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An Interview with Anjali Banerjee



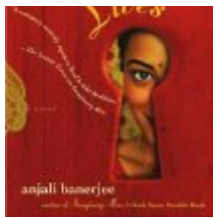
With her past seven published novels -- written for audiences that range from middle-grade readers on up -- [Anjali Banerjee](#) didn't particularly mention male body parts in any great detail. Maybe a twinkling eye here, capable hands there, but she certainly didn't dwell. But as the saying goes, there's a first time for everything.

Indeed, welcome to [Haunting Jasmine](#), Banerjee's eighth novel, her third for adults: Page one opens with an avid discussion on the fidelity factor of male genitalia based on ethnicity, complete with images of... well, shall we say... gold-embroidered formalwear for the faithful Bengali member. Five pages later, our betrayed heroine is not above asking the elephant god Ganesh to put a curse -- à la Lorena Bobbit -- on her heartbreaking spouse's non-Bengali, all-American private parts. Oh, ouch.

Painful initial details aside, Banerjee's latest is actually another easy-breezy, deftly entertaining love story, this time with spine-tingling twists. Searching for respite from her cheating soon-to-be-ex, the eponymous Jasmine heads home to remote Shelter Island in the Pacific Northwest where she's agreed to watch Auntie Ruma's bookstore for a month. Auntie Ruma needs the time to have her "heart fixed in India," and only Jasmine can be entrusted to take care of the historic Victorian and the treasures -- literary and otherwise -- that reside within.

Books and writing -- and certainly some multi-culti magic -- have always been a part of Banerjee's life. Born in India, and raised in small-town Canada and later big-city California, Banerjee found special inspiration in her literary maternal grandmother, herself an English writer who called India





home.

From the moment Banerjee “could pick up a crayon and scribble,” she started writing. She wrote her first story at age seven, and in spite of “preposterous premises and impossible plots,” she never stopped. While she’s “not sure of a specific moment when I decided to become a writer” -- she did have a few career detours as a veterinary assistant, an office manager, a law student, to name a few -- Banerjee readily acknowledges that “writing has always been part of who I am.”

Since publishing her first title in 2005 -- her lauded kiddie novel [Maya Running](#), about an awkward young Indian American girl who goes through a *13 Going on 30*-sort of transformation (sans the timely fast-forward) and becomes an assertive, multilingual beauty overnight -- Banerjee has managed to publish more than a book a year. Even with five books for middle grade readers and three more for us oldsters, all out in just six years, Banerjee insists, “I’m not that prolific!”

In case you’re about to set off for the library or local bookstore, you’ll need the rest of Banerjee’s titles: In addition to *Maya*, her other younger-reader novels are [Rani and the Fashion Divas](#), [The Silver Spell](#), [Looking for Bapu](#), and most recently [Seaglass Summer](#); her adult titles before *Haunting Jasmine* are [Imaginary Men](#) and [Invisible Lives](#) (with nary a mention in either about certain appendages. Ahem).

So *Haunting Jasmine* starts with quite a saucy departure from your previous novels. What prompted the impulse?

The departure seemed right for my character, a jilted divorcée whose husband cheated on her. He dashed her dreams for a perfect life and a happy marriage -- her thoughts seemed appropriate for the situation!

Why a haunted story this time? Do you believe in ghosts?

I’ve always loved ghost stories -- I loved [The Ghost and Mrs. Muir](#) -- and all of my books contain light touches of magic (except *Seaglass Summer* -- but maybe the seaglass was magical!). This is really no different. Secretly, I’ve always wanted to write ghost stories! I’m not sure I believe in ghosts in real life. I’m open-minded. Anything is possible. We live in a fascinating, mind-boggling universe.

Jasmine’s Los Angeles frenetic existence (minus the heartbreak, of course) or her Shelter Island transformation -- which is more like your own life now? And now that you’re (literally) creating your own little Yoknapatawpha County in the Pacific Northwest waters with your latest two titles (*Haunting* along with *Seaglass Summer*, which features Poppy and her Uncle Sanjay on Nisqually Island), could you imagine yourself living that life, too?

My life is probably more like Jasmine’s Shelter Island transformation. I live in a rambler in the woods. I work in a home office with a solar tube in the ceiling, five intrusive but loving cats, birds and squirrels in the garden, and a view of the forest out my window.

So are more island-titles coming, I hope? Maybe Jasmine will end up needing to take one of the bookstore kitties to Uncle Sanjay when Poppy’s there, too? Seriously, can you imagine your characters meeting one another in future titles?

That would be fun! My next book for adults may also be set on Shelter Island. Stay tuned. The story features a young widow, a cat, and a veterinarian. He’s not Uncle Sanjay from Poppy’s story, though. The book is under contract for Berkley/Penguin, due for release in February 2012. The protagonist is a widow struggling to recover from the untimely

death of her husband. I'm also telling part of the story from the point of view of a savvy cat who arrives, like an angel, to help save the day.

What's with the cats, by the way? You and Rita Mae Brown... I'm feeling a story here...

You caught me out as a cat lover! Or was it the tell-tale white fur clinging to my sweater?

Besides the furry variety, how many of your other family and friends end up between your pages? And how do they react?

