

The In-Between World

Anita Rau Badami explores overlapping cultures and political conflict in her new novel

12

Anita Rau Badami, photographed by Kate Hutchinson on June 21, 2006, at her home in Montreal, Quebec.



SUBSCRIPTIONS

Quill & Quire is published 10 times per year. In Canada: \$59.95 for one year or \$99.95 for two (plus tax). Outside Canada: \$95 for one year in Canadian funds. Subscription includes the Canadian Publishers Directory each December and June. Bulk rates available. To subscribe, visit: www.quillandquire.com/subscriptions/

SUBSCRIPTION PRIVACY POLICY

We occasionally make our subscriber list available to companies who have products or services of interest to the book industry. If you prefer not to receive these mailings, call (416) 364-3333 or e-mail info@quillandquire.com

Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:
CIRCULATION DEPT.
111 QUEEN STREET EAST
TORONTO, ON M5C 1S2

GST# R102824547 QST# 1007362621
PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40012362
REGISTRATION NO. 08805

THAT'S EDUTAINMENT..... 15
Will Indigo's puzzles and toys eat into book sales?

THE Q&Q DISTRIBUTION SURVEY 16
Are publishers getting speedier? And who's the new #1?

AFTER MONEYBALL 19
The changing face of the sports biography, and more in the Sports Spotlight

A photograph of Anita Rau Badami sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved, button-down shirt and a white skirt. She has dark hair and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows lush green trees and a house with a tiled roof. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD

*Anita Rau
Badami explores
overlapping
cultures and
political conflict
in her new
novel*

*by Mary
Soderstrom*

Anita Rau Badami's newest novel is being published this month, but as with many major authors, her promotional duties actually kicked off back in June, with a visit to the BookExpo Canada trade show in Toronto.

She went somewhat reluctantly. "I hate to leave my garden this time of year," she explains as she prepares to give me an early-summer tour. "My garden is my obsession." Then she offers the quick laugh that often punctuates her conversation.

Her passion for her smallish but extravagantly planted yard — a couple of hundred square metres of beauty in the middle of Montreal — is a sharp contrast to that new novel's preoccupation with horrific public events. Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? (Knopf Canada) encompasses the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the subsequent bombing of Air India Flight 182, and also stretches back to the Partition of India and Pakistan.

Yet in talking with Badami, it becomes clear that the garden and the novel are two expressions of the same impulses. Both are acts of creation, and she has used both to claim this land as her own.

Badami was not quite 30 in 1956, when she and her son Aditya, then four, arrived in Calgary from Bangalore, India, to join her husband, Madhav, who was working on a master's degree in regional planning at the University of Calgary. Her first impressions of Canada were of "cold and silence." She wished that her father, who had lived for a time in the foothills of the Himalayas, could see the beautiful white expanse, but he died when she was 19. (That death is echoed throughout her

work: each of her three novels has at least one female character who must deal with the loss of a father.)

In India, Badami had been a journalist and also wrote fiction for children's magazines, including dozens of short stories and longer, serialized works. But when she arrived in Canada, she says, the "didn't have the necessary cultural or political background" to find work in those fields. So she began taking creative writing classes and eventually enrolled in the University of Calgary's master's program. Her supervisor, Aritha Van Merk, encouraged her to write short stories, one of which developed into Badami's best-selling first novel, *Tamarind Stem* (published in 1996 by Viking Canada). She moved to Knopf Canada for her second novel, *The Hero's Walk*, in 2000. *Nightbird* is her third.

But Badami has not set aside the techniques she learned in her earlier writing. "The point of view of a child is an extremely interesting way to tell a story," she says, and that point of view recurs in all three of her adult novels. "Children are sensitive to things, they half-know, half-understand, and if the point-of-view character realizes after the fact what things mean, the hints advance the novel."

There are other echoes from her earlier work, too. Much of what she wrote for children was in the first person, and the still loves "the intimacy and immediacy of a first-person narrative," she says. Among her finished novels, only *Tamarind Stem* is told in that voice. But she says that with her subsequent books, she began by writing in the first person as a way to get inside the characters. The result in *Nightbird* is striking: what the three major characters see, feel, and think is told in vivid, captivating detail.

