

May 8, 2014

Speech given at Milwaukee Public Library Literary Luncheon

Thank you Judy Bridges, for your most generous introduction.

You're in my acknowledgements to *The Selector of Souls*, but your name should be engraved somewhere, for founding the writers colony that is Redbird Studios and holding the workshops that have nurtured and encouraged so many Milwaukee writers and their books. Thank you!

It's my honor to be here. I haven't given many readings in Milwaukee, so may I take this opportunity to recognize a few people ...

Prof M. Levine, husband of the late Dr. Marilyn M. Levine for his patience while we co-wrote *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*.

Daniel Goldin has been a friend and great supporter of my work ever since he hosted the launch of *English Lessons and Other Stories* at Schwartz in 1996. *Some of my books are only available in Canada, but Daniel imports them for events like this one.*

I have been asked how it's possible to live in "li'l old Milwaukee," and write a story set in India, or Canada or Costa Rica or Russia. My secret weapon -- both before and after the advent of the internet -- has been the Milwaukee Public Library and its librarians. Here's a fact I could not find on the net: During the cold war, MPL was not only a fallout shelter in case of nuclear attack, but also one of the seven repository libraries for the Library of Congress. A backup, if you will.

When I was writing my first novel, *What the Body Remembers*, a story of two women in a polygamous marriage in Colonial India, I researched the 1947 Partition of India. I found MPL has many books from India, all stamped PL-480 in faded blue ink. Public Law 480 created an exchange that began in 1957 that is

now called Food for Peace. Wheat from the heartland was sent to India, and India paid in cultural artifacts – books, statues, art.

I'd also like to recognize the MPL librarians -- you reach out all over the world for me, using the power of Interlibrary Loan. I thank you!

My husband David Baldwin traveled with me to Pakistan to research *What the Body Remembers*. When I was researching my WWII spy novel *The Tiger Claw*, he hurt his back unloading two massive suitcases of books off the train at the station in Pforzheim, Germany. His books and knowledge of espionage from his years as the Station Chief of Milwaukee's spy theme restaurant the Safe House were invaluable for this spy novel. David designed the tiger claw pendant you see on the paperback published in 2005. He gets a kick out of being called Mr. Singh Baldwin when we're traveling.

And finally, I would like to recognize this beautiful city where I've lived more than 30 years. In case you're wondering, I do write about Milwaukee, Milwaukeeans and the USA. The bike path, Shorewood, Lake Park, Ma Fisher's are settings in my second collection of cross cultural stories *We Are Not in Pakistan*. In one of the stories, Milwaukee's own bull-horn toting doomsday prophet Brother Rob has been moved to southern Illinois to make him fictional.

Today I'll be reading from my last two novels, *The Tiger Claw* and *The Selector of Souls*.

The Tiger Claw is a work of biographical fiction based on the life of a Muslim woman whose fame seems to increase daily. Her name was Noor, Noor Inayat Khan, daughter of an Indian sufi mystic and an American mother. She was mixed race like President Obama, in a time when purity of race was becoming a Nazi obsession. Noor grew up in France, and escaped to London after the Fall of France in 1940. When the Britain's Special Operations Executive, the SOE, was looking for bilinguals, she joined and trained as a spy. She was dropped into wartime France in 1943 to join a resistance network as a radio operator. But Noor has her own secret – she is searching for her beloved, a Jewish composer. At the risk of sounding like Amazon.com If you like tales about WWII, women spies, stories set

in France, the psychology of Aryan supremacists, safe houses, secret radios ... this is your kind of novel.

[reading from *The Tiger Claw*]

The Selector of Souls is set between 1994 and 1998, just after India opened its borders to foreign investment and competition, a time when India was masculinizing rapidly.

Estimates have varied wildly, but the United Nations Fund for Populations Activities now says that by 2001, 3.1 million girls were “missing” from the population of India. Another 4 million were winnowed from the population of India between 2001 and 2008. Worldwide, an astounding 160 million girls are missing from the population since the 1970s. Last month President Carter, when asked to name the one problem we should all work on in this world, said “sex selection.

India’s gender imbalance wasn’t the result of anything we’ve experienced in the US – say in the pioneer years or in California during the Gold Rush. It is the result of discrimination by grandparents and parents against girl babies. If you have no social security, and your corporate pension will be a pittance, when you have to save and pay in full for large items and housing because there is no mortgage system, when you have a legal system that takes on average 25 years to settle inheritance disputes, and a tradition that makes it taboo to live with a daughter at any age... your son’s value rises. Your son becomes your unemployment insurance, and your retirement plan. If there is one thing a patriarchy needs, no matter where, it is a son to carry on the family name, not a daughter.

