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Shauna Singh Baldwin What the Author Remembers

by Robin Roberts

After her grandfather died, author Shauna Singh Baldwin talked – really talked – to her grandmother for the first time. “She came to visit me from India and I asked her, ‘Tell me your story,’” says Baldwin. “I thought I knew it. I thought I was going to hear a story I’d heard before. But my grandfather had passed away and, all of a sudden, this was not the story she had told before. He always told her story and I didn’t realize that.”

The story her grandmother told, back in 1996, became the basis for Baldwin’s first novel, *What the Body Remembers*, which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize Best Book Award (Canada/Caribbean) in 2000. The 70-page memoir Baldwin urged her nani to write, however, was only the beginning. “I also had to do a lot of research because I had been very stupid,” says Baldwin while sitting on a bench in a leafy garden on the UBC grounds in July, before giving a reading. “I had visited her every day for years and years, but because I hadn’t asked the right questions I hadn’t gotten any answers. She gave the standard [responses] she was expected to give. But if you asked her, ‘Where were you when the Quetta earthquake of 1935 happened?’ Oh, that’s a whole different story because you’re an informed person ask-



PHOTO BY ARIAN SASSO



On the surface, it might seem Baldwin has lived a golden life, but a mention in passing of Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* gets this response: "I haven't read it because it's set during the Emergency. I still can't go there, having lived through it."

ing. But if you say, 'What happened when you were young, grandma?' She'd say, 'Oh yeah, we had a good time.' One of my favourite lines, which I used in the book, was when she said, 'Oh we waited for the crops to grow.'"

Baldwin's enigmatic grandmother, it turns out, did much, much more. She and her family suffered through Partition, which displaced them, and, like most women of the time and culture, lived her life under the shadow of men, who also told their versions of history. When Baldwin began asking the right questions – and getting the right answers – the idea for *What the Body Remembers* began to germinate. Published in 1999, the novel, set in Rawalpindi, Punjab, begins a decade before Partition. It focuses on Satya, a young woman who, by the age 40, has yet to conceive. Her husband, Sardarji, a wealthy Sikh landowner, takes a second, younger wife, Roop, who has no trouble producing heirs. As the family grows, so too does resentment and division, not unlike the country in the background.

All Baldwin's works – her 1992 book (which she co-authored) *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*, her 1996 collection of short stories called *English Lessons and Other Stories*, her 2004 novel *The Tiger Claw* (a finalist for the Giller Prize), and 2007's book of short stories, *The Distance Between Us* – follow a similar theme, that giving voice and identity to oppressed and devalued women, as well as shining a glaring spotlight on issues of class, caste and culture, which was likely what caught the attention of her agent, Bruce Westwood, of Westwood Creative Artists in Toronto.

"Being one of the first people to read *What the Body Remembers*, I felt that reminded me so much of Arundati Roy [also an Indian author with strong political opinions], so when it went on to win the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book in Canada and the Carribean

and we had it published in 13 countries, it came to me as no surprise," says Westwood. "I also remember when our foreign rights person was reading this novel, she would move from meeting to meeting carrying the manuscript in her arms, not wanting to put it down, and continuing to read it whenever she could find a moment."

High praise indeed, yet Baldwin, 44, is not driven by praise or awards, noting those things don't necessarily translate to personal satisfaction – or the bottom line. "No, you can't," she says when asked if she can make a living solely as an author. "Maybe over the course of a lifetime you might have a few hits but in general it's very solitary work and the work has to be more important than the accolades. I used to make three times the amount as an IT consultant, so I know where my priorities are. Everybody talks about big advances and I'm like, 'Yeah, uh-huh.' You have no idea what I've sacrificed."

Still, it's a sacrifice that's provided a platform for a unique voice with very specific opinions. "Looking at my books thematically, it seems like there is a connecting thread because it's always about the conflict between cultures, racism and how that can lead to fascism and fundamentalism," says Baldwin, who writes while wrapped in one of her grandmother's many shawls for inspiration. "The fight against that and to broaden of your compassion is what these books are about. So, if that's a Canadian thing to do, good."

