

## Praise for *White Man Falling*



“*White Man Falling* is that rare and wondrous thing – a perfectly realized serious comic novel. That it is also a first novel makes it all the more extraordinary.”

*Sarah Dunant*

“A rare gem of a comic first novel, Mike Stocks’s *White Man Falling*, set in fast-changing contemporary India, delivers an acute, affectionately observed satire on modern family life, police corruption and the power of religion.”

*The Independent, Books of the Year 2006*

“His elegant turn of phrase and cool command of plot are highly impressive.”

*Literary Review*

“The writing is witty and engaging... this is an entertaining read, with all the ingredients of a comedy of errors – confusion, deluded matchmaking, mystical absurdity. There are underlying metaphors, but the book is essentially a satire of the search for meaning in the meaningless.”

*New Statesman*

“It is the precision and originality of Mike Stocks’s prose that makes this tragi-comedy of Indian manners hard to put down and a joy to pick up.”

*Mark Amory, The Spectator*

“Stocks’s poetic background manifests itself in beautiful turns of phrase and in the interweaving of Indian English throughout the text... *White Man Falling* is a reminder that a single location and perspective, and linear chronology, can be deeply satisfying.”

*The Times*



WHITE MAN  
FALLING

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# WHITE MAN FALLING

MIKE STOCKS



ALMA BOOKS



# Book One

## 1

In 1888, the British laid out a grid of three-room bungalows in the town of Mullaipuram, in the state now known as Tamil Nadu in southern India. The bungalows were built for married NCOs in Her Majesty's Armed Forces. After Independence, they were acquired by the Indian Police Service and designated as housing for lower- and middle-ranking officers. These buildings still stand today, reabsorbed by India, their slipshod extensions pressing this way and that in the search for more space to collapse in eventually. Number 14/B is the home of Sub-Inspector (retired) R.M. Swaminathan. He carries a morbid fame in these parts for having once attempted suicide using only a puncture-repair kit.

With his wife and six daughters, Swami has lived at Number 14/B for ten years. On the day they moved in, he ripped out the interior doors and broke them up for firewood. Why would an Appa and Amma put a door between themselves and their children? Better to sleep together, side by side on the floor, your wife snoring like a pond of croaking frogs, your youngest babbling unconscious nonsense as her knees twitch amiably against the backs of your thighs.

Swami, Amma and three of the girls are watching the youngest girl dancing Bharatanatyam-style to a raga playing tinnily on an antiquated Murphy two-in-one

tape player. Her name is Leela. She has a skinny and imperious facility in the art. There is a language to speak by small modulations in gesture, a semantics to convey with the angle of the elbow. A semi-trained instinct tells her what is the best phrase her body should reveal at each moment, leaving her mind to do something else in a place she can never remember afterwards.

Amma performs the entire dance vicariously, using only one eyebrow. This is a talent that comes with middle age. Very good, she is thinking, very nice – thank God she’s still so young. Particles of gram flour lie in the wrinkles of Amma’s knuckles. “Six daughters and no son to lighten the load” – that’s what people say of her.

There is something else that people say of this family: “Six dancing girls and a father who can’t walk!” The taunt is almost true. Two years ago, Swami administered a mild custodial beating to a Very Guilty Suspect in the lock-up of Mullaipuram Police Station, but whereas the VGS suffered five minutes of terror and a single cracked rib – which was surely the least he could expect for being so guilty – Swami suffered an intracerebral haemorrhage in the left hemisphere. The stroke left him with speech and mobility problems. Perhaps he’d been a sitting duck for it, given his high blood pressure, his greediness with food and his lack of exercise – but he prefers to think that it was set off by the acute stress brought on by selflessly beating up a criminal in the line of duty. And for evermore, Amma has resented the VGS for causing this misfortune to befall her husband. Wasn’t the fellow the cause of all her misery? Because of him, hadn’t her husband lost his job and seen his salary replaced by a half-pay disability pension? And worse than any of these hardships, Swami has lost his pride.

“Appa, see!” one of his daughters shouts, entranced by Leela’s haughty signature in resolving the dance.

*Yes yes, I see. Seeing is something I can still do...*

“Tea, Appa?”

The question is put a few seconds after the music dies, before Swami has adjusted to its absence. When a father watches his daughter dance like that, he needs a moment to die as well.

“Appa, tea?”

*Tea, always tea. Do they think I enjoy passing water every three minutes, when it takes me so long to get there and take my thing out?*

He grunts as he hauls himself to his feet.

