

The monsoon chaser

Stephen Alter's latest book is the newest spindly volume furthering the inquiry — what is the difference between Substacks and books anymore? Alter has been writing for a good three decades, and his prose is simply-worded, direct, astutely unflorid and absolutely grounded. There is a lurid logic to nature writing which is akin to a continuously roving camera, and that can get frustrating for the writer. This is why Richard Powers introduces mysticality; this is why Amitav Ghosh deploys history. This is why, in *Becoming a Mountain*, Alter chose the vantage point of physical, mental and spiritual recovery. This work is about Alter chasing the monsoon in southern India and elsewhere, and it has all the trappings of a delightful diurnal thoroughfare (with plenty of menacing discoveries like that of a semi-slug), a rollicking two hours traversing the winds and willows that (un)seasonal torrentiality would grace, and yet, it is already out of date. This is not a commentary on the book itself, which accomplishes its subtitle ("A brief history of the Monsoon") with textbook generosity of spirit and intellect. It's about the context that the book comes out in.

India has been slower on the uptake on Substack, a website allowing one to host informal, not institutionally-published writing, sometimes for a fee. But its rapid

THE FRAGRANCE OF RAIN: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MONSOON

By Stephen Alter,
Aleph, ₹499

adoption for hosting increasingly upwardly mobile content is remarkable. The difference between the onslaught of blogs and Substack is that, for whatever reason, the quality of writing in the latter frequently rivals professionally-produced work. In some cases, as some nooks in the Indian publishing industry turn towards established names and relinquish editorial control entirely, one wonders where the space is for carefully-wrought, precisely-measured work like that of Alter's. At one point, Alter describes the discovery of the butterfly effect from first principles and employs two paragraphs for this purpose. For a tween in 2010, this would be nearly inexplicable reading pleasure. Today? Several other tidbits, book excerpts and asides later, one is pleasantly startled to find that such wonderful, semi-didactic, deer-trot-paced work is still being produced, but one winces at how uncommon this is and would be.

Reading Alter's other work reminded me of a book series I used to read as a pre-teen with no access to the internet. It was called *Tell Me* -, suffixed by the Five Ws



and the H. My father, bless him, who until much later never bought me non-textbooks unless I learnt and recited mathematical tables, would readily buy me the *Tell Mes* because they were replacements for coursebooks. They were facts organised into tennis balls shot out of a machine. I caught some of them but I can't help wondering wheth-

er more narrative works like *The Fragrance...* or my favourite book by Alter, *The Secret Sanctuary*, would fit the bill in the eyes of an educator or a parent. I can't be too pessimistic about the days of reading past and future but I really, really hope so. (*sans* maths.)

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