

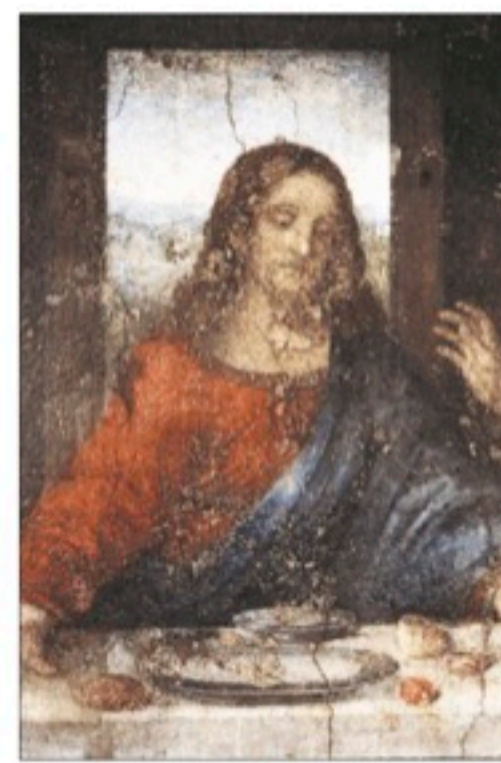
Christ comes back

the spectator Peter Conrad

"James Frey," according to the hype for this novel about Christ's second coming in New York City, "is not like other writers." The marketers mean to imply that he is exalted above his terrestrial colleagues by his sufferings: arrest, abuse, exile, public contempt. Frey is, we are to understand, a man of sorrows, who has undergone excruciation if not crucifixion, and has been stigmatised by his bad press. The truth is paltrier and more profane. Frey happens to be a shameless faker, who manufactures mishaps to embellish his personal mystique. In *A Million Little Pieces*, his memoir about his supposed crack addiction, he claimed to have knocked down a Michigan cop while high, after which he allegedly brawled with a platoon of beefy officers who

hurled him into jail for three months; it turned out that he was merely involved in a minor collision, behaved with exemplary sobriety at the police station, and was released a few hours later. Harried by Oprah Winfrey, Frey admitted that the confessional memoir was a tissue of fibs, but isn't that, he asked, what fiction means? Others were less impressed by his flippant irony. His agent sacked him, and his publisher shrewdly reneged on a seven-figure advance for two more books. All this was a mere five years ago; now Frey is back, unredeemed, assuming the persona of a divine con artist who is his fancied alter ego. "He's been called a saviour, a revolutionary, a genius," the publicists declare. Of course, they admit, he has also been fingered as a mythomaniac trickster. But couldn't the same

be said of Christ, who in the new novel is, like Frey, martyred by the media? It's a feat of stupefying impudence: if only there were a God able to strike the imposter down during his tour of the talk shows! But Frey is the product of a culture with a short memory and a skewed moral sense. He's also less a writer than a professional celebrity, which means that he can count on being rewarded for behaving badly. This current crock of mendacity is a "high-concept" fabrication, artlessly crass in its retelling of what's meant to be the greatest story ever told. Christ returns to Earth, to get us ready for the annihilation of our vile, belligerent species. Renamed Ben Zion, he joins a band of apocalyptic loons who hole up in the subway tunnels beneath Manhattan. His divinity seems to be proved when he miraculously survives an accident on a building site after a sheet of glass punctures his skull and severs his arteries. He communes with his heavenly father during epileptic seizures,

