. Everything was different: the languages people spoke, the food they ate, the crops they grew and the houses they lived in, the gods they worshipped and the clothes they wore while doing it. The time people got out of bed in the morning was different; so too, the movies they watched, the music they listened to, their politics and their histories. Their interest in cricket—surely, I thought, India's one unifying factor—I discovered, waxed and waned across this land, the barren plains and the fertile river valleys, the coarse-sand beaches and the jagged mountains.

For all of India's diversity, Augustine was something different again. Nowhere in my travels through India or across the region, had I seen anyone like Augustine. He was unmissable. He wore his hair long, falling in a straight ponytail halfway down his back, but the sides of his head he kept closely shaved. His angular face was carefully inked in tattoos, three horizontal lines across the bridge of his nose and a vertical pattern that ran from his lower lip down his chin to his neck. These were the traditional markings of the Naga people, the tattoos of the headhunter. But now, even among the Naga, they represented a custom that had almost entirely died out. Only the oldest men and women in the villages looked like Augustine did. Of his generation, only he was marked in this way.

Despite his ancient adornments, Augustine dressed in modern clothes, head to foot in black: long flowing shirts that draped formlessly across his lean body over jeans, and heavy boots. And he wore a feather—the white feather of a hornbill, with its single dark stripe—pointing straight up from the back of his head.



'We live forever through our stories,' Augustine's voice brought me back to the here-and-now, to the cold dirt outside his home. He was still running that thumb along the sharp edge of his *dao*. Augustine had never done small talk, but both he and I recognised the unspoken significance of my visit to Ukhrul this time. What we had was ending. A month earlier, Augustine had suddenly announced—a declaration in itself was unusual enough for him—that he was moving back to his village to live in these hills and the house he

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called Sechumhang—No Man's Land—halfway down the valley. At the same time, my posting in India was almost finished. I would be replaced, in the way of correspondents, and leave soon for Australia and its distant familiarity. I had returned to his village to say good-bye, to Augustine and to these hills. But I had come back, too, to know that Augustine was okay, and to seek to understand what it was that had pushed, or pulled, him back to this place. I sensed not trouble, but disquiet in him. It might be a long time before we saw each other again.

'Come,' Augustine said, again, too-casually swinging that blade, this time to point straight at me, and then out over the mountains. 'Walk with me.'