

***The Tiger Claw***  
**Q & A for the *National Post***

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**Please tell us a bit about *The Tiger Claw* and Noor Inayat Khan.**

*The Tiger Claw* is the story of Noor, a secret agent for the Allies who, while on her secret mission during World War II in France, goes in search of her beloved Armand. It is inspired by the story of Noor Inayat Khan, a Muslim woman who was trained by the British as a radio operator and spy, and secretly landed in France. Her mission: to help the French Resistance with communications and sabotage against the Nazis. To the Germans, she and her colleagues were terrorists and insurgents working against the Occupation, and just two weeks after she landed, the Gestapo arrested most of her network. But Noor refused an order to return to England for safety and continued to work almost alone.

When the novel opens in December 1943, Noor has been imprisoned. She begins writing in secret, tracing the events that led to her capture, and her personal mission – to unite with her beloved Armand. And when Germany surrenders in 1945, her brother Kabir begins his search through the chaos of Europe's Displaced Persons camps to find her.

**How did the idea for this novel come about?**

The only true spy I've ever met (that I know of) is Gaston Vandermeerssche, a leader in the Dutch underground in WWII. While Gaston was writing his memoir *Gaston's War*, he came across the story of Noor Inayat Khan. "An Indian princess was imprisoned by the Gestapo at the same time and place as I was," he told me. "Sure," I said. "Every Indian woman was an exotic houri or princess then, and a wizard programmer today." "Noor is different," he assured me. So in 2000, after the publication of *What the Body Remembers*, I read *Madeleine*, Jean Overton Fuller's 1952 biography of Noor. It raised so many questions, I began reading other books about Noor. I found she has been exoticized, eroticised, blamed and glorified, her tale told, embellished and retold in terribly Orientalist fashion.

**What kind of research did you do?**

My bibliography runs to ten pages – accounts of London, France, Germany, India and the US during the war; memoirs and histories of Occupied France in French and English; several accounts of the double agent codenamed Gilbert who betrayed several resistance networks, and the radio game that misled the Germans about the when and where of D-day; biographies of Noor's father, where Noor is mentioned in footnotes.

Churchill biographies omitted what I knew from growing up in India: that Churchill's policies resulted in a man-made famine in which more than 3.5 million people suffered and died. They omitted that civil liberties were suspended in India, many elected Indian leaders imprisoned, and dissent harshly suppressed during the war. In 1943, Noor and her contemporaries would have

been aware of the famine and suppression of civil rights, and the works of Paul Greenough and Amartya Sen helped make that famine a presence in the novel.

In India, I travelled to Baroda, now called Vadodara, to see Noor's ancestral home and meet her family. I tried to understand her father's message in relation to other preachers in the Sufi tradition. To understand Noor's time in Europe better, I walked around Suresnes, the quaint little town outside Paris where she grew up, went to La Mosquée where she must have prayed. I sought out people who had lived in France during the war, and Muslims who could help me understand Sufism. I followed her route through England, France and Germany. Meeting people who had known and loved her, visiting apartments she used as safe houses, places from where she transmitted; the wartime Gestapo headquarters on the Avenue Foch; and the prison where she was kept enchained for ten months.

**What were the biggest challenges you faced in writing this book?**

Distinguishing between commemoration and history of World War II. Since I'm a Sikh, not a Muslim, I read widely and talked with many students of Sufism and Islam. Creating Noor's captor Ernst Vogel. I had to portray a Nazi's xenophobia, racism, and fears as Allied bombs rained down on his family in Germany, along with his deeply human need: to be loved.

**Do you have any particular literary influences?**

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is probably the biggest influence on my moral vision of the world. Sometimes I call on the rhythm of the epics and poetry I grew up with – the *Mahabharat*, the *Ramayan*, Whitman, Shelley, Byron, Chaucer – but of course I'm not aware of that until afterwards.

**Is there a book that changed your life?**

Every book I read changes my life. Every book illuminates some area, provides models, options, other points of view. Books enter my life with uncanny synchronicity, each giving me something I need at the time.

**What's your next project?**

That's top secret.

**Shauna Singh Baldwin**  
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