

# Chronicling Adoor

**Adoor Gopalakrishnan**  
*A Life in Cinema*  
**The Authorized Biography**  
By Gautaman Bhaskaran  
Penguin; 218pp, Rs599

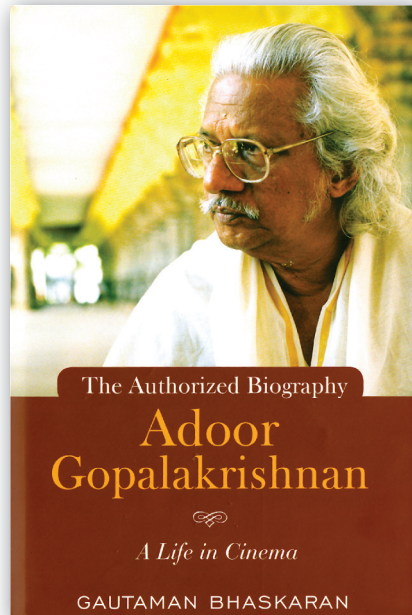
By Nahla Nainar

“N ever before have I talked so much in my life, definitely not about myself.” Thus writes southern Indian auteur Adoor Gopalakrishnan in the foreword to his biography penned by veteran journalist Gautaman Bhaskaran. Whether for his slim (11 feature films and around 30 short documentaries since the 1960s) but convincing body of work, or for his conviction in working against the formula and the long shadow that Bollywood throws on Indian cinema, Gopalakrishnan has always defied simple summarising.

Made in the Malayalam language, Gopalakrishnan's films mirror social concerns particular to Kerala, and oftentimes include an element of surrealism. He uses the 1940s as a backdrop to set his celluloid ‘historicals’ to elaborate social situations in pre-independence India.

Born in 1941 to Madhavan Unnithan and Moutathu Gauri Kunjamma, Gopalakrishnan was the sixth child in a family of three girls and four boys. The maternal side of his family was more involved in his upbringing, both because of Kerala's matrilineal society and due to the fact that Gopalakrishnan's parents separated in the later years.

He had an early start in the arts, having started writing and acting in amateur plays from the age of eight. An ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Gopalakrishnan earned a degree in Economics, Political Science and Public Administration in 1961 from the Gandhigram Rural Institute in Tamil Nadu, and even worked for a short while as government officer in Dindigul before quitting to study screenwriting and



direction from the Pune Film Institute in the 1960s, and later was also the chairman of its governing council.

The word ‘authorized’ figures largely in this biography. Inadvertently, it seems synonymous with ‘sanitised’ and ‘censored’.

The first thing that most readers will notice, is the dominant voice of Gopalakrishnan. Whether it is about his filmmaking technique or his early childhood years, it is only Adoor who seems to be ‘directing’ the narrative. In an interview with the *India Abroad* newspaper, the biographer, perhaps anticipating the trickiness of the situation, says that the decision to rely on Adoor's memory over that of the filmmaker's elder siblings and other family members was just so as to ensure accuracy.

While Adoor the filmmaker looms large in this book (he declares himself pleased with the venture in the foreword that also reveals his relief at his work not being over-analysed), there's little to know about him as a non-cinema personality, a father, husband or son. It's almost as if good

manners have held back the biographer from asking probing questions.

The second part of the book moves away from the filmmaker's personal story to the feature films he has directed. Again, the treatment is not what one would expect in a biography. From the gentle narrative that evokes small-town Kerala, the reader is cast headlong into a textbook style exploration of Adoor's technique.

Key points that would have interested a reader, such as why the director dissociated himself from the Chithralekha Film Society, a wing of the Chithralekha Film Cooperative that he co-founded in 1965 with his friends and well-wishers, are dismissed quickly. The pioneering body eventually wound up operations in the 1980s.

There is also no satisfying explanation as to why the filmmaker never worked again with the actor Gopi, who won a National Award for his performance in *Kodiyettam*. Critical insights from Gopalakrishnan's contemporaries are also missing.

Production details will no doubt be of interest to any student of film, and there are many thoughts here on Adoor's use of mood music, silence and natural sounds to illustrate his ideas.

But there is also some overenthusiastic attention given to the animal ‘actors’ in Gopalakrishnan's films. The exposition on the behaviour of rats (used in *Elippathayam*) is a little juvenile, while the most evocative detail that sticks in the reader's mind in the chapter *The Servile*, is that of hero Mammootty running for his life dressed in just a dhoti, after hearing rumours of flash floods on location at a waterfall in Karnataka state, and the rest of the cast of *Vidheyam* following suit.

Photographs, which would have added a new dimension to the work of a filmmaker of Adoor's stature, have been chosen with little care. The captions don't give any additional information.

The absence of archival material may have been a contributing factor to this biography's shortcomings, but the abruptly-ending book still deserves a satisfying sequel, preferably one with less authorisation.

Housekeepers say things like, “if I'd known I was going to have a son like that, I'd have had an abortion”, and “I'm against that, which ought to tell you something”.

There is, I suppose, almost everything wrong with this book. A character is foreshadowed for 150 pages without then bothering to appear; jokes are repeated, absent, or just rubbish; the opening is a third-hand account of a tedious academic committee meeting; no one speaks or behaves like a human being; the farce element is unsophisticated; and the efforts to shock are feeble.

