

A Conversation with Anita Rau Badami

Athabasca University's 2014-15 Writer in Residence

Veronica Thompson

A striking feature in your writing is the vibrancy of the characters and the settings. What are your strategies and sources for creating these characters and settings?

All my characters and most of the settings start with a small grain of reality. In the case of the characters, it might be the merest gesture made by a stranger on the metro, a phrase uttered by somebody in conversation, a friend or relative's way of thinking about some aspect of life that I have observed and carefully preserved as the building block for a character. Sometimes it could be a question that arises in my mind about somebody that I have just met or, alternatively, known for years, a question about what makes him or her tick, or do this thing or that, make a decision about something perhaps – the question is the trigger to the story that I build around the character. This sort of zooming in on one single aspect of somebody seen, or heard, or known makes it easier for me to create a "real" character, one who becomes whole and alive in my mind and thereafter in the book I am writing. But it takes a while for this to happen – this switch from somebody constructed for the purposes of a work of fiction to somebody who occupies my life for the duration of the writing as a living, breathing entity.

The setting is somewhat easier to construct – once I have decided where the book is to be set and the time during which it is to unfold, then other details are inserted as required. However, this imagined landscape becomes real only when my characters are alive and moving in it.

In all of your novels the situations are simultaneously vast and intimate. How much research do you do when developing a novel, and how do you incorporate that research into your fiction?

The only time I do a great deal of research is when I am writing a book that needs to be historically accurate such as *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* All my other novels are character driven and did not require the amount of research that book needed. In either case, however, the challenge lay in keeping the research invisible, a sort of unseen framework for the fiction. Once again, in order to prevent the story from being obscured by the non-fictional material, I focused on the characters and how their lives were affected (or not) by their historical, geographical, political, social or other larger contexts.

Your novels engage directly with some very traumatic and horrific events, both public and private – domestic violence, murder, assassinations, terrorism. How do you find hope in the fictionalizing of these kinds of events?

I deal directly with terrorism and violence in two of my books *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and *Tell it to the Trees*. The other novels have elements of conflict, sorrow and trauma but not to the same degree. Stories where everything proceeds smoothly and without obstruction and all the characters are blissfully happy would not make for very interesting reading, or for that matter writing. It is an old and well-worn adage that every good story needs conflict of some sort at its heart -- whether it is a private one between husband and wife, father and son, or a public one between countries or large groups involving guns and bombs. Conflict, it seems to me, is a part of the human condition and brings in its trail trauma, horror, sorrow, fear and other negative emotions. But this is the dark side of the human story and must be told, which is what I do to a greater degree in some of my novels and to a lesser degree in others. However, I also believe that for every bit of ugliness that exists in our world, there is also an equal amount of goodness, joy, kindness and other positive things. Which is why every one of my novels has a leavening of optimism and humour – I suppose you might say that is my way of introducing hope into otherwise bleak stories.

*Kamini in **Tamarind Mem** often describes, quite exquisitely, the snow and frost outside her window in Canada, and depictions of winter are prominent in and fundamental to Tell it to the Trees. Despite the beauty of these depictions, winter is oppressive in these novels. How do you achieve both beauty and brutality simultaneously in your writing?*

I suppose the descriptions reflect my own belief that there is no single way of looking at almost anything in this world. A flower as exquisite as a lotus can grow in a reeking pond. Similarly winter can be terrible and cruel in its effects on the human body, but it also has a visual beauty that never fails to move me. An ice storm, for instance, turns a mundane landscape into something unearthly in its loveliness, but it is also dangerous, and can bring all kinds of miseries in its wake. I love bright sunny winter mornings here in Montreal, but conversely, they are also miserably cold. Cloudy days when everything is mournful and overcast and depressing, are also when temperatures are above zero degrees! That said, though, I might still write a novel where winter is nothing but beautiful. In the two novels you mention, winter is oppressive because the story required it to be so in order to create a certain mood.

You've been previously quoted as "wondering what you would do if you discovered that someone you loved – son, father, lover, husband – was involved in something terrible. Would I

*live with the knowledge, keep quiet about it, or would I feel morally obligated to inform the authorities? And then how would I deal with the consequences of losing that love?" Is this part of what you are exploring in **Tell it to the Trees**?*

No, I don't believe that was the idea underpinning this novel. Here I was more concerned with the after-effects of violence in the domestic sphere on children who grow up in that hideous, hidden space. I did use that notion to start *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* but didn't explore it quite as completely as I wanted to. Perhaps I will in another work.

***Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?** has been described as historical fiction. How does including history impact the creation of a novel?*

I find it very challenging to write a novel trapped inside a structure pre-ordained by history. I am constrained by dates and events and have to be careful that the fiction does not go beyond historical parameters. A lot of research is necessary and if I am not careful facts can overwhelm the story and reduce the characters to mere toys marching across the landscape of reality. The trick is to make sure that the characters and their stories are so compelling, that the history which underpins the whole book, remains just that – the underpinning – necessary but only barely visible, the skeleton that you know exists to hold together the overlay of muscle, and tissue and skin.

Are there particular events and/or characters that you find you return to, perhaps in different manifestations, in your writing?

I do write about my grandmother in various ways in my fiction. She was a complex and fascinating woman and could become, one day, the subject of an entire novel. But I am not ready to explore her in her entirety, yet, and so I take small details from her and use them to construct other characters.

Would you describe yourself as a feminist writer?

I have never thought of myself in any terms other than "writer" or "novelist". I have certainly never thought of myself as a feminist. I have, however been brought up to believe that women are entitled to the same opportunities as those offered to men, and if that is what defines a feminist then that's what I am, I guess. But when I write, I do so not as a feminist but as a fiction writer and my only job in that capacity is to create interesting, textured stories with believable

characters who might or might not ascribe to the same beliefs that I hold. The women might be strong or weak depending on the story I am telling, for example. I try not to let my own convictions and beliefs interfere with those held by my creations!

Can you describe your writing process?

I treat writing as I would any job with the added mystery of never really understanding how I managed to complete it, which makes it difficult to describe, I suppose. The physical business of writing is quite ordinary -- I sit at my desk and start to write or think about what I am planning to write at around 9:30, take a few brief breaks in between and then get back to work for as long as I can. I used to have a more structured working life when my son was young but now that he is an adult I have yards of time and don't really need to think about meals and homework and things like that.

The mysterious bit is the process of turning something as ephemeral as the imagination using words as tools into a whole book. I have no way of describing that -- it is still inexplicable for me, but I will try to outline the stages. The beginning of a new novel is always the hardest. There is a lot of scribbling in notebooks, scratching out scribbles, rewriting, dithering about which idea is worth pursuing for three or four or five years and then starting what appears to be THE ONE only to abandon it after a few pages. Once I have settled on an idea, I draw up a rough outline of the story, the characters, their physical details, motivations, the place where they live and, and other details. Then I start to write a chapter, hoping I will find that elusive voice to narrate the whole story. Sometimes I find this voice right away, and at others I have to try out several different ways of telling the story before I locate the right one. Then comes the long business of making up three to four hundred pages of prose. Some days it is exhilaration when things are swimming along, and others are fraught with frustration when the writing isn't doing what I want it to do. Then one day, amazingly, it is done, and a new book is ready to go out of my life.

When did you start writing, and who were your earliest literary influences?

I started writing when I was a child and had my first piece published in a magazine in India when I was 18. My earliest influences were British writers such as Dickens, Shakespeare, Austen -- mostly because their books were on our school syllabus and the ones most easily available in libraries and bookstores. I also read a lot of writing by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy because in the 1970s when I was a child, India and the Soviet Union were great friends and there were Russian bookstores everywhere with beautifully produced books at low, low prices. Later on, though, at

university, I got to read a lot of contemporary prose by writers from the USA, India, and more of Britain. I also learned a lot about story telling from myths and legends and folktales which were all told to me, or read out by people who worked in our home or by my aunts or other relatives.

What books have you reread most often in your life?

Too many to list.

You are also a visual artist. What connections do you experience between the two art forms?

I use a lot of sensory detail in my writing. Colours, forms, shapes, sounds, all these need to be there so that the reader experiences my book as if it were a film, or even better, as if they were in the same place as my characters. Conversely, in my art, it is the narrative impulse that I try to incorporate into the work – especially when it is figurative or abstract or a combination of the two. When I am painting or drawing, I imagine that I am telling a story, or a fragment of one. Later on even if this is not visible to the person looking at my painting, I like to think that he or she can sense that extra thread of meaning running beneath the colours or the ink or pencil lines and is intrigued. In addition, just as my fiction focuses primarily on character, drawing or painting faces is what I love the most.

What can you share about what you have worked on during your AU residency, and do you have a timeline for when it will be published?

All I am willing to say about my new novel is that it is, once again, a family drama, set in Montreal, with the ghost of India in there as well, of course. Each member of the family has a secret that impacts in some way one of the other characters and it is these small mistakes that each character has made that drives the narrative engine of the book as a whole. I do not know when it will be published – soon I hope.