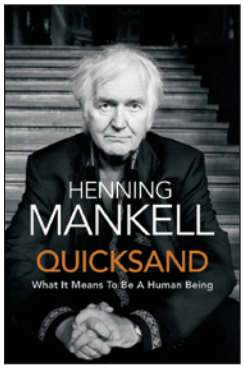
Book Reviews

Quicksand. What It Means to be a Human Being. Henning Mankell. Harvill Secker (Penguin Random House Group), London, 2016. *305pp,* ₹ *699.* ISBN 978–1846–5599–52.



Henning Mankell (3 February 1948–5 October 2015) was well known as an author, playwright and dramatist in his native country Sweden. As translations of his books emerged in English, he became an international celebrity. He wrote gripping thrillers; novels on crime, featuring the world-renowned Inspector Wallander and tales of dark Africa with an equal felicity.

Mankell considered himself a member of the genus *Homo narrans*. (This term was introduced by German folklorist Kurt Ranke [1908–85]. Hungarian folklorist Linda Dégh's [1920–14] comment on this expression holds especially true for Mankell and the book under review. She wrote that *Homo narrans* expressed 'the sum total of Man as narrator and tradition bearer who shapes the different basic forms of narration by expressing desires, dreams and fears common to mankind'.)

An inveterate traveller, he focused on African countries during his later years. The difficult local conditions stirred him not only to write about them but also, in more practical terms, contribute funds and work with local charities. He set up a theatre in Maputo, where he identified and encouraged budding local stage artistes. In 'The car accident', his opening chapter, he refers to his adaptation of *Hamlet* in that city as a drama about an African king. He envisaged the end of the play, where everyone lay dead on the stage. Fortinbras strides onstage—the white man who arrives to start colonizing Africa. He would conclude the play with the 'To be or not to be…' soliloquy.

Of his many awards, one is particularly notable. The University of St Andrews conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his contribution not only to literature but also to 'the practical exercise of conscience'.

Quicksand is neither a work of fiction nor one of the appalling conditions in poorer African countries. It embodies his thoughts and flights of memory and imagination after he learnt that he had widespread cancer. We are granted the privilege of sitting by his side as he ponders the miracle on the 28th day, Hagar Qim, the ancient ivory lion man, the woman with the sack of cement, the stupid bird, the buffalo with eight legs and much more.

The dedication gives you a hint of what is to come. 'This book is dedicated to the memory of the baker Terentius Neo and his wife, whose name we do not know. Their faces can be seen in a fresco painting at their house in Pompeii… When the volcano erupted in AD 79, they did not have had much time to grasp what was happening. They died there, in the middle of their lives, buried underneath the ashes and the glowing lava.'

The book has three parts—'The Crooked Finger' (containing 27 chapters), 'The Road to Salamanca' (with 16 chapters) and 'The Puppet on a String' (with 24 chapters). Most chapters are just two to four pages long. At the end of the book, I could not help echoing Oliver Twist: 'Please sir, may I have some more?' Alas! Henning succumbed to his disease in 2015.

His cancer made itself known by awakening him about 3 years ago, on the morning of Christmas Eve, with pains in his neck and a general feeling of stiffness. It soon spread down his right arm. He lost all feelings in his right thumb. The holidays delayed his tests. On 8 January, he was on strong painkillers. Tests showed a 3 cm tumour in his left lung and a metastasis in his neck. As he left the clinic, he saw a little girl jumping up and down in the snow. 'I saw myself, as a child, jumping around in the snow. Now I was sixty-five years old… I was not jumping around.' He ends this chapter telling us, 'That is what this book is about. My life. What has been and what it is.'

In the course of this book, he often returns to his illness, his thoughts during repeated stay in hospital and on the effects of chemotherapy. He reflects on relief: 'one of the strongest emotions of which humans are capable', on intimations of his own mortality and on eternity. 'Life is short. But death is very, very long. *How long is eternity?* asks the child. Who can answer that question?'

He dwells on the fact that, though nobody likes to be forgotten after death, nearly everybody is. 'How many authors do we remember and still read today?… How many artists have disappeared altogether from our consciousness? How many scientists, engineers, inventors?' And, he reminds us, 'most important of all, how many *ordinary* people?' He echoes Dante's statement in *Inferno*: 'Earthly fame is naught but a breath of wind…'

The fourth chapter explains the title of his book. It refers to a fictional tale read years earlier that had then stirred his imagination to lead him to believe that 'The quicksand was alive…a flesh-eating sand hole.' He later learnt that no desert on earth possesses such evil sand. Notwithstanding this, he tells us that the initial terror caused by the diagnosis of his illness was identical to the fear he had experienced when he read that tale.

