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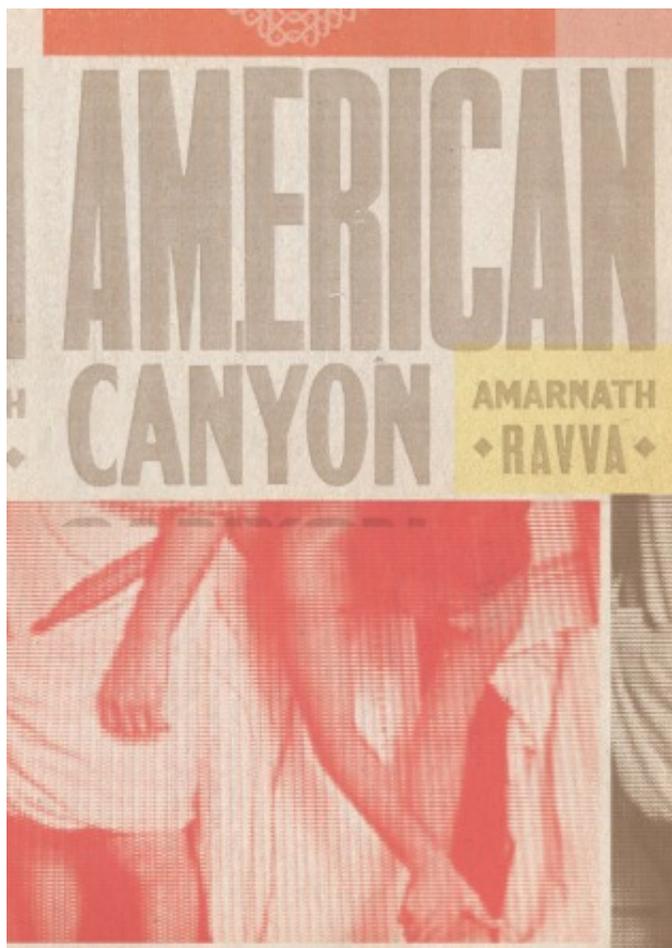
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## Books: Amarnath Ravva's Multimedia Memoir

Submitted by [Joyce Chen \(/users/joyce-chen\)](#) on January 28, 2015 - 2:08pm

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Memory does not, and cannot, function as a direct transcription of what has happened to us in the past. It is perhaps understandable, then, that Amarnath Ravva chooses to employ several other forms of documentation in

his debut work, [American Canyon \(http://www.amazon.com/American-Canyon-Amarnath-Ravva/dp/1885030169/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1422418570&sr=1-1&keywords=american+canyon/hyphenmagazin-20\)](http://www.amazon.com/American-Canyon-Amarnath-Ravva/dp/1885030169/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1422418570&sr=1-1&keywords=american+canyon/hyphenmagazin-20), which is multimedia in every sense of the word. Using stills from filmed rituals and recorded interviews with family members and holy men alike, Ravva carefully reconstructs on the page a past that belongs to both him and those whose lives have given rise to his.

The resulting narrative -- part-memoir, part-documentary, part-mythical exposition -- is a fragmented collage in much the same way that Ravva professes to be a man of hybrid tradition and innovation himself. The content informs the form.

An Indian American who grew up in Northern California, Ravva confesses early on to feeling that something was missing from his being, much like the "American grain," which he likens to "a hollow trunk."

"Only the outer rings remain," he writes. "We cut away what doesn't belong. Our methods, our mechanical eyes and surgical hands, treat symptoms because origins overwhelm us."

This sentiment of unexplainable loss is a significant one because Ravva spends the entirety of the narrative struggling to fill that hole with stories and histories and myths that he gathers over the course of ten years in India. He doesn't seem to mind being overwhelmed by the discovery of origins; he is unafraid to deep-dive into the past in order to better understand his present, even if what he finds is uncomfortable and, at times, almost claustrophobic in its sheer volume. In this way, then, he interrogates from all angles rather than simply seeking a superficial salve for his unease.

The premise of the narrative can feel foggy at times, in that Ravva plays with the murky depths of memory, but the gist of it is this:

Ravva undergoes numerous rituals, in part to get closer to his family's past, and in part to try to shake off the bad omen that clings to his being, as "seen" by his mother's seer, Sharma. He has a hard time believing the seer's proclamation, but thinks it might have a lot to do with his status as a second-generation Indian American, tainted by the ambivalences of being neither solely Indian nor solely American.

"He said I have a naga dosham, like Nayanamma," he writes. "Unlike karma, which is the fruit of what your soul did in its previous life, a naga dosham is the result of prarabdha karma. Prarabdha karma is the fruit of your actions during this life. It is immediate retribution."

loading, ple



*Amarnath Ravva*

And thus begins his journey to discover just what this bad luck is, and how and why Nayanamma, his maternal grandmother, had it too. In his quest to find an answer, he recounts and references some well-known myths that include the Hindu epic Ramayana and the Hindu god Rama's siege with an army of monkeys. But whether the reader is familiar or not with these myths is less relevant than, say, whether the reader can trust in a narrator who is constantly conflating his personal narrative with stories made up of more magical realism elements.

The answer, based on the deft hand with which Ravva guides the reader in and out of his memories -- both personal and collective -- is a resounding yes.

Ravva serves as more of an observer than an active participant throughout the novel, and begins his tale with what is presumably a selection of stills from a video he took of his time in Rameswaram. This, however, is hardly the beginning of his journey; no, it is somewhere in the middle -- and this constant sensation of floating in and out of time is not an altogether unpleasant one. Many of the scenes feel dream-like and their order seems to matter less than the fact that they exist at all.

The incorporation of video time stamps throughout the book are helpful guideposts for the reader to find his or her way back to the main narrative, though it is arguable that everything is the "main narrative," since everything is very much connected.

He explains at one point that during his years-long documentation of Indian rituals, he once lost all of his DV tapes and hard drive after someone stole the backpack they were kept in, essentially wiping clean hours, days, months of capture. The loss, however, turned out to be a metaphor in disguise, for though the thief might have tried to record over the original footage, the first encryptions will always remain.

"The past is written over with new ones and zeros," he writes. "An entry in the index is created so they can be found again. This new data is stored randomly, and all around it are dispossessed strings of numbers that have no

entry, have no name to be called by anymore. ...We imagine the rest of the poem. We dream of the sky that is missing.”

And perhaps, in the end, it is because Ravva is so aware of his inability to ever fully capture the past and its significant impact on the present that gives the reader license to trust his words. He is self-aware in his writing and in his observations, and he is, above all else, concerned with both capturing and recognizing the limits of capturing, the present.

For the truth that he seems to state is one that all readers can relate to: memory will always be incomplete, and layered, and complicated and there's beauty to be found in its disintegration.

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