But what it does have is the absolute smell of authenticity: of a period in English history and a fashion in fiction that will soon be beyond living memory like dial telephones and quiet Sundays, and chops, and red-faced squires, and bobbies and cooks, and cars that break down all the time, and everyone in their right place.

It made me almost nostalgic for something I never much liked in the first place. Unless you think like Wilt (and there are a purple-faced minority, getting on now, who are very much its target market), you won't count this among the year's best reading experiences. But you might well, as I did, feel a sneaking affection for the old thing. — Guardian News & Media

## thrillers roundup

### **The Death Instinct**

By Jed Rubenfeld  
Headline Review

A sort of sequel to *The Interpretation of Murder*, this reconvenes the crime-solving gang from that novel 10 years later: lapsed psychoanalyst Stratham Younger, colder and harder after his experiences in the trenches; cop James Littlemore, granted more autonomy this time around; and, of course, Sigmund Freud, even though he's back in Vienna by now.

It's a better book, less stodgy and digressive; a Buchanesque thriller with chases and a McGuffin (in this case some stolen radium) rather than a murder mystery, unless you count the historical event it pivots around the bombing of Wall Street in 1920 by persons unknown as a murder. Another improvement is the presence of a woman who is more than exquisite-corpse set-dressing. Feisty-but-vulnerable radiologist Colette has a mute son paging Dr Freud! and has been taught by Marie Curie herself. Go, Colette, go!

### **Sister**

By Rosamund Lupton  
Piatkus

Nicci French via Ford Madox Ford, anyone? Lupton's debut is an exceptionally confident domestic gothic thriller with a mosaic-like, non-linear structure “pointillist”, its graphic designer narrator Beatrice calls it. Framed as a letter from Beatrice to her dead sister Tess, in which she lays out the facts of Tess's murder as she has discovered them, *Sister* works so well because of the natural, unforced way it withholds information from the reader. It also packs a devastating emotional punch. Tess and Beatrice got on pretty well, but theirs was still a complex, awkward relationship to which Lupton does full justice. Indeed, *Sister* is so ably done, so perceptive about grief and guilt and self-delusion, that when the cliches of the genre do obtrude in the form of overwrought prose “Facts of exploding shrapnel were ripping our relationship apart” it's a bit of a shock.

### **Savages**

By Don Winslow  
Heinemann

Shortly to be filmed by Oliver Stone, *Savages* is the story of two southern Californian weed-dealers, Ben and Chon, and their unfazed response to a video nasty from a Mexican drug cartel showing what will happen if the pair don't let them take over their business. Winslow's style here is clipped, brash, smart and vulgar. Chapters are short, sometimes just a single line. It dares you to call it glib, but actually it's a thoughtful, prescient satire on the war on drugs, packed with neat twists and funny-horrid setpieces. The characters stay with you, too, especially middle-class son-of-psychoanalysts Ben yin to former Navy Seal Chon's yang who jets around the world being philanthropic while his goods attain their full psychoactive potency.

### **Three Seconds**

By Roslund Hellström,  
Translated by Kari Dickson  
Quercus

Can you really tell a dead man's nationality from the way his large intestine was sewn up after an appendectomy? Yes, according to author duo Anders Roslund (an investigative journalist) and Berge Hellström (a one-time criminal), who won the prestigious Swedish Academy of Crime Writers' Award for this gripping, intelligent novel. It's about an undercover operative, Piet Hoffman, whose project to penetrate the Polish mafia's drug trade is jeopardised when another policeman links him to the “execution” of a fellow undercover operative who was posing as a buyer. Hoffman's fractured life makes him a compelling figure: a fake drug baron who is also a fake in his attempts to be an “ordinary” husband and father who (supposedly) manages a private security firm. Quercus has high hopes for *Three Seconds* justifiably so. The translation by Kari Dickson is superb. — John O'Connell/Guardian News & Media

## Funny and nostalgic

*The Wilt Inheritance*  
By Tom Sharpe

By Jenny Colgan

The idea that comedy is a young person's game has some truth in it, you have to be, as Eric Idle said, “fresh, and angry”. Comedians emerge the same way as physicists; the greats, in their first flush, show us the world through new eyes.

Of course, this is not always the case. Barry Cryer remains endearingly brilliant; David Nobbs still delights; and those with “funny bones” — the Tommy Coopers and Les Dawsons — are funny for ever. So can Tom Sharpe, now 82 and, according to a cover puff, “one of the world's funniest writers”; reinvent his most famous creation, *Wilt*, for the 21st century?

Almost every home in the UK had a Wilt novel in the 1970s. If you grew up then, they were notable mostly for their total lack of dirty bits, despite some promisingly

saucy covers, and a lamentable film starring Griff Rhys Jones and a blow-up doll. The first in the series, published in 1976, was about a young lecturer whose woes include having to teach *Lord of the Flies* to a class of gas-fitters, and attempting to kill his wife, with farcical consequences.

Fast-forward three decades and Wilt is not enjoying the changing times. Now head of computer studies at a new university, he spends his days “filling in the forms the administration department concocted to justify employing more staff than the ‘university’ had lecturers. ‘Suppose it keeps the sods off the street,’ Wilt muttered to himself, ‘just like having so many so-called students makes the employment figures look better than they really are.’”

Wilt's preoccupations haven't changed a whit since 1976. Women are still horrible, terrifying things; the concept of embarrassing oneself in front of the vicar remains a very real concern; and the landed gentry and their bloodlines are of major importance.