

What made you first take up fiction writing?

A spell of joblessness. I'd had to leave my job at the BBC when I was moved to the breakfast shift - a news reporting job that involved having to leave the house at 5am to be at the news desk for 6. Since my daughter, Rohini, needed help to get bathed and ready for school in the mornings, this was impossible for me to manage. Stuck at home and feeling utterly bored and useless, I started to write a kind of memoir that then grew into my first book, *Ancient Promises*.

Was that how you first discovered yourself as a writer?

I've always liked to write. Even as a child, the only homework I used to enjoy was essay writing and I was the only one amongst all my friends who used to write copious letters while on holiday, even if they were never replied to. My first novel was written when I was about ten, a pompous little tragedy that was called *And the World Marched On*, the title almost definitely stolen from somewhere. But I guess I only saw myself as a writer once *Ancient Promises* got published. I have to admit that, even now, there are days when I feel like a bit of an imposter in the literary world, mostly because I don't write very LIT-ER-RARY books. They sell well, though, so I'm learning to convince myself that good writing is not necessarily what critics hail but simply what people read and tell their friends to read. Perhaps when I have a bigger corpus of work, I'll describe myself as a 'writer'. I had once set Jane Austen's 6 as a sort of target but, having overtaken that number and not feeling at all 'Austen-esque' yet, I've revised that to Dickens's 20-ish.

What do you mean by 'not very literary'?

Well, general wisdom is that 'literary fiction' is more demanding of the reader, focussing more on style than story or narrative which is 'commercial fiction' territory. Of course, a lot of books straddle such easy descriptions. I remember David Godwin, the agent who sold *Ancient Promises* describing it as a 'cross-over' book and I can think of many others too. More crucially, readers are usually eclectic in their tastes and tend not to read out of convenient little boxes. But such terms have been created by publishers (editors and PR and sales teams) to place their books, understand whom they are aimed at and how best to market them so, to some extent, authors have to allow themselves to be pigeon-holed thus.

You have a strong pedigree as a writer, certainly to Malayalis who are aware of your relationship with the legendary Thakazhy Sivasankaran Pillai. Has this helped?

I wouldn't sneeze at the idea of a writerly gene, not with a great-uncle like Thakazhy in the family. But all I know is that I used to hero-worship Thakazhi Amavan as a kid, seeing him as the only grown-up who did the kind of job I would like to do someday. Whenever he came to Delhi for a seminar or function, our house would suddenly be full of his fans and other well-known writers, such as O.V. Vijayan (whose nephew, also a writer, I'm matey with now, curiously). An atmosphere would prevail that was completely different to that of my parents normal Air Force one. Hanging around the edges of the animated literary or political conversations that always surrounded Thakazhy Amavan, I used to feel as though I were

getting a glimpse into some exalted world that was on a far higher plane than my very mundane one. When a short story that I wrote as a thirteen year old was published in the Deccan Herald, my father posted a clipping to Amavan who wrote back with the first bit of literary criticism I was to receive. He was a model critic, appreciative but also constructive in his criticism. He picked out one of my descriptions to particularly praise - that of a small girl whose only clean part was the thumb that emerged from her mouth - leaving me with an early, very important lesson in how small observations can serve to present a wealth of information.

An autobiographical novel carries all sorts of risks. Did you ever think of possible consequences when you wrote *Ancient Promises*?

When I started *Ancient Promises*, it was a memoir being written a bit like a long explanatory note to my husband who, I felt, had never completely understood some of the decisions I had made as a teenager that had affected his life too. It was a private endeavour and I never dreamt at that point that it would ever get published. But, when the manuscript had grown to full-length and an agent was interested in selling it, I obviously panicked at the thought of having something so personal out in the public realm. At that point, I started to fictionalise as much of it as was possible without losing the essence of the story and the final result was *Ancient Promises*

. Thinking about readers and social consequences comes only when a writer is assured of being published and, even then, I believe that the best fiction emerges when authors are only trying to tell a story and do not carry any grander agendas in mind.

What does your daughter think to your writing? Does she know that she too was one of the characters in your first book?

Rohini recognises my name on the book jackets and her own on the acknowledgements page but I don't think she really knows what it's all about because of her limited understanding. She certainly knows that I'm writing books when I sit for long boring hours in front of the computer - which really annoys her sometimes. The only bit of the whole thing she's really interested in are the book launches - which she eagerly looks forward to, calling them book lunches as she tucks rather too enthusiastically into the food that is served at them!

