

UNEDITED VERSION OF INTERVIEW IN TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE (30th July 2011)

1. How did you come up with a theme like adoption in 'A Scandalous Secret' after two other books in the series which had more chick lit themes.

This book also has a woman-centric theme, as it explores the mother-daughter relationship, albeit looking at the idea of rejection rather than the more usual maternal love. I'm not sure the other two 'Secrets' books are straightforward chick-lit either as that genre usually calls for much bigger dollops of romance and comedy. 'Secrets & Lies' is a celebration of female friendship but has the underlying theme of bullying and 'Secrets & Sins', though on the face of it a love story, explores the idea of adultery – not really chick-lit territory which usually offers much lighter fare. All three books do, however, fall under the genre that's been given a very cumbersome name in western literary circles, which is: 'quality commercial women's fiction'!

2. Which are some of the books you are reading now and what do you like about them.

I finally managed to get hold of Andrea Levy's 'Small Island', which won both the Orange and Whitbread prizes in the year it came out. Wonderfully touching and funny story of post-war West-Indian migration to Britain in the 50s. Much of the humour and pathos of that story would apply to the large groups of Indians who also emigrated to Britain at around the same time, all with dreams of this 'golden' land that would solve all the problems they were facing in their home countries. How they faced up to their shattered dreams and then gradually started building new lives for themselves in a cold and unfriendly land is the story of immigration the world over.

I also recently read a terrific commercial fiction novel called 'One Day' by David Nicholls. A moving love story that also charts the social history of Britain from the 80s. Again, it did that thing I love when I read, which is to make me want to cry and laugh all at once. Goose-bumpy and wonderful.

3. What must a person do to be a good writer? What advice would you give your readers about writing?

Most of all, an aspiring writer has to have self-belief and patience and persistence. Writing a book is such a long process, you simply can't rush it and I do worry about the up 'n' coming generations I see who want immediate gratification and overnight success. Not that such things don't happen but it's impossible in the world of books, I'm afraid! Another very important aspect to becoming a good writer is to read voraciously and never confine oneself to one genre. Learn from others but try to come up with a technique and style that's unique and unusual. I've actually been writing a column on creative writing that's now available on my website so there's lots of tips there for aspiring writers.

4. What is your typical day now like, in India where you've settled down?

Well, going by what I've just said in my previous answer, it should be no surprise to know that I spend vast amounts of time indoors, reading and writing. One has to find the balance, of course, with keeping one's life and 'mental windows' open to allow for real experiences, without which one would soon start running out of material to write about!

I'm also involved in setting up a large residential community for people with disabilities that's coming up on the outskirts of Delhi. I'm working alongside a terrific bunch of parents and we meet fairly regularly to keep the project going (the building given to us by the National Trust is being renovated at the moment and we've just been a bore-well by the Jal Board). It's both comfortable and comforting to work with people who share my experience and beliefs in such an important matter. All such groups develop a kind of 'gallows humour' around whatever it is that they're facing and ours is, of course, our children who are all teenage plus with learning disabilities.

5. What is your opinion of Indian women authors now? What can they do to improve and bring out better books? Does the western writer fare better than us?

I think Indian authors are getting more and more confident regarding the way they write, the subjects they write about and their likely readership. Gone, thankfully, are the days when we all thought we had to write like Salman Rushdie in order to succeed. Gone also are the days when we were constantly looking to the west for tacit approval. Now we have Indian writers like Preeti Shenoy doing out-and-out commercial fiction with enormous sales among younger people here in India, Rashmi Bansal bringing out imaginative best-selling non-fiction books on entrepreneurship and, of course, Rujuta Dwivekar's wildly popular diet and fitness books. I revel in the variety that's on offer and am very pleased that I no longer have to go hunting for something written by a western writer as there's every chance an Indian writer would have already covered the subject.

Is the western writer faring better? Not any more, as they're all eyeing the Indian market in the face of their own sagging domestic sales. Even publishers are trying to find different ways to tap into this market so it's actually a great time to be an Indian writer.

6. What is coming up next with you? Another set of fiction or is there anything else you are working on or plan to do in the near future?

Well, with the release of 'A Scandalous Secret', I'm now done with my three-book deal with Harper Collins. I've had fun with them, and have learnt a whole lot about writing smartly and keeping deadlines, but I'm very glad to now have the time to languish a bit more while I write my next book. No crazy deadlines and no editor breathing down my neck – bliss! Having said that, I almost never sit around wasting time so I've already pretty much completed the first draft of a new book that mixes historical fiction with contemporary life and times. The theme sounds a bit hard-hitting (human trafficking) but it's hopefully a readable account of two young women who were caught up in the terror of that world and responded in completely different ways.