

Kiran Desai, Too Busy To Rest on Her Laurels

The Well-Traveled Writer Connects in D.C.

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When Kiran Desai became the youngest woman ever to win the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, she made a lot of people happy.

There was her mother, novelist Anita Desai, who three times had made the shortlist for the prestigious British award -- which is open to citizens of the Commonwealth of Nations but not the United States -- but had never won.

There was her American publisher, Grove/Atlantic, which had just put out a paperback edition of "The Inheritance of Loss" complete with reading group guide. There was her British publisher, Hamish Hamilton, which took a chance on the 35-year-old Desai's novel -- her second -- after it had been rejected by a discouraging number of publishing houses in Britain.

And then there was Terry Hong.

As a consultant to the Smithsonian, Hong was in charge of lining up speakers for this year's South Asian Literary and Theater Arts Festival, held Saturday at the National Museum of Natural History. Many months before the Man Booker announced its finalists, she'd read and loved "The Inheritance of Loss" and invited the author to the festival. Onstage at the museum's Baird Auditorium, Hong recalled her excitement when, on the afternoon of Oct. 10, she'd gotten a text message alerting her to Desai's triumph.

"I was jumping up and down on Independence Avenue as if I myself had won the lottery," Hong said.

Then she introduced Desai -- who was born in India and now moves easily between her apartment in New York and her father's home in New Delhi -- as "the perfect example of today's global citizen."

"I had a kind of dramatic journey over here," Desai said, referring not to her intercontinental migration but to the suitcase she'd had stolen on the train to Washington.

Then she read a passage from "The Inheritance of Loss" that evoked an immigrant journey infinitely more difficult than her own.

The action in Desai's novel moves back and forth between a decaying colonial mansion in Kalimpong, a hill town in northeast India at the foot of the Himalayas, and the rodent-ridden

basement kitchens of New York. It's to these kitchens that Biju, the son of the mansion's cook (and sole remaining servant), has been dispatched to make his fortune.

"Saeed Saeed caught a mouse at the Queen of Tarts, kicked it up with his shoe, dribbled it, tried to exchange it with Biju, who ran away," Desai read. "It went hysterically up until it came down dead. Fun over. Back to work."

In an interview the day before the festival, Desai had explained that the Queen of Tarts is based on an Upper West Side bakery near where she lived when she was starting "Inheritance." A soft-spoken, dark-haired woman in a brown sweater, she was still a bit rattled by the luggage theft and sipped a nerve-soothing margarita as she talked.

Much of the material for the American portion of her book, she said, came from conversations with illegal immigrants she encountered:

"In New York, these stories are easy to come by. You just talk to the taxi driver. Incredibly complicated stories, crazy hopping from nation to nation. They go from India to Saudi Arabia to Italy to Germany to Guatemala, across the border into Mexico, across the border into the States."

At first she thought she'd be writing from her own experience as an immigrant living in New York. Gradually she realized that she couldn't do this "without including India in the book," by which she means evoking the childhood world that shaped her. She came up with a narrative in which a 16-year-old orphan named Sai is sent to live with her grandfather, a retired judge, in that decaying Kalimpong mansion with its lonely cook.

American and Indian scenes began to intertwine.

The other big change was that instead of concentrating on an upscale immigrant like herself, she shifted her focus to the cook's son. Biju's experience is vastly different from Desai's. He represents a face of India not visible in press reports of the booming of its economy and the "computer kid" culture of its cities.

"There is a lot of championing of the fact that globalization brings wealth to a nation," Desai said. Yet in India "you see this huge class divide. . . . The world is extremely not flat for many people."

The novel weaves together the stories of Biju and of Sai, who falls in love with her tutor only to see him swept up in a violent struggle for self-determination by the region's ethnic Nepalese. But just as important is a third, historical strand -- the story of the old judge -- which is based on the life of Desai's grandfather.

As a relatively poor young man, the judge travels to England to be educated and to partake of what Desai called "this crazy ambition . . . to be one of the ruling class of India right at the moment when the Indian independence movement was really gathering steam." Unlike Biju,

he succeeds in raising himself in the world. But he suffers a different kind of loss.

Trapped between the disappearing British Empire and the fast-changing political landscape of India's nascent democracy, Desai said, the judge cannot "maintain his humanity."

His sole emotional connection becomes his (very British) love for his dog.

Desai went to college thinking she wanted to be a scientist. A writing class at Bennington, taught by essayist, poet and novelist Phillip Lopate, changed her mind. She published her first novel, "Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard," in 1998.

"The Inheritance of Loss" took seven years to finish. During one stretch, Desai lived with her mother and the two wrote in the same room -- though in extremely different styles. Her mother is "very disciplined," Desai says. "She writes by hand and every line comes out without a mess, just grammatically perfect and taut -- as if it's been edited and corrected."

Her own style is messier. She is grateful for the gentle criticism her mother offered, which prompted her to snip out excess story threads -- but also for the advice that "even if it's a flawed book," there comes a point at which you have to stop revising and let it go.

Desai arrived in the United States 20 years ago, when her mother came to New England to teach. She's amazed by the increase in South Asian cultural activity since that time. In the past five to 10 years, she said, "there's been a dramatic explosion of literary festivals, film festivals, South Asian art galleries" in this country.

The South Asian Literary and Theater Arts Festival is part of that explosion. It was launched six years ago by a group called the Network of South Asian Professionals. Three years later, the group joined forces with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program, now a co-sponsor of the festival.

Among Saturday's participants was Samrat Upadhyay -- author of "Arresting God in Kathmandu," "The Guru of Love" and most recently "The Royal Ghosts" -- who is invariably, if awkwardly, referred to as the first Nepali-born writer of fiction in English to be published in the West. Also appearing was Tarun Tejpal, a well-known Indian journalist whose first novel, "The Alchemy of Desire," has been drawing favorable notice in Europe. (It will be published here next month.)

On the film front, there was Tanuj Chopra's "Punching at the Sun," an emotional slice of immigrant life and death in Queens that has been making the festival rounds. It premiered at Sundance and won best narrative feature at the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival.

And there was the U.S. premiere of "DOR," the latest from Nagesh Kukunoor, whose previous work includes "Bollywood Calling" and his high-grossing, low-budget 1998 debut, "Hyderabad Blues."

“DOR” features two female leads -- not an asset, Kukunoor said, when he was trying to raise funds -- whose lives interact in dramatic fashion. One loses her husband and enters the unhappy state of Hindu widowhood, in which many women, unable to remarry or live independent lives, suffer a form of social death.

This theme offered a link to last year’s South Asian festival, at which director Deepa Mehta screened “Water,” her film on widowhood. But there was an even closer link on this year’s program as well: Mehta’s daughter, Devyani Saltzman, who read from her memoir, “Shooting Water,” about the making of the film.

She told of researching “Water” at a grim underground ashram in Benares where unwanted widows retreat to live and die. In the oppressive gloom, she read, “I saw a woman lying on a thin woven reed mat, turning in her sleep. Beside her another lay sleeping. They must have each been over 70. The same age as my Nani in Delhi, I thought to myself. But my grandmother inhabited a different world.”

Her more than 200 listeners grew completely silent as she read on.



*Desai, who lives in New York and New Delhi, was a panelist at the South Asian Literary and Theater Arts Festival here.
(By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)*