*Ancient Promises* had some strong criticism against the system of arranged marriages. Weren't you worried about how people in Kerala would react?

I completely disagree with that analysis. Far from setting out to rubbish the arranged marriage system, I go to great lengths in *Ancient Promises* to explain how well the system worked for most people in Janu's immediate circle - her parents, grandparents, uncles - which is why she herself succumbs to it so hopefully. The fact that it did not work for her was down to all sorts of other factors that the book attempts to explain, both on a practical and philosophical level. Having said that, I was anxious about the reaction I thought I may get from Kerala readers in my presentation of life in its upper social circles as being sometimes not the most conducive to women's freedom and emancipation. Consequently, I was both surprised and relieved when I received so much positive endorsement of that view from different quarters - from critics and ordinary readers. The only way a society can progress and improve is when it is willing to be

self-critical, rather than hang onto false notions of its own greatness. Too often, I had heard fellow Malayalis praise our home state for its hundred percent literacy rates and the many other statistics we share with the developed world and - while I too take great pride in those facts - it seemed doubly sad that, despite them, we still allowed deep-seated conservatism and orthodoxies to keep women from achieving their full potential. Nothing could have delighted me more than suddenly realising that there were enough Malayalis (home-grown and of the diaspora) who felt the same way as me and who seemed to appreciate my honesty.

What exactly is the title *Ancient Promises* referring to?

It is a philosophical thread, borne from Hindu ideas about karma and re-birth, that runs through the book, and is essentially Janu's way of understanding and coming to terms with her broken marriage and the birth of her child who has a disability.

Why did you resort to a male point of view in the sequel, *Afterwards*?

*Afterwards* is not quite a sequel but I realise that to a lot of people it felt like one. The male point of view was a deliberate effort on my part to try something different. As I said earlier, I'm still discovering and experimenting as a writer and enjoying every minute of it. My second novel (*Accidents Like Love and Marriage*) was a comedy of manners, *Rani* a historical novel, *Secrets and Lies* started off life as a whodunnit but turned into a celebration of female friendship. It may sound crazy but, honestly, I'm never very sure of what will come next. Until my agent subjects me to the third degree and I have to quickly come up with a proper synopsis that will make her stop scowling!

What do you think about fellow Indian writers, especially the women?

Superbly talented. I recall my first editor at Penguin UK saying once that nobody uses English more imaginatively than Indian and Irish writers; probably something to do with being, by and large, bi-lingual. But I think it's the women writers from these two cultures who have shown themselves to be especially talented at the kind of quiet, self-effacing writing I admire. Women often get criticised for dwelling too much on domestic concerns, the limited sphere of home, hearth, heart. But isn't that where life's biggest dramas are played out? It is much cleverer, I believe, to be able to describe human endeavours using that two-inch bit of ivory that Jane Austen luckily made available to us all. It's something of a male trait, I think, to go for those grand themes and verbal pyrotechniques.

Who is your favourite author?

I don't have favourite authors as much as favourite books - Roy's *God of Small Things* and Seth's *Itable Boy*

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among Indian writers. And I do really like the way Marian Keyes and David Nicholls and the early Nick Hornby can be funny and poignant all at once. My favourite books of all time? -

Harper Lee's

*To Kill a Mockingbird*

and Ian McEwan's

*Atonement*

, both crafted to perfection.

What are your future projects?

At the moment [spring 2011], the third of my three books with Harper Collins is nearing its launch date. The book, titled *A Scandalous Secret* will be available in UK bookshops and supermarkets by May 2011, although the Indian release will probably be in June.

As people often ask - no, the three 'Secrets' books are not sequels, nor even related in terms of themes or characters. Only the titles have resonance with each other and have been chosen by my publishers as a kind of 'branding' exercise. I'm not sure such things work but I'd rather go along with professionals who hopefully know what they are doing. Personally, I blame Bridget Jones for being such a successful franchise.

I haven't quite decided yet what to write next, and I'm currently veering madly between 'bittersweet rom-com' and 'historical novel'. Maybe I'll manage both! Write a few pages of one every alternate day! Well, that's the kind of mad challenge I'm prone to setting for myself and then forgetting about the next minute.

Talking of challenges, the residential home project for people with disabilities is taking shape very well (please do email me if you want to know more, or help in any way) and, despite the odd hiccup, I'm settling into life in India and missing London just a little less heart-wrenchingly than before. Now, if I could only find myself a decent *plumber* ...

