

Shauna Singh Baldwin

Email Interview with Media Voice -- August, 2010.

Interviewer: Deepa Srinivasan

1. What kind of research went into 'What the Body Remembers'?

The kernel of the story was my family history. In addition I travelled to Pakistan, interviewed women on both sides of the border, and read many history books by British and Indian sources.

Also the book is the subject of polygamy as well.

**Response from SSB:** The book is not the subject of polygamy – polygamy is one of the subjects of the book. Polygamy was the norm in India before the laws changed in 1956. Men believed it was a humane and generous way of life, and wrote off the suffering of individual women as the cost of their security. Not being a social historian, I don't write about polygamy as an institution. I'm a storyteller, and write about people who practised polygamy in the 1920s and 1930s in India. Several people in my generation have two or more grandmothers – maybe you do too. Have you ever asked your elders? Ask how those many grandmothers felt about their "older sisters" and "younger sisters." Ask whether one of your grandmothers was a poorer woman brought in to be a surrogate mother. Ask if she was ambitious? Then read Satya and Roop's story in *What the Body Remembers*.

How did you decide on the title – does it have to do with the memory of the mind?

**Response from SSB:** I don't know what you mean by "*the memory of the mind*." The title *What the Body Remembers* came as the book came, from dreams and memories of growing up in India. The mind organizes afterwards. Both dreams, memory and mind are necessary to writing. For a long time, I didn't know it was the title of the book I was writing. When you ask "how did you decide on the title," it implies choice between options. I felt there was only one option for this novel.

Critics always speak of Partition as a first-hand experience.

**Response from SSB:** Which critics do you mean? Which texts are they criticizing? From when to when is your “always?” To whose first-hand experience do you refer? Do you mean “writers about Partition speak of it from first-hand experience?”

In the first fifty years after Partition, survivors – often those who paid for the independence of India with their land, jobs and loved ones -- told us their stories. Since seventeen million people became refugees in their own country and had to make a new life in a new land, there are seventeen million stories. And more – we don't even know the stories of the five million people who were killed on both sides of the border.

Refugees on both sides of the border didn't have time to explore the why of their stories. In the post Partition period, they just got on with life and tried to survive. It is the next generations who must ask: what happened and have we taken steps to prevent such communal violence from continuing to surface in modern India?

---

However, post-Independence, several authors have written about it as cerebral angst. What are your comments on the same?

**Response from SSB:** You can only write about the Partition post-independence, since the border line was only announced three days prior, by the British. Which authors have written about it as “cerebral angst”? What is cerebral? Do you mean cerebral?

---

Angst means “A feeling of anxiety or apprehension often accompanied by depression.” If you were among the seventeen million people uprooted from your home, or your loved ones were killed, or you had to kill someone to survive, how do you think you would feel? I have never read a credible historian who referred to that generation's feelings of regret, remorse, anger and loss as “angst”!

---

To explore and understand the psyche of the partition, did you watch movies like *Tamas* and *Pinjar*? Was your family personally affected by the partition that might have triggered the subject of the book?

**Response from SSB:** *Pinjar* was released in 2003. *What the Body Remembers* was published in 1999, so it wasn't possible for me to read it before writing *What the Body Remembers*. I have not seen *Tamas*, but read Bhisham Sahni's novel.

What do you mean by "the psyche of the Partition?" Partition was an event not a person – how can it have a psyche?

Yes, my family was affected by the Partition – and so was yours. If you enjoy independence from the British in India today, your family is the beneficiary of the suffering of those who died for that Independence during the Partition. If you don't pay taxes to a foreign government today, if you have a vote in India today, thank those who died and became refugees for your independence. Families of Indian heritage all over the world left India because of Partition – that trauma added to the Indian diaspora.

After your first book, did you always know you wanted to write about Noor Inayat Khan? Why did you choose to write about her considering several books have already been centred on her?

**Response from SSB:** No, I didn't know the story of Noor Inayat Khan. And I wish I knew which "several books" you mention that were already "centered on her" while I was writing.

Here is text pasted from:

<http://www.bookclubs.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780676976212&view=auqa>

The only true spy I've ever met (that I know of) is Gaston Vandermeerssche, a leader in the Dutch underground in World War II. 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 that 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 World War II France.

I had questions like, who was the piano student Noor was reportedly engaged to for five years before they parted when the Germans invaded? Why did she

need a stomach operation in the thirties? What did it mean to be the daughter of a man like Hazrat Inayat Khan, who brought his version of Sufism to the West, a version preaching a Universal God unrecognizable to literalist Islamists? And in a time when India was struggling for independence from the Raj, how did Noor, who came from so Indian a family, justify working for the Raj? Imagination could slip between the silences, and informed speculation could take over where non-fiction could not go. Noor herself captivated and fascinated me, though not for the same reasons that she has fascinated other writers. She made me wonder, how did it feel to be a racially and culturally hybrid person during a war? What was it like to be the only Muslim among the fifty SOE (Special Operations Executive) women in clandestine operations? What kind of survival skills would she have, being nourished by her faith in Allah, yet aware of her minority status as a colonial, a woman and a non-Christian?

Both 'What The Body Remembers' and 'The Tiger Claw' centres on women. Is it the lack of empathy towards women including the way they are treated that you chose to write about women?

**Response from SSB:** *do you mean centre on women? Do you mean, Is it the lack of empathy towards women including the way they are treated that prompted you to write about women?*

I tell stories of people who fight to be individuals, often people who are betrayed by family, friends and country. These are often women, but if you read my latest, *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007), you will see they can be men as well. The way people are treated can be terrible and reprehensible, but it's how each individual reacts and how each character fights injustice that makes his or her story interesting to me -- and hopefully to the reader.

You are the co-author of *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*. Could you tell us a little about that? Did it interest you because of personal experience when you first travelled to the United States?

**Response from SSB:** Yes, a book to help people of other cultures planning long stays in the USA had not been written since 1937. Since the publication of *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America* in 1992, there are a few more, mostly for business travellers. And since the internet emerged in 1995, there are several web sites as well. However travel books usually discuss how other countries and cultures differ from the US. My co-author the late Dr. Marilyn Levine and I decided to turn that around. The US is an aberration and new experiment, by contrast with other countries around the world. The book sold out its print run, is still in use in many universities and available on the net.