

Response to Questions from Tehelka
By Shauna Singh Baldwin
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- 1. You've said: "You would not attend writer's conferences if you did not believe in the power of the written word to transform your life." How has writing transformed your life?**

Writing helps me live with more awareness. I remember events and places better if I've written about them. I capture the moment – not merely visually as one might with a camera, but noting smells, sounds, tastes and touch. Being a writer allows me to give myself permission to ask questions to which I do not need answers for myself. Being a reader and writer of fiction forces me to set aside my current self, and see other points of view.

- 2. If you hadn't been a writer, what career would you have liked?**

I would like a thousand different careers -- an actress, a polo-player, a composer, a pianist, a radio-producer, a rickshaw-wallah, a magician, a photographer, an ayah, a doctor, a lawyer, a publicist, a weaver, a farmer, a mali, an architect.... Fiction allows me to explore what it would feel like to have such skills.

- 3. How, if at all, did studying something as traumatic as the Partition affect you personally?**

I wept through much of the writing of *What the Body Remembers*, but I became grateful to the story and its characters eventually, grateful for making me see why the Partition reaches into our present, why it permeates our lives as an unresolved, un-mourned event. For example, from 1999 to 2002, Hindu fascists published 400-page reports of violence from 1947 on the net to stir up anger against Muslim minority communities in India. Similarly, fear of Partition-style violence keeps minorities in Pakistan from asserting their civil rights. We have no memorials to those who paid in lives, land, blood and conscience for Indian or Pakistani independence, no understanding that 17 million people were displaced in both countries, or that 5 million people died (both country figures). I don't believe memorials can stanch this psychic wound, but something like the South African reconciliation trials might help us all before we say farewell to the generation that experienced Partition. Because Partition is unexamined and undocumented in so many ways and since Bush never learned about it or understood it in history classes he might have taken at Yale, the world is considering a repeat of that "solution" today, this time for Israel.

- 4. A writer of Indian origin is labeled everything from an Indo Anglian writer to an Immigrant Writer. Do you dislike labels? Do you see them as being condescending? What label, if any, would you prefer?**

Labels are just organization tools. Any condescension implied is the labeller's character problem, not mine. When you accept a label applied to you and stay within it, you limit

yourself. So I like being in many categories. I'm an Immigrant writer in the US, a Canadian writer in Canada, a diasporic Indian writer in India, a woman writer in some circles, a literary fiction writer in others...One day I might get the best label of all – a human being who writes.

5. You've recounted how after a reading of *What the Body Remembers*, an elderly woman stood up, and said that she had met a Sikh once, and that they made good door men. Have you by now become immune to such reactions?

No I am certainly not immune to such reactions! People surprise me every day. Get me a shroud when my reserves of outrage are spent. Those who have no outrage have given up feeling, they seek comfort in the myth of inevitability.

6. Do you feel that writing about non-Indian origin Canadians or Americans is your final frontier?

No. My stories and novels have many non-Indian characters – my Indian-origin characters meet people of all different origins if the story calls for it.

7. What's the best part of being a successful writer?

Hearing from a reader who was touched by a line, a character or a situation. Hearing someone say reading one of my books changed their lives in some way. The adjective "successful" might be premature -- I have a long way to go and many stories I need to tell.

8. Would you describe yourself as a feminist writer?

Yes. Consider the alternative.

Does one get to be a "feminist writer" by choosing to write from a woman's point of view? Then how do you explain the fact that I have two male point-of-view characters in my novels to date and a few more in my short stories?

Does one get to be a "feminist writer" by writing about active caring women? I don't know any passive accepting women, or men. Besides, who would be interested in tales of passive women if such people existed? Men only, maybe? I like women who try not to let themselves be determined by others, even other women. My women characters may be headstrong but they usually care a great deal about the impact of their actions on others. And they are feminist, often long before their time; they dare believe and act as if they are people.

How would I "write as a man"? Perhaps using a masculine sensibility that restricts me and my reader to the timeless but incomplete: love and death. To write with a feminine sensibility is to cover the ground of difference -- chasm? -- between men and women: subjects like menstruation, marriage, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, co-

mothering, surrogate mothering, sisterhood, and caring for children. There is progress -- men who write novels sometimes have female protagonists. But quite often they are talking *to* women, and not yet *about* women.

9. Can you tell Indian readers about *The Safe House*, and how it lead to *The Tiger Claw*?

My husband and I own The Safe House, an espionage-theme restaurant in Milwaukee -- you can have a virtual experience of it at www.safe-house.com. At the Safe House, I met the only true spy I've ever met (that I know of). Gaston Vandermeerssche was 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, which only led to more questions, till I finally wrote my way to the possible answers through this novel about a Muslim secret agent in search of her Jewish beloved in WWII France.

10. What research did you do for the book? How long did it take you?

WWII was covered in a chapter during my schooling in India. Though 2.5 million Indians had served, it wasn't considered India's war. But from my research for *What the Body Remembers*, the story of two women in a polygamous marriage in colonial India, I knew of the man-made famine Indians had suffered as a result of Churchill's policies, and of the suppression of dissent in India during the war. Churchill biographies are markedly silent about his famine policies, which caused the deaths of 3.5 million people in India. It isn't top secret -- anyone reading Nehru's most famous work of prison writing *Discovery of India* will discover the famine in the first chapter. On the Internet, information about this famine was posted only on Holocaust-denial web sites. In 1943, Noor would have been as aware of that famine as any educated expatriate Indian.