A multi-national in a way, Baldwin was born in Montreal, raised in New Delhi and now resides in Milwaukee, where she ended up after Canadian universities would not recognize her Indian degree. After graduating at 21 with an MBA from Milwaukee's Marquette University, she returned to Canada to begin her career in commerce. "The only problem was I'd met this Irish-American guy and our phone bills got really large," she says with a laugh. "One look at those big blue eyes

and that was it." She married David, an attorney/restaurateur, and settled in his home state of Wisconsin. The two have no children, but Baldwin is aunt to her younger brother's two daughters in India and to five other children in Toronto.

Big business soon began to lose its luster, however, and Baldwin turned her wandering mind to more creative pursuits. She says she knew she wanted to be a writer at age 11. The defining inspiration? "Beauty," she says simply. "I think the world has so much beauty, and you want to describe it and be lyrical about it."

For Dr. Kuldip Gill, writer-in-residence at the University College of the Fraser Valley, Baldwin balances perfectly the lyrical with a keen understanding of the human condition. "*What the Body Remembers* has a variety of themes of which family and arranged marriage is but one that is important, since it deals with universal fears, emotions, values and triumphs," says Gill, who led two discussion groups on the novel this summer at the UCFV's Abbotsford campus. "[At the same time], I love it for its beautifully written, strong, moving and emotional literary style."

That would be thanks to Baldwin's desire for the lyrical, which she acknowledges, sadly, fades with time. "As you get older, cynicism sets in and there's always that tension between the lyrical and the cynical," says Baldwin, whose soft voice retains a lyrical pitch, in spite of whatever cynicism she battles. "So to be lyrical and to be excited about the world is a young person's thing and that's how I was at age 11. Some of the things I wrote at age 11 are much better than some of the things I write now. It's that confidence, that joy in the world, that excitement. I'm always trying to regain that confidence that I had at 11, because I think, at least with women, it gets knocked out of us as we get older."

One might think it would have gotten

knocked out of her while much younger considering the circumstances of her birth. Her first day on earth greeted her with disappointment, from friends and relatives who sent her parents letters of condolence on the most unfortunate arrival of a baby girl. "My mother got mad and named me Shanaaz, which means 'That of which emperors are proud.' When she took me back to India for a visit, everyone said, 'We're not going to call her by a Muslim name!'"

The rebellious Baldwin steadfastly stuck with the name until, at age 18, she applied for a passport and changed it to Shauna, a name her grandfather called her. "It means golden girl, because I had golden hair as a kid."

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Although cryptic, it speaks volumes about her personal journey and whatever experiences she's had that inform her writing. She still has much to say about the struggles of women, the culturally oppressed and, generally, the distance between us, which happens to be the title of her upcoming collection of short stories, to be published next year. "Even people who are very close have this distance between them," she says wistfully. "My first book was *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*, which was really showing how the U.S. is different and the rest of the world is more alike. The rest of the world, in 1992, was more tribal in that sense. But the U.S. has become a tribe of its own. At that time the U.S. was considered the norm. But we really don't think of that because of the power structure. *English Lessons* was kind of a progression as well, the lessons that the language teaches you about what it is to come into the west or to have a family member go to the west. It starts with a woman in 1919 whose son had gone to the west and who realizes they'll all have to use plates. If somebody goes to some other place, you have to change, [because] you're affected with them."

That notion struck a cord for a certain segment of B.C.'s population; for these people *What the Body Remembers* is particularly relevant. "I believe the book is very appropriate for us in the Fraser Valley, where many cultural groups with different family styles live in harmony and

where we can benefit from knowing more about each other to build social cohesion," says Dr. Gill.

