

JOE This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education.

MCGONEGAL: Power corrupts. Cultures clash. Roles reverse. Youths rebel. Icons crumble. These are just a few of the contemporary phenomenon making headlines in our newspapers today. But travel back with my guest, Anjali Mitter Duva nearly 500 years to Jaisalmer in the west of India, and you'll find many of the same forces at play. Like much great fiction, Duva's debut novel, *Faint Promise of Rain* published this past fall by She Writes Press provides readers with much familiarity in human conflicts to access despite being set in a far off place and time.

The story of two brothers and two sisters and the divergent lives their paths take as they struggle with identity, or stray from duty, *Faint Promise of Rain*, though written by an alumni with a masters in city planning is really a study in characters planning their new lives. Anjali Mitter Duva, thanks for joining me. Why did you write this book now?

ANJALI MITTER DUVA: It was a confluence of things that just came together for me. I hadn't intended to set about writing a book. But in 2001, I traveled to India where my father is from, taking my husband there for his first visit to India. And I wanted to take him through Rajasthan, which is to me, just one of the most beautiful kind of magical parts of India out in the desert, Northwest part of Rajasthan and reaching out towards Pakistan.

It's also I think for first time travelers to India, one of the most accessible areas. It's not as crowded, hot, but it's desert hot, it's not humid hot. And Rajasthan draws a lot of its revenue from tourism, and so there's a lot of attention to services and tourism. And it is full of these just beautiful castles and palaces that just rise out of the sand, I mean, especially in Jaisalmer-- which is really far out in the desert-- just right out of the sand like a mirage. Everything is orange and brown and ocher tones in terms of architecture. And then everything else is very bright, the bright blue sky, and the bright sunshine, the very bright clothing of the people there.

So it really, really tickles all the senses. I was looking in a guidebook, there was this little anecdote that said, that in Rajasthan-- and this just shows up on the first pages of my book-- it is so dry, it rains so rarely that a child can reach the age of five and never have seen rain. And that because of that in ancient times in the rooms of the children who lived in the palaces, they would paint the walls and the ceiling black and blue cloud designs under the assumption that then when the real clouds came, the children wouldn't be afraid.

I just I wrote it down, I wrote it down just to save it, just because I thought it was beautiful. When I returned, I started studying kathak dance, which is one of the classical forms of dance from India. And I had seen kathak in India growing up in my trips there. It's a very striking form of dance, dancers dance with their bells around their ankles. And very percussive, there's a lot of percussion, feet stomping on the ground, different rhythms, and very mathematical.

I teamed up actually with a teacher, wonderful woman, Gretchen Hayden, whose husband, George Ruckert is a professor here at MIT in musicology. Gretchen or Gretchen G as we call her, wanted to start a school. So I started getting involved with her on that. And as part of that, founding this nonprofit called Chandigarh, I did a lot of research into the history of kathak.

The three pieces that made me start writing this book were one, of the images I had in my mind of Rajasthan, two, this anecdote, which I just felt I wanted to bring to life somehow, and three, researching the history of this dance form and finding that it actually, a branch of it dates back, goes back to Rajasthan and to temple dancers in Rajasthan. And I started putting together the story of a family at this transition time in India's history.

MCGONEGAL: Emily Dickinson says, the first line falls out of the sky.

DUVA: It's true. It's the only line that has never changed. I mean, god know's this manuscript was rewritten so many times. But that one paragraph barely changed.

MCGONEGAL: You're writing about a place so far off for 500 years prior. That presents some obstacles, what other obstacles get in you way?

DUVA: That wasn't actually much of an obstacle honestly. The thing about Jaisalmer, it's a UNESCO World Heritage site and there's very strict limitations on what can be built or destroyed there. If you go inside the citadel and take away just the power cables, the power lines, it looks like it looked back then. There are no cars, there's no vehicles allowed. Every now and then, a motorcycle. There's cows in the street, there's people building-- carrying big chunks of sandstone on their heads. I mean, it was very easy to imagine what it looked like back then.

And in terms of the characters, as you pointed out in your very eloquent introduction there, the family dynamics and the challenges and that people face, they're the same. It's human nature, it's human beings. So the obstacles for me were not so much in concocting the story itself, it was finding the time to write.

I was working. In the process of writing the book, I had two children. And I was also starting

volunteering for this nonprofit, running it as a volunteer executive director, freelancing, raising kids, et cetera. So the challenge was really just buckling down and finding the time to write.

The other challenge was more in the-- well, obstacle, I wouldn't call it a challenge-- was in the publishing process, because this book became ready to be published at a time of immense transition in the publishing industry. I think I might have had an easier time had I sat down to write it 10 years ago and tried to publish it eight years ago.

But because of the time it took me to get it out there, I ended up in a time where big publishing houses are eating each other up, and there's fewer and fewer options in terms of traditional publishing for authors. And publishers are facing a financial crisis to some extent in part brought on by the sort of democratization of writing and publishing where anybody can put stuff up online or write and self-publish.