“Wife,” he says. “Tea,” he says. “My books,” he says.

He can risk short sentences. More than that and he hardly knows what oddities may come sidling out of his sloping mouth.

His wife carries a white plastic chair and a folding table to the noisy verandah – a fine vantage point for the day-long Mullaipuram rush hour – and sets them up. Jodhi, the eldest girl, drags out a plastic crate of books and papers. Swami follows her with his slow, sad limp. Outside, he tests the gradations of the day’s hustle and blare with a cocked ear, and watches a former colleague walking past on his way to an evening shift. The man gives a lacklustre salutation. Swami returns the gesture gravely, with his good hand. *That man hasn’t stopped to talk to me since my stroke.*

It’s late afternoon on a January day that will not remain ordinary for much longer. The rainy season has passed, having done its worst. Mullaipuram at this hour is hot dirty air and 110 decibels of hysterical honking traffic. Swami collapses, in a controlled fashion, into the hard seat. The verandah looks out over a ruined British wall to the busy Madurai road; on the other side of the road are shops selling electrical and plumbing supplies. Buses, lorries, old Ambassador taxis and the slick new cars of the middle classes tailgate one another casually, parping without cease, scattering the yellow-and-black

autorickshaws, the families on scooters and bicycles, and those unfortunates who are merely walking. A fetid ditch lies under the ruined wall, as though to catch the crumbling brickwork as it falls. Half the policemen in Mullaipuram piss in it every day.

“Which book, Appa?”

“*Eight*,” he says. “*Songs*,” he adds. He is tired, and defeated, and in such circumstances what in the world is there to do but read 2,000-year-old poems about love?

Jodhi fingers through the books, head down, frowning slightly. A petal from the jasmine flowers in her hair flutters down. There is a slight dampness visible at the junction of the sleeve and tunic of her *chudidhar*, an odour residing there, not unpleasant.

“*The Eight Songs*,” she mutters dubiously, “*The Eight Songs*... What colour is it?”

A nasty whip of temper cracks within Swami – *doesn't she know anything about anything?* – and “Blue!” he shouts; then, curiously, “Four Hundred!”

This puzzling numerical rebuke doesn't seem to faze her.

“Yes Appa,” she says. “So sorry. Getting tea.”

She places *The Eight Songs* on the table, and his exercise book and pen, arranges them tenderly and withdraws.

Swami turns the pages, brooding about his daughters: there is Jodhi, the academic one and the eldest, with her calm unnerving acceptance, who is in the third year of her B.A. in English Literature at the Madurai University-affiliated local college, inexplicably studying the books of some foreign devils rather than those of the Sangam poets or the great Kalki; there is Kamala, the domestic one, now finished with school and studying, who fusses around them all like Amma at Pongal time, and is forever sewing lurid pencil cases to sell at the market for a few extra rupees; there is Pushpa, the witty one, who has a temper on her, and who is the cleverest

girl in her school year; there are the twins, Suhanya and Anitha, who live in their own little world, and who were the obvious choices to send away to Swami's brother and childless wife in Coimbatore – to give away, almost – after Swami's stroke left him unable to support all his family; and there is Leela, the youngest, just eleven years old and everyone's spoilt and naughty favourite, who always has something mischievous to say, and who can dance like Nataraja until the other five weep in wonder.

*Jodhi, Kamala, Pushpa, Suhanya, Anitha and Leela* – Swami recites the mantra of their names while he opens his exercise book and places it to the top right of the table – *loving daughters, pretty daughters, talented daughters, dutiful daughters, lively daughters...*

*Six daughters! What was Lord Vadivela thinking of, giving me six daughters and no sons? How could anyone find dowries for six daughters, let alone a cripple like me on a half-pay pension?*

Jodhi's marriage has been at the forefront of Swami's and Amma's anxieties for a long time. "How will we marry this daughter of ours?" – this is what his wife is always saying, or thinking, or stopping herself from saying, or pretending not to be thinking. Most of their savings have gone on Swami's medical expenses. "These days you need a new Honda scooter with indicators and everything if you want a very good good-boy dowry," Amma worries. "Jodhi would have to be a computer programmer or an engineer to get a good boy without a very good good-boy dowry – how can an English Literature student get a good boy, when we can't even afford a new bicycle? What kind of good boy does a bicycle get? Do we want some low-down worthless boy wobbling around on a Gupta Hero Bicycle? But if we take out a loan for a scooter, then how will we get very good good-boy dowries for the other five girls? Where will they get their good boys?"