The novel actually began, though, with musings about the intersection between personal concerns and larger ethical and political ones. After Badami and her family moved to Vancouver in the late 1990s, she "began 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?"

Something else was haunting her as well. In 1984, when she and her husband were honeymooning, they arrived in Delhi on the day after Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh guards in reprisal for her order to send troops into the Sikhs' most holy shrine, the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Riots and violence against Sikhs followed. "The city was in flames, and we saw some incredibly awful things. The bus we were on was stopped several times by hoodlums looking for Sikhs. Among the passengers was a Hindu holy man, a Sadhu, with his hair in a topknot. The goons thought he was a Sikh, but passengers convinced them that he wasn't and so he was safe."

Many others weren't so lucky, and *Nightbird* is dedicated to one of them: "The man on the bridge in Modinagar." Badami and her husband, watching helplessly from the bus, saw this man thrown in flames from the bridge. "How to capture the horror and the sadness of that?" asks Badami. "It's incredible that people can cold-bloodedly burn other people alive. What pushes a person into that place when he can without question harm others?"

The book is also dedicated to "the victims of Air India Flight 182," which was the greatest civilian loss to terrorism in history until the 9/11 attacks. Many assert that the Air India bombing was retribution by Sikh extremists for the violence that followed the Gandhi assassination. Yet Badami's novel is far from a simplistic tale of evil. One group's heroes can be another group's villains, she notes, adding "all acts of terrorism are rooted in real reasons." She found herself looking for those reasons in the lives of people in both India and Canada.

She was especially fascinated by young Canadian-born Sikhs, "some of whom had never spent much time outside the interior of B.C., who in the 1980s suddenly wanted a free Punjab, an independent Sikh state. How did they get that way? Where were they going?" Her first impulse was to write a love story about one such young man, Jasbeer, and a girl from a Hindu background, Preethi. "But it didn't go anywhere. I didn't know how young people

in British Columbia talked in the 1980s. I couldn't get inside the characters."

More doubt struck after 9/11. "It seemed so opportunistic to be writing about terrorism," Badami says. She and her family had recently moved to Montreal – the third Canadian city that she has called home – where her husband had accepted a position at McGill University. "For a whole year I kept asking myself, *How am I going to do this?* It sounded so fake, everything was wrong. But then I realized the story had to be grounded in historical events not only in Canada but in India."

It also had to be grounded in characters – which meant research not only into the political events but into the Sikh religion. Badami herself was raised in a nominally Hindu household – "my father was an atheist, and my mother loved to tell us stories from the Hindu tradition," she says – but she has great admiration for Sikhism. "It is so egalitarian – the Sikhs are such generous-spirited people. I tried to be as much sympathetic understanding as possible to the situation."

She decided she wanted to focus the story on three women: Nimmo, Bibi-Ji, and Leela; two Sikhs and a Hindu; two immigrants to Vancouver and a Delhi resident. The young people whom she originally imagined remain in the story – Jasbeer is Nimmo's son, while Preethi is Leela's daughter – but in the completed novel their paths have become very different. Jasbeer is a Sikh nationalist, while Preethi has become a successfully integrated, high-achieving Canadian woman.

Is this CanLit or literature of the Indian diaspora? Badami stops to think a minute before she answers. "Sometimes I feel as if I'm standing between two worlds," she says. "It's taking a long time to figure out what it means to be an immigrant in Canada. I feel as if I must write several more books before I figure it out."

This fall she probably won't have much time for writing, though, as Knopf is sending her on a 10-city tour, with appearances at several major literary festivals. Before then, Badami plans on spending time in her garden. As she points out the roses, now loaded with buds after the harsh winter, and the naturalized daylilies preparing to burst into bloom, it seems almost a metaphor for her novels, where people from many places live – and sometimes, after much work, thrive – side by side. ■