And so there's this big gap where my book, I'm a no name for the moment, I wasn't a recognized name, I didn't have a big platform. So I wasn't an obvious money maker for a big publisher. On the other hand, I had this work that had been termed literary that editors liked, so I got a lot of what I called, good rejections. This is a wonderful book, da, da, da, the characters, the story, the setting. It's unlike anything we've published, therefore we can't basically take a risk on it.

Took a while to find a publisher that was offering an option for authors like me. More willing to take a risk, because they're more nimble and more committed to authors and they're works than to making a lot of money.

MCGONEGAL: Readers learn quite a bit about kathak dance in this. Maybe you could read this portion from Mahindra who's left his family to try out the soldier's life, proving himself on the first night with his--

DUVA: Well, he's joined a troop who he believes to be well-meaning. And he is hoping to become a warrior, even though he is a dancer. And he'll find out that making the switch is not that easy. So he's in the desert. This is the desert at night.

Mahindra swallowed hard. Behind him, most of the men had sat back down around the newly fed fire. They did not really care what happened to him. He could run, but there was nowhere to go. He took another step forward. The horse closest to him, a proud black one, shook his head and neighed, exposing long teeth. Mahindra took a breath and the dancer in him took

over. Out of his mouth came down syllables, which he recited as he stepped forward toward the horse.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

The animal's ears twitched and pitched forward.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

The horse lowered his head.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

Mahindra reached out his hand and the horse nuzzled it with his lips, breath warm and moist. Up so close to the animal, Mahindra could see how long its legs were. Long legs to keep its body away from the scorching sand. He put his hand on the horse's flank.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

Mahindra reached up farther and caught a handful of mane. It was rough and tangled, but easy to hold onto.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

Tugging on the mane, my brother took a leap and threw his right leg over the horse. The instant he was on, tension shot through the animal's body. It threw itself back violently and whinnied. The others quiet until now joined in as they poured the sand. Mahindra gripped the rough hair with both hands and tightened his hold with his knees. His mouth was dry, when he opened it, no sound came out.

The horse bolted, jolting him back. In a moment, they were careening into the darkness. Mahindra was thrown painfully forward and back. The sounds of the other horses, the voices, and drumbeats around the fire all fell away. In terror, Mahindra closed his eyes tight willing the horse to stop. It didn't even slow down. But out of the fear ringing in Mahindra's ears emerged the rhythm of the horse's pounding hoofs as it galloped over the sand.

It was a syncopated four beat rhythm with the slightest of pauses barely perceptible while all four feet flew in mid-air. One, two, three, four, pause, one, two, three, four, pause.

[SPEAKING INDIAN]

Mahindra laughed, but the sound was carried away on the wind. He slid easily into the rhythm and dared to open his eyes. He was surrounded by shades of black. Below him, the horse's body was a gleaming silver black. Farther down, the ground was a shade lighter with occasional cold colored clumps blurred by speed and flying sand. The head of the horse and land, dunes loomed like impenetrable shadows. Above them, an endless sky sparkled with stars.

Mahindra's hair streamed back as he lifted his head to look up. He was one with the horse, with the desert, with the sky. Dance in such a way that you become one with everything, Boku had taught him as he had taught me. Finally, Mahindra understood what this meant.

MCGONEGAL: Mahindra's rite of initiation in *Faint Promise of Rain*. I was also reading the book and you were writing it at a time of enormous change in India in terms of protests over the gang rapes in the cities and the countryside too. And this huge flux, and we've got Adhi, a young woman undergoes trauma. We've got corrupts-- and I don't know if you call them clergy. And just essentially a male dominated world. Has India changed that much?

DUVA: Well, you know, yes and no. It's interesting, the dichotomy of how women are treated in India has always for me been a mystery. How we can survive this way for so long that women on the one hand are revered as you know the Mother, capital M, the giver of life, the sustainer. And on the other hand, there is some circumstances, a blatant disregard for the rights of women.

So if you look at it that way, then it hasn't changed, because the characters in the book, these are temple dancers who are given or sold to the temple. They're considered auspicious, they're considered sacred. When they are dancing, no one is allowed to touch them. They are revered. They are auspicious presences at weddings, at births, at big events. And they are you know vessels of the divine.

And yet, the other side is that they have to give themselves to their patrons who they do not choose. And the patrons pay the temple in money, in whatever forms of payment, they sustain the temple. And there's a scene in the book, one of the characters for example, isn't allowed into the inner sanctum where the shrine for the deity Krishna is, because she's menstruating. And so therefore, she's unclean.

And yet, three days later, she will be this revered sacred vessel of the divine. So I don't know

it's such a complicated issue. It goes so far back. I don't have an answer. In writing this book, I wasn't necessarily searching for an answer, but it helped see the different sides, even if it doesn't explain them.

MCGONEGAL: It's a story of Adhira. If seen in one respect, it's a very simple arc of her coming of age, deciding what to do with her life. And embracing certain kinds of power, and trying to discard other kinds. But I found the most ambitious thing is the point of view. It's unlike any other I've read, and I am curious about the inspiration to tackle that, because we hear the entire book through Adhira's point of view while at the same time, chapter by chapter, you take us through each character's development and deep inside each character's head.