Swami does not have answers to any of these questions. He only knows that it's a matter of personal honour and inviolable religious duty to marry off his daughters at Bollywood-blockbuster expense, and the first instalment of this bankrupting epic could be coming soon. Trusting in Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, some months ago Amma had set to work with one of Jodhi's numerous aunties in finding a potential match for Jodhi. Oh, these two formidable ladies, they have firm ideas as to what kind of boy he should be: a suitable boy from their own Vanniyar community, a dutiful boy, a kind boy with a first-rate education, a boy with prospects, a boy of varied accomplishments, a boy good-looking enough to merit their own lovely Jodhi, a boy whose skin colour isn't too dark, a boy without bad smoking or drinking habits, a boy with respect for the old traditions, a good Hindu super gem of a boy into whose A1 household Jodhi can be happily entrusted.

To put it more concisely, Amma has taken it into her head to bag the most expensive boy in India.

Jodhi's auntie claims to have found just such a boy. His name is Mohan. He is a distant acquaintance of the family, and possibly a relation, being a cousin of Amma's sister's cousin's friend's tea-stall owner's brother's people, who happen to be related to Swami's brother's wife's sister's father-in-law, via the father-in-law's mother, who is dead, but who had close family links with the tea-stall owner, or the sister, or somebody else; and he lives with his parents and extended family in a brand-new apartment complex in the third-best district of the nearby town of Thenpalani. His father, whose name is so long and unpronounceable that he is universally known as Mr P, holds a respectable position on the railways, while his mother Mrs P is a housewife. There are two other brothers who unfortunately, for the purposes of Amma's six-daughtered matrimonial

masterplan, score her idiosyncratic and very lowest rating of “useless”. The younger brother Anand is very useless indeed because he is expert in sleeping and in being expelled from educational establishments for world-champion laziness – people say he is so lazy that he eats bananas with the skins on – and he is known to write poetry and also to stare for hours on end at mundane objects for reasons no one has succeeded in pinpointing. The much older brother Devan – thirty-two going on forty – is even more uselessly useless than the younger one, because he is unforgivably happily married. But the middle brother, Mohan... he is not useless in any department, he gets Amma’s highest ranking in every aspect, his attributes make her mouth water. Take, for example, his educational accomplishments. Not only does he have a first-class degree from Madurai University in Computer Programming, but he has also won a nationally prestigious and lucrative scholarship to study for an M.Sc. in Applied Computer Programming at the South Indian Institute of Integrated Information Technology in Bangalore. In a matter of months he will be heading off to that place with all the other very clever high-fliers. After another year, he’ll be earning like a film star. Amma and Jodhi’s auntie are in full agreement: the boy is a *very good* good boy.

On the verandah, flicking through *The Eight Songs*, Swami shakes his head uneasily at the thought of him, this Mohan, this supernatural being. *There is something wrong with this boy*. Of that he is convinced. Why would the parents of this young Krishna even consider his own poor Jodhi, dowryless as she is? But his wife won’t listen, and who can control a mother when it comes to plotting the welfare of her children? Already the priests of both families have consulted their charts and scrolls, and those two learned gentlemen are as one in confirming that with Guru on the ascendant in the sixth house of

Mohan's horoscope, and with Sukran favourably placed in Jodhi's fifth house, everything augurs well for long-term marital bliss.

Never mind planetary movements and the stars, Swami complains – we don't have any money! But Amma won't listen to such matter-of-fact objections. She trusts in God. She trusts in lots of gods. She trusts in all of them, every last one, even the ones that nobody else can be bothered with any more, even the goddess Santoshi Mata, even Maangadu Amman, who is especially obscure. The priests have already been asked to decide on an auspicious date and time for the first pre-engagement visit, and that meeting is only a few days away.

The forefinger of Swami's good hand traces the path of a love poem written in the full glorious flowering of ancient Tamil culture. He nods in melancholy appreciation of the poem's beauty. As he reads, he can see his moustache lurking at the base of his field of vision. Just as a young woman is considered peculiar unless she is wearing jasmine flowers in her hair, "A man is not a man without a moustache" – so his mother had told him, nearly thirty years ago. *And is a man a man, who cannot walk or talk or sing? And is a man a man, who cannot make his daughters scream in mock terror by picking them up and trumpeting like an elephant? And is a man a man, who has no work to do and no way of purchasing a brand new Honda scooter – with indicators and European crash helmet and all the trimmings – for his daughters, who all deserve their very good good boys? No. There is nothing I am good for but reading and thinking. What kind of a man, Swami would like to know, is that?*

He turns back to the poem and digests the words sombrely. A few lines strike him, so his finger revisits them:

*“On the night of their marriage ceremony  
the low will be the high and the low,  
the high will be the low and the high.”*

He copies out the lines in his notebook, thinking how they are true: not just in birth and death are the rich and the poor equal, but in sexual congress, when all become beasts, and gods. Then he writes a comment underneath: *Perhaps everyone who has ever lived is somehow one person only.* There is a comfort in such notions. And it is insights like these which offer a small hint as to the extraordinary fate that is going to overtake him.

