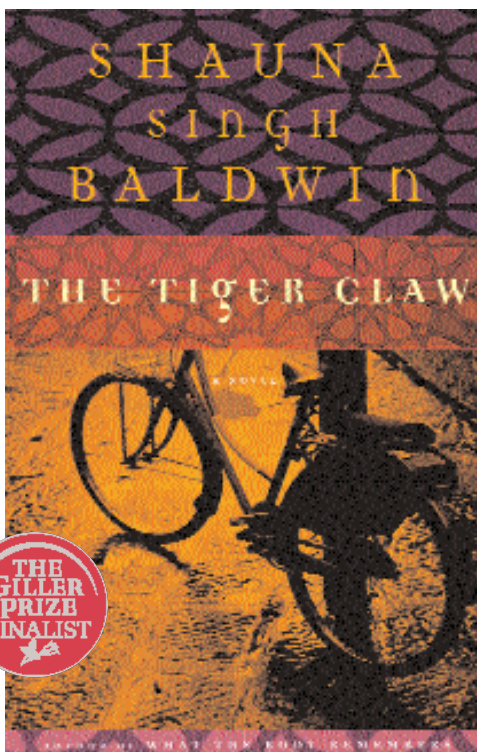


# Ruthless Terrorist or Valiant Spy?

Shauna Singh Baldwin  
tells us the story behind  
*The Tiger Claw*



The only true spy I've ever met (that I know of) is Gaston Vandermeersche, 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.

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 30s? 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 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 as she has fascinated other writers. She made me wonder how it felt to be a racially and culturally hybrid person during a war. What was it like to be the only Muslim woman among the fifty 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?

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. In 1943, Noor would have been as aware of that famine as any educated expatriate Indian.

I wondered if Noor would have thought of herself as an expatriate Indian or, being a second generation immigrant, would she have thought of herself as French? I decided she could be Indian and French. With an Indian father, she could also have thought of herself as English, and with an American mother, she might have thought of herself as American. Again, I decided she was both. Was she Muslim or Christian? From Hazrat Inayat Khan's teachings, I concluded she must have been both, and that exclusivity



Photo: David Baldwin

and single path solutions would have been foreign to her very being.

On I went, collecting 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 read many fiction and non-fiction accounts of the double agent codenamed Gilbert who betrayed several resistance networks only days after Noor landed in France, and the radio game that misled the Gestapo about D-day. In biographies of her father, I found Noor mentioned in footnotes. The official History of the SOE [Special Operations Executive] mentioned another woman, in a footnote—Renée Garry. Writers who have written of Noor have mentioned but barely explored the connection between these two footnotes, these two women.

Reading accounts of other resistance agents, I began to feel each of them, not only Noor, deserved a book be written about their exploits. But Noor was treated differently. Why was she held at the Avenue Foch Gestapo HQ in Paris and not sent to a prison, work or death camp like any other Allied agent? Was she tortured? Raped? The accounts contradicted one another.

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, and the prison where she was kept enchained for ten months. The biography said she made a daring escape attempt, but visiting 84 Avenue Foch in Paris, I doubted it. Nor am I convinced by the Gestapo Chief's testimony in Noor's personal files in the Public Records office.

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 polarizing 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 as in the book, 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 Guantánamo Bay about her husband or lover. 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, hoping he is alive after two years in prison, hoping he has not been tortured. And just as the French said in the 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 September 11, 2001, 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 l'oeil where you consciously switch point of view so you can see either a vase or two faces in profile, but not both. And like that illusion flipping in and out of view, the picture is both: 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 character, Noor's brother Kabir—a pilot who, having bombed Germany during the war, turns to

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religion and becomes 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. Her captor Ernst Vogel—a Nazi. I had to understand his xenophobia, racism and fears as Allied bombs rained down on his family in Germany. Other writers have humanized their Nazi

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characters by showing them with family. That was too facile. But Vogel became human when I realized he had a need we all have—to be loved. Though he himself had loved power so well he had become incapable of love for others. Sadly, we all know men and women like Vogel.

As I wrote, Noor taught me each of us is presented a choice at every moment, to acquiesce or resist, to be faithful to the values of love and justice or to compromise our principles for the sake of comfort and advancement. Writing her story acted in a strange way to teach me hope, and the importance of holding on to it. Seeing through her eyes reminds me often that it's a blessing we cannot see the future. Reading about amazing acts of resistance, I learned that even in a total war against empathy like the one waged in Nazi Germany, not everyone succumbed. The Nazis could not outlaw kindness, concern and compassion. Activists, concerned Americans, writers and others who protest show me the same is true in our times.

Some readers say *The Tiger Claw* is a novel about fidelity and betrayal, others say it's a love story, others that it is about the birth of hope in an era of darkness. To many, *The Tiger Claw* offers up parallels with a history to which the world, including the USA, proclaimed, "Never Again." For me, the story is about the triumph of love and hope over forces that try to kill our compassion, our humanity. About love beyond physical existence. I trust you will come to love Noor, Renée, Kabir, Vogel and all the other characters in *The Tiger Claw* as much as I have. **R**

EXCERPT



# It's the Crude, Dude

There's something almost obscene about a map that was passed around among senior Bush administration officials and a select group of oil company executives in the spring of 2001. It doesn't show the kind of detail normally shown on maps—cities, towns, regions. Rather its detail is all about Iraq's oil. The southwest is neatly divided, for instance, into nine "Exploration Blocks." Stripped of political trappings, this map shows a naked Iraq, with only its ample natural assets in view. It's like a supermarket meat chart, which identifies the various parts of a slab of beef so customers can see the most desirable cuts ... Block 1 might be the striploin, Blocks 2 and 3 are perhaps some juicy tenderloin, but Block 8—ahh, that could be the filet mignon.

The map might seem crass, but it was never meant for public consumption. It was one of the documents studied by the ultra-secretive task force on energy headed by U.S. vice president Dick Cheney, and it was only released under court order after a long legal battle waged by the public interest group Judicial Watch.

Another interesting task force document, also released under court order, was a two-page chart titled "Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfields." It identifies 63 oil companies from 30 countries and specifies which Iraqi oil fields each company is interested in and the status of the company's negotiations with Saddam Hussein's regime. Among the companies are Royal Dutch/Shell of the Netherlands, Russia's Lukoil and France's Total Elf Aquitaine, which was identified as being interested in the fabulous, 25-billion-barrel Majnoon oil field. Baghdad had "agreed in principle" to the French company's