Characters might be composites of people I know. They don't seem to recognize themselves, and if they do, they're polite enough not to say anything. If I've accidentally translated a person directly to the page -- and I haven't done that consciously -- nobody seems to notice!

And how much of your own history and experiences end up in your stories?

I believe we're always drawing from our own history and experience. We write what we know but also what we can imagine. My first novel, *Maya Running*, was fairly autobiographical, but I find I'm moving away from my own history and branching out into other realms.

Being a part and yet not-a-part of dual cultures -- the Asian into which you were born and the Western culture in which you were raised, and now live -- how does this duality affect your writing?

I addressed the duality of my experience in *Maya Running*, in the most authentic way, I believe. I may write about the duality again someday -- never say never -- but I find my interests expanding to other themes now. I'll always be an immigrant, born in India and raised in North America in a complex amalgam of cultures, but in a way, I feel I've "been there, done that" in my writing and want to move on.

Yet the majority of your characters share your ethnic background (except for *Silver Spell*, which is part of a specialty fantasy series). Might you write a book someday with a nonethnic-specific hero?

Yes! In fact, in my current manuscript for Berkley/Penguin, the heroine is not Indian. The other main character is a cat -- of no specific ethnic origin.

Are you a disciplined writer? Are you a research-heavy writer?

I'm not a disciplined writer, but I work consistently when the story is flowing. When I'm blocked, I know something is wrong with the story and I have to backtrack and make adjustments. I do some research but not a huge amount.

Do you approach writing projects for various audiences in different ways?

I don't simplify language or vocabulary when I write for children. Young readers are smart and savvy. The main differences have to do with theme. A sixth-grade reader probably won't be interested in reading about a divorced woman's struggle to remake her life (*Haunting Jasmine*). But I feel my children's stories address universal themes of interest to anyone -- grief (*Looking for Bapu*), identity (*Maya Running*), friendship (*Rani and the Fashion Divas*), compassion (*Seaglass Summer*). So in a way, writing for children is writing for everyone, but I make sure the subject matter is of interest to younger readers.

What was your most challenging title to write? Which story flowed with the greatest ease?

Looking for Bapu flowed with the greatest ease. The main character's goal was so compelling and touching to me -- a

boy searching for his beloved grandfather's spirit. The most difficult book was *Seaglass Summer*, about a girl visiting her veterinarian uncle for the summer. It took me a while to find her personality and goal -- there were too many possible directions for the story.

...which can only mean we'll see Poppy and Uncle Sanjay again, right?

I would love to revisit Poppy and her Uncle, but it's all up to the publisher!

So in this new era of publishing, various literary friends often bemoan to me that writing the book is the easy part and getting the book into readers' hands is now a far greater challenge. How has the marketing journey been for you? How much has it changed since you published your first title?

The biggest changes are the difficult economy and the rise of e-books. I created a book trailer for *Haunting Jasmine*, and I'm going on a blog tour to enhance my Internet presence. Blogs are perhaps even more important than anything else these days, as so much commerce occurs online! *Haunting Jasmine* has been chosen for Target stores' Emerging Authors program -- such a great opportunity. Fingers crossed. My publisher has also done wonderful things for this book, embossing the cover with sparkles and texture. It's beautiful! So... I'm optimistic.

Youthful as you are, you're definitely of the techno-facile generation... how do you think the Internet has changed the writer/reader relationship? Pluses? Negatives?

I'm not that youthful. But a woman never tells her age!

The internet makes authors more accessible to readers and vice versa. Most of my "fan mail" comes via e-mail or Facebook, although I've received lovely handwritten letters from young readers as well. I'm happy to visit book groups via telephone or Skype -- all things are possible. The negatives are that people can easily post nasty book reviews or comments online for any reason -- even if they haven't read the book -- and those comments seem to endure forever on the internet.

You're about to go off on book tour -- both virtually and physically. What are you looking forward to the most? Anything put dread in your soul?

I have local, in-person events planned. I'll be signing books at Liberty Bay Books in Poulsbo, The Dauntless Bookstore in Port Gamble, and Eagle Harbor Books on Bainbridge Island, all here in Washington. I'll also be teaching at the upcoming Whidbey Island Writers' Conference and other venues. I enjoy meeting readers and celebrating with friends and family. I'll go on a blog tour and promote the book via the Internet, and when the promotion phase wanes, I'll get back to writing my next book. I don't really dread anything... oh, except the "R-word": Returns (the unsold books that stores return to the publishers). I hope we don't have any of those!

Yes, but surely your feline companions -- not to mention the human husband -- will be thrilled with the "R-word," as in Return home... or...?

Maybe they'll have to come and look for me in Jasmine's haunted bookstore on the shores of Shelter Island, consulting with the ghosts of Jane Austen and Edgar Allan Poe!

Terry Hong writes a [book review blog](#) for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.

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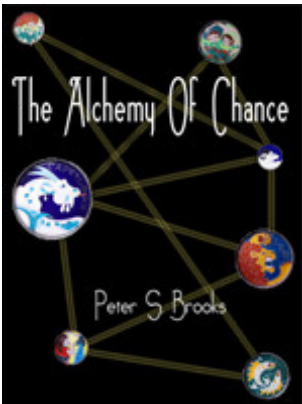


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