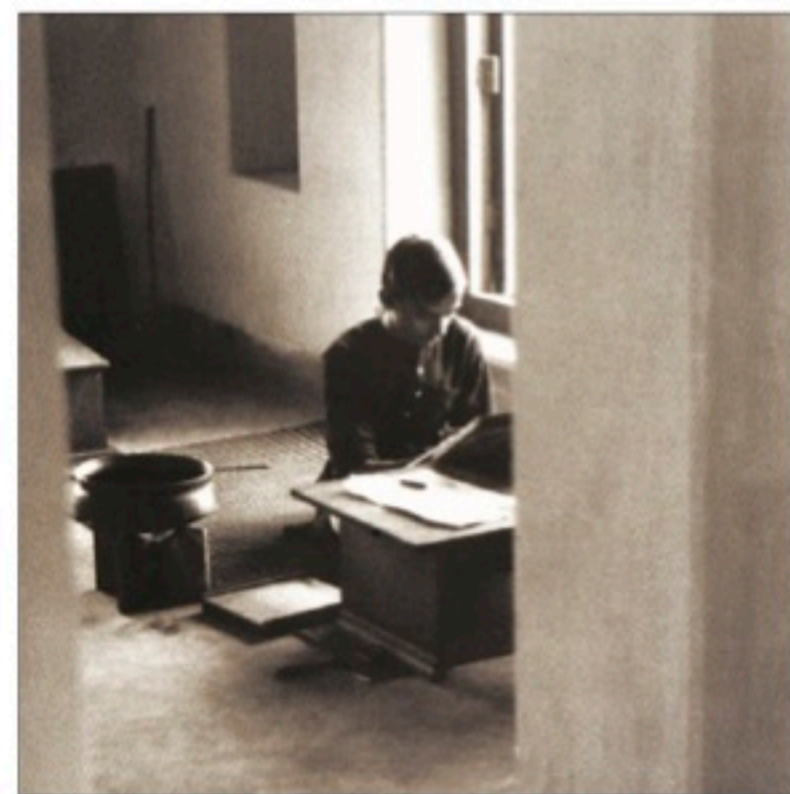


and gathers around him a gaggle of hapless apostles, to whom he preaches drippy sermons about peace. He licks and laps the genitalia of his female acolytes, disseminating celestial bliss in their nether regions; bouts of tantric sex follow, along with vegetarian love-ins at a rural commune. The FBI arrest him as a menace

to public order and a court prescribes a lobotomy. Reduced to idiocy but still alive, he is spared the bother of having to resurrect himself, and instead simply vanishes. "I love you," one of his concubines burbles three times on the last page, perhaps hoping that her credulity will be contagious. In effect Ben Zion abolishes himself by disparaging the notion of a deity who is incarnate. "I was just part of this greater thing, or place, or force, or energy," he drivels, like a semi-articulate hippy. In saying this he rescinds the literary gift of the Christian story, which is its consecration of all that is humble, modest, earthy - the minutiae of carpentry and money-lending, of loaves and fishes, of nails and thorns and cups containing vinegar not water. This astral blather dispenses Frey from having to convince us that his would-be god is a real human being. Instead the aesthetics of fiction, so cleverly elaborated when he planned the imposture

of *A Million Little Pieces*, come to his aid: Ben Zion admiringly defines religion as "a beautiful con, the longest running fraud in human history". As Frey's surrogate, he exposes his own dishonesty while blaming those who he duped for being so gullible. A disciple backs him up by arguing that "the sin of lying was not actually a sin", since all human beings do whatever they please and then invent justifications. The huffing and puffing publicists prescribe our responses to the book: "Be moved, be enraged, be enthralled by this extraordinary masterpiece," they exclaim. But take it from me: *The Final Testament of The Holy Bible* is blandly unmoving. You'll be irritated not enraged, and will find its thraldom easy to resist. Extraordinary masterpiece? Well, let's just say it makes Jesus Christ Superstar sound like Handel's Messiah. *Guardian News & Media 2011*
The Final Testament of the Holy Bible by James Frey (John Murray)

photography



The poet and his pasture

German photographer EO Hoppé's visit to Santiniketan in 1929 has left behind an unforgettable legacy for lovers of both photography and Tagore, writes Sayandeb Chowdhury