A proud Sikh, Baldwin does not let her own religion off easy when it comes to ensuring the tenets of equality between the sexes is honoured. "The difference between theory and practice is always where the novel is," says Baldwin, who also speaks French, Punjabi, Hindi, and a smattering of Urdu. "The hypocrisy of life, no? And that's a word I learned too early. One should not teach the word 'hypocrisy' to girls until they're at least 30 years old because they get very influenced by the word and they start looking for it everywhere. And they find it. And that's a really difficult situation to be in. It's a word one should stay away from; just accept the world at face value. I hate cynicism; it is not productive. I strive for the lyrical rather than the cynical, but it's a hard battle. Especially in today's very fascist world where you see more of the rewards coming to people who are very tribal in their thinking."

Like any author with strong viewpoints, Baldwin has her fans, but she also has her detractors. "It depends on who you are," she says of the types of feedback she's received. "With *What the Body Remembers*, English people said I had been so rude and nasty to the English. [They'd say] 'The British really weren't that bad in India, considering what the Dutch did in Indonesia or what the French did elsewhere.' [Indians would say] 'The British were pretty nice to us, they left us with the telegraph, they left us with the railway system.' It was really interesting to see how defensive people were."

Men naturally disputed her portrayals of male oppression of women; younger women viewed stronger, older female characters as "awful"; while older women described younger female characters as "bimbos." On Partition, Sikhs would tell her, "Your family didn't suffer as much as ours, how dare you!" Muslims felt she'd been too nasty to their group. "The how dare you factor came up constantly," says Baldwin, shaking her head. "With *The Tiger Claw*, the hate mail was more, 'How dare you, a Sikh, write about the Muslims!' I got a thick skin pretty quickly."

During a reading in Sechelt, a few older women challenged her portrayal of Winston Churchill. "If you're writing about an Indian character in 1943, he or she is going to be very conscious of the Bengal famine, you can't get away from it," explains Baldwin. "And the

fact that Churchill, a demigod to many people, starved three-and-a-half million people is going to be in the book. Unless you're really trying to turn a blind eye to it, you can't avoid it. But these ladies said, 'You really shouldn't be saying these nasty things about Churchill.' So I said, 'Ma'am, would you like me to tell you my sources?' And she said, 'No, I worked in the agricultural department in England at the time and I know we sent food to India.' And I said 'Well, isn't it strange that it didn't arrive? Why do you think there was starvation?' And she said, 'The maharajas took it.' I said, 'That's like saying you shipped wheat from Canada to England and it got taken by the U.S.A. along the way.' Last time I checked, the maharajas were not in charge of British India, Churchill was.' I end up telling people, 'It's your prerogative to believe whatever you want, but I can certainly quote my sources.' But that was really not the point for her. On the other hand, a lot of the interviews I did with former colonists went right into this book. I didn't make a lot of that stuff up, which is very sad. They liked the book. It had their words, and they liked that. Things they thought were OK to say 50 years after the war! They're not. It's a strange animal, this writing thing."

It's a strange animal she'll continue to wrestle – for the reader with an open mind, for her family, for herself, for her grandmother, who passed away in November. "She loved it," says Baldwin of her grandmother's reaction to *What the Body Remembers*. "She said, 'I love Roop but you know she's not me. Is she you?' And I said, 'No, she's not me either, she is herself.' And she said, 'You're right, she's herself.' It was this realization that a character had been created who was her, who was me, but who was not actually either of us. It was so wonderful to see that."

Baldwin pauses to collect her emotions before saying, "Somebody had the gall to say to her, 'What have you accomplished in your life?' My book was lying next to her, because she was housebound at a certain stage, and she thumped the book and said, 'This is what I have accomplished.' She was very, very important to me." And thanks to Baldwin, she finally got to tell her own story.

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Shauna Singh Baldwin, currently at work on her next novel (with inspiration from a tour of Surrey), gives talks and readings around the world, including B.C. Check out her touring schedule on her website, www.ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com