And now comes ultrasound, perfected by GE Medical in Milwaukee, marketed by a joint venture with an Indian company. And little private clinics spring up in large and small towns, offering ultrasound. These clinics aren’t like the one on Farwell Ave, though many are situated close to abortion clinics. They’re not trying to encourage bonding between parents and child. These ultrasound clinics offer quiet referrals for non-medical, late abortions. Often they offer a young woman’s family the option of a forced abortion.

Sex selection entered global politics in the mid 90s. Christians – Catholic and Born Again – now entered the fray, with reactions of horrified pressure to stop access to *any and all* abortions, for any reason.

As my characters find, this is a complex issue with persuasive arguments on both sides. As usual, young women's bodies are the battlefield.

Let's go back to men. India's gender imbalance has resulted in a society for men, a society with masculine values. For Indian men, it has made it increasingly difficult, even with the fabulous institution of extended family, to find wives. It's not easy being a man in India –on average you'd have 10 people dependant on you.

But wait, wasn't India a male dominated patriarchy before the 1990s? Sure. But after 1991, when India opened its doors to business from the Capitalist West for the first time since independence in 1947, prior emphasis on the virtues of altruism vanished, to be replaced by Desire. Gurus and swamis who preached detachment from the consequences of your actions, or justified your wealth as the result of good deeds in a past life became popular. A great divide opened between the English-speaking western-style elites in the cities and those who vote and speak Hindi or one of India's 300 other languages. The inequality fueled the traditionalists, and their nationalism rose to fever pitch.

India went proudly nuclear in 1998. A few days later, so did adjoining Pakistan. The CIA said they didn't know of either.

You know, we may yet have to use our stately gracious Central library and its six basement floors as a fallout shelter.

The characters in *The Selector of Souls* are women living in a democracy with a colonial history – that sounds like the USA. They are living in a custom-bound caste system that enshrines discrimination – a parallel to our two centuries of slavery.

If these characters can find the language and methods to challenge their traditions and bring about change, I hope they'll inspire us to do the same.

Just before this book was released, on August 5, 2012 an Aryan supremacist shooter walked into my gurdwara in Oak Creek, WI, killed six people, wounded several others including a brave policeman who attempted to stop him, strafed cars, and devastated the Sikh and non-Sikh community alike. We're still recovering. The irony was that since 2001, for both *Tiger Claw* and *The Selector of Souls*, I'd been writing about Aryan supremacists and their sense of wounded entitlement, their masculinization of entire societies, their rejection of women as a living symbol of weakness, their anger at minorities and anything they label foreign or impure... Had I thought a shooting could happen in North America? Sure. But not in my back yard, *not in Milwaukee*.

I've learned from writing *The Tiger Claw* and *The Selector of Souls*, that Christian or Hindu Aryan supremacists are just as virulent as their jihadi counterparts in Muslim countries. I've learned that Destruction is easy. It's the so-called feminine behaviors that are difficult: Creating, cooperation, empathy, concern, caring, nurturing, enduring, friendship, engagement with equals, activism for social justice.

I didn't have such opinions when I started. Writers go where images, voices, questions and affections take us. A character from a short story I wrote in the nineties continued to haunt me. A novice nun tried to build herself a new life in a clinic in the Himalayas...I had no idea that seven years of reading, two homestays in the Himalayas, and many hours of interviews lay before me.

The story is told from the points of view of a Hindu woman Damini, and a Catholic Christian woman Anu. Damini would be considered middle-aged if she lived in Milwaukee. But she lives in India, so she's old at fifty. In the first chapter, she commits a terrible crime and all the standard reasons you read in the news are given. Then time folds back and you get to know Damini, and find that self-preservation has led her to break the taboo I spoke of earlier – she has gone to live with a daughter in her old age. Her crime is a consequence of that transgression, and the story is powered by her attempts to balance her karma.

We're also in the world of Anu, a reluctant rebel. Anu is a Hindu-Christian. Meaning she has added Jesus Christ to the Hindu pantheon. She's convent-educated, has a Bachelor of Science, wears Western attire as well as the Indian shalwar and kameez. Unlike most women, she is one who never wanted children. But she's also someone who has always tried to please her elders and husband, and she was Catholic enough to be against abortion – though her daughter is the product of a rape. At the beginning of the story, Anu takes the opportunity to leave her husband, set aside her golden handcuffs, and engage more deeply with Catholicism. She's on a collision path with Damini.

As the story unfolds, Anu critiques Damini's myths of inevitability, and shows her alternatives, while Damini critiques Anu's stance against contraception and abortion, and shows *her* alternatives. Here's Damini in the first chapter.

[Reading from *The Selector of Souls*]

I'll stop here and take questions.

Thank you for listening!