In Chapter 24, he points out that dying—a biological necessity—stirs the imagination in many, leading to fear. The title of this essay—'The courage to be afraid'—teaches the lesson that it takes courage to live and courage to die.

His erudition and broad canvas compel us to read. Not wishing to influence your feelings as you read this book, I will content myself with providing hints on what you will encounter.

You will learn about the painting showing Vicar Gustaf Hjortberg, one of the disciples of Linnaeus, and probably the person who introduced potatoes to Sweden. As was the custom then, the painting shows us his family gathered around him—not only members alive then but also those who had died. The latter were shown partly hidden behind the others. 'All that is visible of one of the dead boys is his forehead and one eye. He gives the impression of trying desperately to make his presence felt.' I will leave you to read Mankell's reasons for recalling this painting so vividly. There are descriptions of works of art by others and interesting facts about the artist. Theodore Gericault and his 'The raft of the Medusa' is an example. In each instance, you are enlightened and wish to learn more about the artist and his work.

His fascination with prehistoric cave painters is contagious. He ponders why these artists chose the darkest parts of the caves when they created their admirable art 40 000 years ago. It was while he was started on a new course of chemotherapy and lay on his hospital bed for the infusions that he read the book that provided the answer (see Chapter 51 for details).

You will encounter some interesting persons. The man who often stood looking out of the window of the ward in Sveg's little hospital is one such. The German writers, Georg Buchner and Thomas Clarkson, are two others. There are many more enshrined in these pages.

You will also learn some interesting facts. 'Ice' provides fascinating details on the lives and dissolution of icebergs and of ice ages over the millennia. Chapter 22 describes his travel to Timbuktu (in Mali) to view the treasure-filled archives overflowing with old manuscripts. 'A 1000 years ago, this desert town had been one of the world's most important intellectual centres.' He recalls with pride the fact that he was permitted to hold these manuscripts in his hand. A few years after his visit, Islamic jihadists considered these archives blasphemous and burnt many of them.

Mankell was deeply troubled by the fact that nuclear waste is hidden all over the world in 'onkalos'. 'Onkalo' is the Finnish term for a cavern. He marvels at the cupidity of experts who believe that such burial will ensure safety for humankind over the 100 000 years it will take to render the nuclear waste safe. He returns to this theme on a number of occasions throughout the book. His concern on radioactivity is also addressed in 'Luminous teeth' (Chapter 29).

He offers us aphorisms derived from his eventful life and career. 'People create the greatest of all illusions: if I die. Not when I die.' 'Questions receive answers, but answers always lead to new questions.' 'Haste is nearly always an outcome of imagined human necessity.' 'Our ability to wonder and ask questions is what makes us human.' 'In my world, truths are always provisional.' The chapter titled, 'Last Will and Testament' is especially rich in these.

He, too, was troubled by questions that have puzzled so many over time. 'Can we possibly one day discover what is involved in thinking? Not just the chemical processes in which neurones play a significant role, but what we could, perhaps call the human soul.'

In 1998, Mankell married Eva Bergman, daughter of the film director Ingmar Bergman.

He chronicled his illness in a series of articles in newspapers. These were translated into English and published in *The Guardian*. In the essay written before his death but published in its English translation the day after he died, he had written: 'There are, of course, dark times. A deep darkness of worry, loneliness, fear. Nights when I wake up and cold winds sweep in. I know I share this with everybody who is affected by severe illness. I also know how dependent I am of the people around me—family, friends. To claim otherwise would be hypocrisy…

'Eventually, of course, the day comes when we all have to go. Then, we need to remember the words of the author Per Olov Enquist: *One day we shall die. But all the other days we shall be alive.*'

He died in Gothenburg on 5 October 2015, aged 67 years, almost 3 years after his cancer was diagnosed.

I conclude this review with a quotation from Edward Bilsky, the provost and chief academic officer at Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences in the state of Washington: 'A good book is memorable while a great book makes you think differently about a topic and perhaps change a behavior or apply what you have learned to a new challenge.'

Mankell's final book falls into the latter category.

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