

# OF HILLS AND TALES

A short trip to Ruskin Bond's adopted hometown results in a tryst with the author's supernatural world.

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*I have been told that I write about ghosts, jinns, witches and others with empathy, even affection. People find this strange. Perhaps I am a ghost myself, then?*

— Ruskin Bond Mussoorie, June 2004

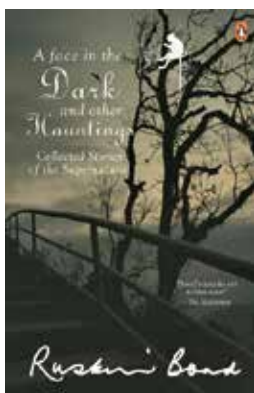
## CHRISTMAS WAS APPROACHING. HAVING

attended a cousin's wedding in New Delhi, I was now headed to the hills to recover from the (beautifully) chaotic extravaganza that's typical of Indian festivities. It was during the hour-long drive from Dehradun up to Mussoorie when I thought to myself: "Wouldn't it be lovely if I ran into Ruskin Bond? I'd have a great story to tell then." Wishful thinking? Perhaps. However, I couldn't help but recall the many childhood days spent reading his short stories for hours on end. As we drove through Barlowganj, the scenic beauty that surrounded me left no doubt why most of Bond's stories were set in this very hill station.

## CHANCE MEETING

Mussoorie, also known as the Queen of the Hills, is nestled at the foothills of the Garhwal Himalayan ranges and has long been favoured by tourists from across India, including famous ones such as Sachin Tendulkar and Jawaharlal Nehru. Its focal point is the Mall—a bustling main road that offers a variety of entertainment, hotels and dining options—replete with its own cable car ride, The Ropeway, to Gun Hill, the second-highest peak in Mussoorie.

While visiting the Public Library at the western end of the Mall, I spotted The Savoy, a hotel that forms the setting of Bond's famous short story, *Ghosts of The Savoy*. I smiled to myself when reminded of one of its characters, Mr McClintock, a "fake-nosed" Englishman who was constantly under the scrutiny of the Indian hotel staff.



Above right: Ruskin Bond at the book signing.  
Below: The warm and colourful interiors of Chick Chocolate.



Also housed on the Mall is a thriving Tibetan market where one can buy woollens and other knick-knacks at throwaway prices. It was here, while I was treating myself to a cup of piping hot coffee, that my eyes fell upon the Cambridge Book Depot. The store had a banner put up that indicated that Ruskin Bond would be signing books for fans there that afternoon (later, I learnt that he visits every Saturday at 4 pm for a two-hour interactive session with his fans). Of course, I promptly bought a book and waited in line for the scheduled meet-and-greet, at which I thanked him for enriching my childhood with his stories. The rest of the evening was spent with burgers and cheesecake at Chick Chocolate, a lively café on the Mall, and my newly autographed book for company.

Landour has been home to Ruskin Bond for the last 50 years.



### GHOSTLY TIDINGS

The next day, I woke up early and headed to Landour, a tiny town adjacent to—and 15 minutes away from—Mussoorie. It has been home to Ruskin Bond for over half a century. Landour is the perfect combination of magic and eeriness; a walk through its deodar- and pine tree-lined pathways feels surreal. Given that it was once a cantonment for convalescing British soldiers, it's understandable that the town has a substantial Anglo-Indian community that lives in beautiful quaint cottages. Perhaps they served as inspiration for Bond's characters such as Robert Astley, a flamboyant wanderer who returned from the dead to take his loyal servant to the world beyond.

A visit to Landour is incomplete without a hearty breakfast of omelettes and chocolate-chip pancakes at Chaar Dukaan, literally translating to (and housing exactly) 'four shops'. Additionally, Sister's Bazaar is a great place to buy a variety of cheeses and jams, though it may be slightly difficult to find.

I was so engrossed during my walk among the trees that I lost track of time. Soon it was evening and dark clouds loomed overhead. The deodars suddenly seemed to be closing in on me and a chill ran up my spine. I needed to rush if I were to catch the last cab back. A flurry of panicked thoughts had begun to run through my mind when I spotted something in the dense thicket, a face—a faceless face in the dark—perhaps the same face made immortal in Bond's story. Or was it not merely a tale? ■

### ✦ QUICK FACTS

#### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights from Bengaluru to Dehradun via Delhi. From there, Mussoorie is about 31 km away by road. Landour is a further 4.3 km away from Mussoorie.

#### ACCOMMODATION

Mussoorie has a variety of options ranging from bed and breakfasts to medium-budget hotels such as Hotel Hill Queen. Premium hotels include Fortune The Savoy and Kasmanda Palace, the former summer retreat of the royal family of Kasmanda. The Rokeby Manor, which is a restored British estate, is another premium option in Landour.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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