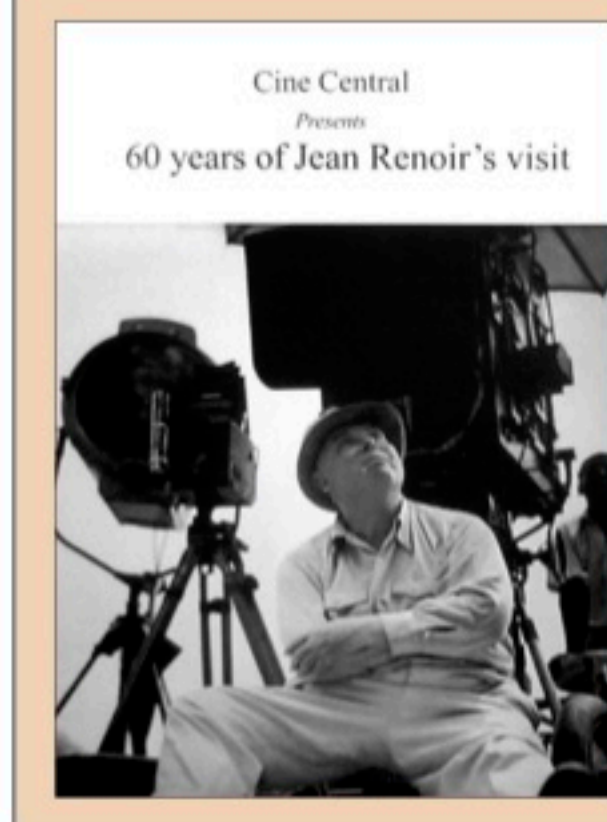
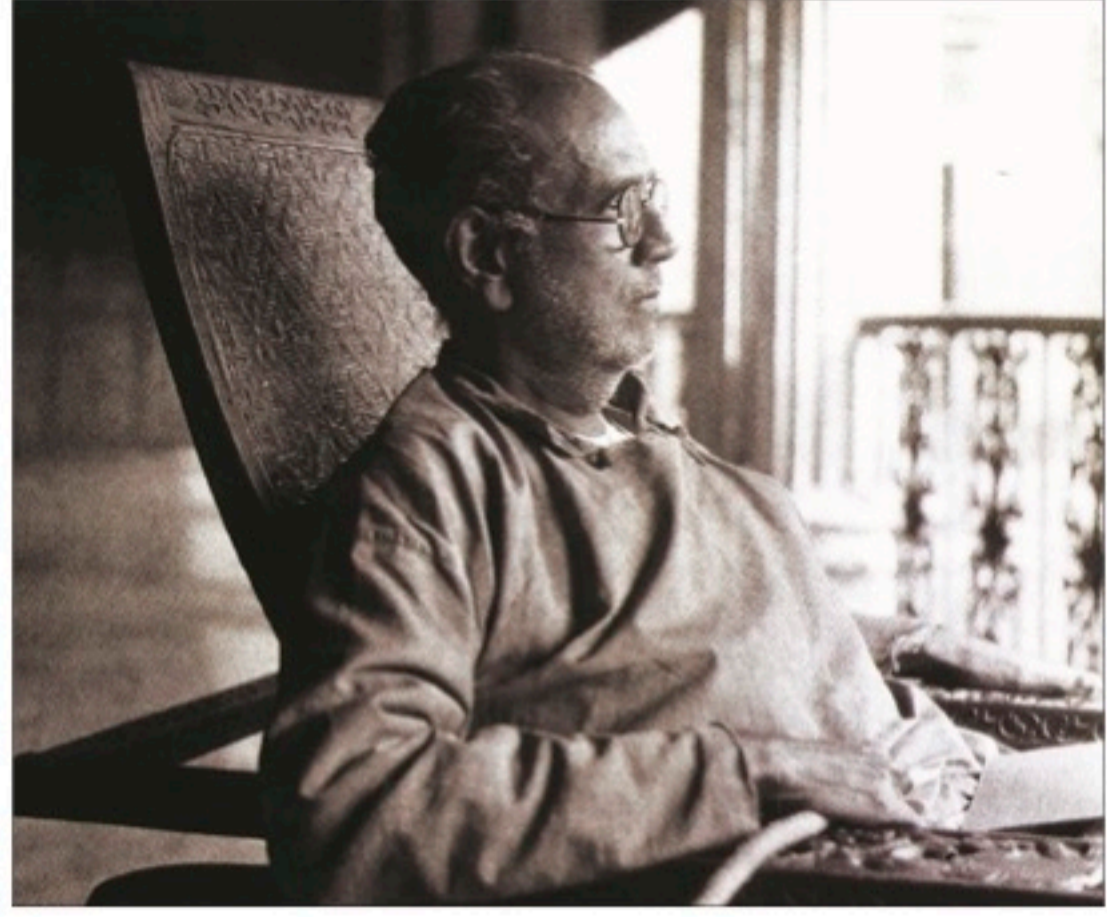
Munich born Emil Otto Hoppé (1878-1972), German photo-portraitist, had by the second decade of the last century established himself as a photographer of repute. Having learnt painting under Hans von Bartels, Hoppé travelled to Paris and Vienna in the last years of the 19th century before he settled as a banker in London. Soon he left his life as a banker and concentrated on his vocation as a picture-taker - as early photographers would be called. Over the next decade, his various collaborations with Alvin Coburn, Henry Robinson, George Davidson, EF Griffin and Sir Benjamin Stone had borne fruit large enough for him to go alone on his way towards establishing a photographic studio on Baker Street in London in 1911, not far from the apocryphal address that housed the world's most famous detective. It is here that he is said to have been visited by a touring Indian poet who was in England to