At one point, I realized, this must be what complete omniscience is for a god or a goddess, in this case.

DUVA: I'll admit it was a bit of a risk, but I really didn't believe in it. The book started out in an early draft in third person, but it was a shifting third person, like a close third. I actually wanted Adhira to be a composite of how everybody else saw her. And I wanted the reader to see her in that way and make up his or her own mind.

I realized after I wrote a draft and I started getting feedback that that was maybe a little too contrived, or honestly, too cowardly. People said, I love Adhira, but I want to know more about her. What is she thinking? She's at the center of this, and yet, I can't put my finger on her.

And I realized perhaps I had been trying to avoid that. As a writer, sometimes there are things you avoid, because you know they're going to be difficult. But ultimately, tackling them is what is going to make your book much better, and make you a better writer. And I thought, well, the thing about Adhira is she is special, she is divine in a sense. So maybe I need to relate it through her.

MCGONEGAL: Your degree in city planning, how well is that at work here? You didn't learn how to write fiction at MIT during your time here. You were at Brown before this.

DUVA: I was at Brown before in international development studies. Then I worked for a couple of years at a little economic development consulting firm. And that gave me a taste, that's actually, the two years that I worked there, that's when I realized that what I really wanted to do at the time was urban planning.

I've always been interested in cities. I've lived in large cities, I grew up in Paris and France. And growing up a lot of my favorite places to take visiting relatives was the catacombs. Much to my parents dismay. And the sewers system, because I was fascinated. I was fascinated by all these networks that are hidden-- sort of the skeleton, the digestive system, all these things that make a city function.

Then I realized I wanted to focus on that, on cities and infrastructure. And I came to MIT I worked a bunch with Paul Levy. I actually ended up taking half my courses in civil engineering. I think it was perhaps to be an antidote to Brown. Brown for me was very, they weren't down to earth enough. I realize I'm pretty concrete person. And MIT was so practical, you know, we're going to do this project and it's actually taking place across the street.

And I was really fascinated in how do you plan a vast infrastructure project? How do you keep things going while changing them? How do you finance it? How do you deal with all the different stakeholders and come to an agreement? And so that's what I did. And then I worked for a number of years in infrastructure planning, mostly in developing countries.

While the work was fantastic, traveling around to all these places all the time is not conducive to raising a family, at least not in the way that I wanted to do it. Life takes you in a funny directions sometimes. I do actually find that a lot of my MIT education comes to work here. But it's--

MCGONEGAL: In fiction?

DUVA: In fiction. I had planned a four book project. From the moment I started writing the first one, I realized it was going to be a four book project. Now my life is structured a little better for me to spend more time writing, so hopefully it won't be 10 years per book.

MCGONEGAL: Throw a challenge out to your fellow alumni, or to the MIT community either to right some of the wrongs you've encountered in your work, or that you've addressed in your writing.

DUVA: I think the ability to write well and improve your writing is crucial for anybody at MIT. When I was here, I taught, it's a writing class program for undergrads to improve their communication skills. I found it really fascinating to teach that class, because the students who are, I mean, are amazingly smart, right? I mean, a bunch of them had already patents pending with NASA and all kinds of stuff that made me feel very small.

And yet, I could see that there was sometimes a gap in their written communication skills. I

remember showing them this example of a written piece of communication. And it had to do with the Challenger, and how there was somebody who had actually foreseen the problem with an O-ring. But what he was trying to draw to people's attention was so mixed into other things and not clear enough that this piece, I mean, it didn't put up a flag for anybody. And so this really resonated with them that this is why it's so important. Even if you're not going to be writing a lot, what you do write needs to be very compellingly written.

MCGONEGAL: Customers who bought your book also bought *I am Malala*, *Fall on Your Knees* by Ann-Marie MacDonald, *The moon is Down* by John Steinbeck.

DUVA: I was very pleased to see that. I'm keeping good company apparently.

MCGONEGAL: But tell me, what else are you reading right now?

DUVA: I just read *I am Malala*, because I, well, everybody I think should read it. I run a children's book club, which I've been doing for two years now with a group of nine kids in Arlington where I live. And it's been honestly, just a fantastic experience. And I've been trying specifically to expose them to books that they're not taking out of their school library right now.

And we had a fantastic conversation about it, this was with fifth graders. And we we're talking about all kinds of things and pretty tough subject. But I think it's important for kids to realize what is going on in the world and form their own opinions, and how to learn from it.

Now we switched, I had a focus on human interaction with the animal world. And so there's a book by Kenneth Oppel called *Half Brother*, and it's the family whose father is an anthropologist. And he's part of this study to see if chimpanzees can learn advanced language, and sort of sign for them.

And so they end up having a chimpanzee live in their home. Actually I just started reading *Wolf Hall*. I'm on a mission to read very strongly written historical fiction.

MCGONEGAL: *Faint Promise of Rain* by Anjali Mitter Duva is available online now or from your local bookstore. Anjali Mitter Duva, thanks for joining me.

DUVA: Thank you very much. This was great, a lot of fun.