He remembers how much his body had shaken with terror and desire on his own wedding night. His wife had been so very beautiful. “Film star matrimonials” – some wit had come up with the phrase early on, during the morning of the ceremony; a perfect description for such a handsome couple, it was still doing the rounds eighteen hours later on platform five of Mullaipuram station, when a vast wedding party had waved them off on their three-day honeymoon. Later, his heartbeat drumming against hers, the train moaning past dark-drenched villages, he had entered her and had known she would conceive immediately. That was the beginning of Jodhi, right then at the beginning of the marriage.

Inside the bungalow, Amma is reaching for a large volume called the *Tirukkural* that is face up on a shelf, so that, some twenty-two years after creating her, she can chastise her eldest daughter.

“What is the number Appa is shouting at you?” she scolds.

“Four Hundred, Amma.”

“Why are you so naughty, provoking him all the time?” she asks, pursing her lips as she searches the pages.

“But Amma, I don’t know anything about all this Classical Tamil that Appa reads.” Jodhi prefers Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh and E.M. Forster. Her dissertation is on English novelists of the 1930s.

The “Four Hundred” with which Swami had rebuked Jodhi refers to a couplet from the *Tirukkural*, otherwise known as *The Sacred Couplets*, by the ancient poet Tiruvalluvar. There are 1,330 sacred couplets in *The Sacred Couplets*. And although no one has fully comprehended the scale of Swami’s achievement, nor its connotations, since losing his employment he has memorized all of them by heart, like some kind of divinely blessed holy man.

Jodhi, Kamala, Pushpa and Leela wait for Amma to find sacred couplet Four Hundred, suspended as always between sincere filial respect and dread hilarity. Amma mouths the page numbers with exaggerated respect – she can read, but she hasn’t made a habit of it.

“Sacred couplet Four Hundred is in section forty of Part One of *The Sacred Couplets*,” she begins. She always begins like that. And she always pauses before reciting the words of wisdom:

*“The learning that you achieve in this birth  
Will benefit you in all seven births.”*

Silence from the girls.

“Let us reflect on this thought-provoking nugget of wisdom,” she ventures, gamely.

The girls try very hard not to giggle or to catch one another’s eye. Quite recently Leela, forgetting the number with which Appa had chastised her, had generated an entirely random Nine Hundred and Thirteen to Amma.

“Sacred couplet Nine Hundred and Thirteen is in section ninety-two of Part Three of *The Sacred Couplets*,” Amma had said:

*“The false embrace of loose women is like  
That of a cursed corpse in the dark.”*

Her face! They had all collapsed with laughter. Pushpa and Leela had slumped to the ground helplessly and cried in pain from the general hysteria. Even Amma had joined in. It was the tension, which had to find release somewhere in that unhappy bungalow. But Appa had reacted very badly, and in the evening he had tried to drown himself in a bucket of water.



## 2

Mullaipuram is situated on the hot, flat plains of Tamil Nadu. An isolated goitre of rock protrudes from the face of the settlement. The rock is only seventy metres high, but it is visible for many miles. Rival South Indian dynasties – the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Pallavas – fought for control of it for centuries. Then Tipu Sultan, the British and the French fought over it for a further two hundred years, bequeathing ungraceful additions to the ancient and ruined fortifications. No one fights over it now. An employee of the Tamil Nadu Board of Tourism climbs up it every day and sits in the cool of a dungeon to wait for tourists who do not come, tourists who will never come, tourists who will go to Madurai and Chennai and Pondicherry but who will never come to Mullaipuram, not even with a pistol at their temple. This fellow has a pee, eats his tiffin, takes a nap, then climbs down some four hours early and goes back home to his wife.

The rock carries on regardless, like they do.

Swami often goes on small trips into town. For short distances he limps, although a round trip to the nearest shop might take him twenty minutes. For longer trips he uses an antiquated three-wheeled wheelchair purloined from an amputee beggar by police colleagues. Usually one of his daughters pushes him, but when none of the