explore possibilities of promoting his new poetry collection in English which he had recently translated as the *Geetanjali*. It is another story that the poet found a noted Irish man of letters called Yeats leaping up to his lyrics and in about two years the Nobel Committee bestowed the literature prize on the bearded bard from Bengal. Our story instead concerns Hoppé and how he, genuinely impressed by the poet's work, promised to make a trip to India with his camera in tow. He had taken a few photographs of the fifty-nine-year old poet during the latter's England visit in 1920, though after 1911, they are said to have met briefly in 1915 as well. Once captured in shades characteristic of Hoppé, Tagore found himself in the robust gallery of faces that included Thomas Hardy, GB Shaw, Ezra Pound and his former protégé TS Eliot, HG Wells, Albert Einstein etc, all of whom having had the distinction of posing, wrapped in shadow and light, for Hoppé's camera. By 1922, after his famous 221-portrait exhibition at the Goupil Gallery in London, Hoppé had become widely celebrated as a portrait photographer. By the time he arrived in Santiniketan in 1929, to photograph the famous Indian Nobel Laureate's now-famous university, Hoppé was already drawn towards the man who helmed it, much like others across the globe who had been attracted to the munificence, the intellectual charm and colossal humanity of Tagore's writings. "Long before it was my privilege to visit Tagore at his university in Santiniketan, I had been deeply impressed by the sheer beauty and sincerity of his writings which conveyed so vividly to the West the emotions of the people of his native Bengal", Hoppé wrote in one of his essays on Tagore in 1941. Though he could not completely eschew his gifts as a portrait artist, Hoppé's camera, mostly small, handheld contraptions that he used in Santiniketan, stand out in their stark depiction of the landscape and the setting, something that portraits often conceal. As Graham Howe writes in the introduction to the Hoppé catalogue published by the Marg Publications, "Hoppé captured a body of remark-

able images that are the first to show a natural, spontaneous and distinctly Modernist view of Indian life." Hoppé himself recalled Santiniketan very fondly for years to come after his visit showing that the place had touched a special core of his heart, a sensation that worked fulltime behind the sensitive and artistic documentation on a small patch on Bengali, nee Indian life. In what is a remarkably precise exposition of the philosophical cornerstone that made Santiniketan what it is, Hoppé writes: "The Santiniketan school... was born with a great scholastic tradition behind it - one that stretches far back into the shadows of ancient India, when colonies of learned men withdrew to the forests to meditate in open seclusion on the meaning of life and man's place therein. According to the poet himself, the school was the materialisation of the intense desire of his own childhood to escape from the prison of classroom walls and fetters of academic scholarship to the freedom of communion with nature and absorption of knowledge through her influences." Little is known about the visit and the details of their stay in Santiniketan. Perhaps both Tagore and Hoppé intended the photos to speak for themselves.

It is clear that Hoppé has access to the nook and corners of the university which was famous for the open air classrooms, its tradition of practical and vocational engagement and the genteel quietude of its faculty. What attracted Hoppé further was the fact that the sage-like setting of the university was never a barrier to its attraction for the progress in sciences and the arts worldwide. As Hoppé writes, "Evening debates on art, literature, or the current problems of the day are popular and in these students, professors and occasionally the Poet himself freely participate. As knowledge of the world's progress is brought to the doors of the Santiniketan not only by means of its fine and up to date library but also through the living witness of teachers and visitors who come from every civilised country, drawn by the magnetic charm of this cultural centre of the world." Hoppé's Santiniketan is surprisingly serene and orderly for its claim to being the cultural centre of the world. But perhaps that is what its attraction had been and that is what brought teachers from across the globe, as the foreign faculty in Hoppé pictures amply exhibit. What Hoppé also manages to capture, in changing or in constant light, the centrality of the Poet in a setting that he has himself helped create. Tagore stands tall in most of his pictures, whatever is the setting and the surrounding. Also, in a series that captures in close detail studying and working in Santiniketan as well as Tagore amongst his students, one portrait of Tagore's brother Abanindranath sitting on a recliner and looking at the horizon is no short of being a masterpiece of portraiture. It really goes to the greatness of Poet that he could attract a talent like Hoppé, who had found fame and fortune in Europe, all the way to Bolpur and helped him leave behind a legacy that is a treasure for all of us who have ever had anything to do with poetry, Santiniketan and of course Rabindranath Tagore. **Santiniketan: Collection of photographs by EO Hoppé, on view at Victoria Memorial Museum.**

Clockwise from top left: Tagore in his drawing room at Santiniketan; Tagore with Indian and foreign faculty; A student at work; A class in progress; Abanindranath



Film that launched a hundred films

In 1949, Jean Renoir, feted French filmmaker, had come to India hunting for locations for his colour film *The River*, which released in 1951, based on a novel by Rumer Godden. Renoir's visit was cause célèbre for the film fraternity in Calcutta who, thirsty for more contact with world cinema, embraced the touring crew with all eagerness. Renoir responded with no less equanimity and included Harisadhan Dasgupta, Kalyan Gupta, Bansi Chandragupta, Ramananda Sengupta in his crew. Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta were inducted as observers. It has been often said Bengali cinema's hallowed entry into the pantheon of world cinema with Ray's *Panther Panchali* would not have been possible had they had not got a chance to interact so closely with Renoir and his crew so early in life. Seen here, from left to right, poster of sixty years of *The River*, Ray and Bansi Chandragupta on location with Claude Renoir and the crew of the film with Jean. SC