I collected books that mentioned Noor, immersing myself in accounts of London during the war, reading memoirs and other books about Occupied France in French and English. I interviewed a survivor of Dachau and people who had lived through the war in France. I read many fiction and non-fiction accounts of the double agent codenamed Gilbert who betrayed Noor's network only days after Noor joined it, and the radio game that misled the Gestapo about D-day. I interviewed people in the Grignon area and found more details of the roundup for which Noor was awarded the Croix de Guerre. In biographies of her father, Noor was mentioned only in footnotes. The official History of the SOE mentions another woman, Renée Garry in a footnote. My story came alive when I realised the emotional connection between those footnotes.

Each resistance agent I read about, not only Noor, deserved a book be written about their exploits. But treatment of captured resistants led me to the question -- why was Noor

treated differently? Why was she tortured as little as she was, why not more? Why was she held in prison so long instead of being sent to a camp?

To understand Noor's situation better, I travelled her route through England, France and Germany, visiting apartments she used as her safe houses, places from where she transmitted, and the prison where she was kept in chains for 10 months. I walked around Suresnes, the quaint little town outside Paris where she grew up, went to La MosquJe where she must have prayed as a child. In India, I travelled to Baroda, now called Vadodara, to see her ancestral home.

An area I thought would be a tremendous challenge, understanding how people can slide into Fascism, was brought to me in real time in contemporary America. After the World Trade Center tragedy of 2001, people I knew began polarising into pro- and anti-Bush factions, with Bush-supporters acquiescing under the excuse of "Security" to amazing violations of international law, the law of the land, as well as civil and human rights. Just like Noor searches for her beloved Armand Rivkin, who has been rounded up as a terrorist and locked away in a camp, some woman in Afghanistan waits and prays for news from GuantBnamo Bay about her husband, or loved one. Just as Noor was trying to send her Armand a message in 1943, some woman is trying to reach her "enemy combatant" husband through the International Red Cross, praying he is alive after two years in prison, trying not to believe he may have been tortured. And just as the French said in the early 1940s, "they must be black marketeers and terrorists," many Americans in my day are saying the same of the 1100 nameless people rounded up after 9/11/01, and of 3000 people mentioned in Bush's January 2003 State of the Union speech. I understand Fascism now – it is that time when the worst in us is glorified and rewarded by our leaders.

Noor challenged my preconceptions at every turn. A Muslim woman who received the George Cross for aiding in sabotage operations, a Muslim woman who received the Croix de Guerre for her bravery in facing and killing two German soldiers. Was she a terrorist or a valiant member of the resistance? It was a trompe d'oile picture where you consciously switch point of view back and forth to see either a vase or twin faces in profile, but not both together. And like that picture flipping in and out of view, Noor is a terrorist in the eyes of the Germans, and a formidable member of the French resistance in the eyes of the Allies.

Other challenges: the second point of view, Noor's brother Kabir – an RAF pilot who, having bombed Germany during the war, turns to religion, becoming a Sufi pir like his father. And since I'm not a Muslim, I read widely and talked with many students of Sufism and Islam.

To write Noor's story, I had to create her opposite. Gestapo interrogator Ernst Vogel. I had to allow him his xenophobia, racism, and mortal fears as Allied bombs rained down on his people, and his family in Germany. Some writers have humanised Nazi characters by portraying them as loving fathers and faithful husbands; that was too facile. My story deepened when I understood that Vogel had a need we all have – to be loved, though he

loved power that he became incapable of love for others. Sadly, we all know men and women like Vogel.

Research and writing for the *The Tiger Claw* took me four and a half years.

11. What were the reactions of Noor's descendants—who I believe you met in India—to the writing of this book? Have they read it?

Not yet. I hope they love it.

12. How much of it is truth, and how much fiction?

33.33 percent and I'm not telling you which is which J.

13. You've said this is the only book you could have written? Why?

No, I said I feel you should *write the book that only you can write*. And every so often when I got discouraged I reminded myself that only a culturally hybrid person like me could write *in this way* about Noor, because she too was such a hybrid person. (which doesn't mean there won't be other interpretations of her story).

14. You took a break from the book after 9/11, to distribute pamphlets on behalf of Sikh cab drivers, who were being targeted for their supposed likeness to Osama Bin Laden. Can you tell us about that?

This was published in *Writer's Digest* magazine:

Horror and grief for the victims of the World Trade Center gave way a few days after the attack to the realization that a backlash was in progress against members of my community, Sikh-Americans, and other minorities. We were reminded that no minority is immune from racism in the land of the free.

When 206 hate crimes against Sikhs were logged across America in just five days we first thought these hate crimes were the product of ignorance. That because our men wear turbans, there were actually cretins who believed we are related to or followers of Bin Laden. At the same time, 3.5 million Muslim-American friends and neighbors were also targets, and we didn't want to redirect the violence we are experiencing, against them. But it didn't help when President Bush called his "war" a "crusade."

But in the wired world of the 21st Century, hate crimes cannot be excused by ignorance. We now understand that racists across America believed the events of Sept 11 gave them license to attack and vandalize anyone visually different, settle personal scores, feel macho. For weeks, I put my novel on hold and channeled my eloquence into flyers, e-mails, and anti-hate crime faxes.

My flyers said, "Yes, our men wear turbans and No, we are not related to Bin Laden."

Volunteers from the community distributed them to cab drivers, school children, and police officers from other communities.

To both terrorists and racists I say: each of us is given the ability to create and to destroy, I opt to create.