

# Indian American Author

Discusses Writing, Living in the United States

**Indu Sundaresan**, whose novels bring 17th century India to life, says her stories provide a way to maintain a strong connection with the country of her youth while living in the United States. Sundaresan is best known for her novels *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses*, about one of the most powerful women in Indian history, Mehrunnisa, who became the Empress Nur Jahan of the Mughal Empire.

"I do have a lot of family in India, as also in the U.S., and that is how I define myself. I am Indian and I am American," Sundaresan told participants at the Frankfurt Book Fair during a live Web chat from her home in Seattle, Washington, on October 5.



JERRY BAUER/Courtesy Indu Sundaresan

## Excerpts from the Web chat:

**I was very impressed with your descriptions of India in the 17th century in *The Twentieth Wife*. Did you research the history of India for the book, or did the descriptions come from stories passed down from your parents and grandparents? Do the places you describe still exist in India?**

**SUNDARESAN:** I did research both *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses* (the sequel) extensively before and during the writing of the two novels. And all my research was done here, in the Seattle area, from the local library system and the University of Washington's Suzzallo and Allen libraries. Between these two libraries, I found enough translated travelogues, manuscripts, memoirs to fashion out the lives of the characters in 17th century India.

As for the stories from my father and my grandfather—they were more bedtime stories, and tales of their friends

and acquaintances. My father taught me how to tell stories, a skill I used when I began writing.

Most of the places I describe in the two novels still exist after some 400 odd years and, considering their age, are in excellent repair. The one place that comes entirely from my imagination is the huge chess board in *The Feast of Roses*. I made up a life-sized chess board in one of the palaces for the scene where Mehrunnisa plays chess with a courtier, Mahabat Khan, and defeats him, thereby establishing her supremacy over him. The two players use live pieces to play with—the rooks are baby elephants with mahouts that command them to move from square to square.

The idea for this scene, however, comes from a life-size *pachisi* board that is engraved on the floors of one of the courtyards at Fatehpur Sikri, an entire ghost city in red sandstone near Agra.

**Was it a huge culture shock when you arrived in the United States?**

Yes and no. Most of my ideas and im-

pressions of the U.S. were based on movies and books, and it wasn't until I came here to experience life firsthand that I realized how erroneous some of those impressions could be, and how accurate they could be also.

For the most part, my first few years were in an insulated university environment, but the happiest realization still is that in the U.S. you can be part of the society and still maintain your own ethnic and cultural identity.

***The Splendor of Silence* was set in India during World War II. Was this easier to write about than India in the 17th century? I read that your dad was in the Air Force. Did this help you write *Splendor*?**

In some ways *Splendor* was easier to write from the point of view of creating an atmosphere for the story. It wasn't an entirely new or unknown world....And there is, also, a lot of material to research from—almost too much!

*Splendor* is set in four days in May of

1942, and the last few years before independence from British rule in India are very well documented, so I had to cull through and find what I wanted for the novel—the viewpoints of my Indian protagonists, and the viewpoint of my main American character, Sam Hawthorne, who is in India as part of the U.S. forces to help in the retaking of Burma.

To answer the second part of your question, I grew up on Air Force bases and have a sense, if you like, of what cantonment life was like—the officers' mess, the dress whites after 6 p.m., no children allowed after a certain time, a lot of impressions that find their way into *Splendor*.

**Do you feel that this is a particularly rich era, as it were, for Indian writers who write in English?**

Yes, there is such a wealth of literature in English both from within India and without. Why now? I'm not entirely sure. I went out with the manuscript of *The Twentieth Wife* for five years before I found an agent to represent it (and Sandy Dijkstra sold it to my publishers at Atria Books, Simon & Schuster in something like a weekend), but the timing was right, the book was at its polished best....A lot of things happened at the same time.

I think we (Indian writers in English) are speaking out, a lot of us have a lot to say, people are listening, there are a variety of voices, both contemporary and historical (as in my case).

**Could you please let us know whether there is special training for authors in your country e.g., literature institutes?**

There are a lot of MFA (Master of Fine Arts) programs that "teach" creative writing in most of the universities in the U.S. But I took night classes at the local community colleges here; this was well after I had written four novels.

I had two previous (unpublished) novels, and then *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses*, and then I went out and took my first class. The classes taught me how to edit my work, how to revise. I guess what I'm saying is that writing cannot be taught. You write and then you listen to what others have to say about your

work and you learn to edit. The writing has to be all your own.

**You grew up in India and received a degree in economics there. How did you come to the U.S., and how did you become a writer?**

I never considered writing to be a career, but the idea must have been percolating somewhere in the back of my mind. After I finished my graduate degrees at the University of Delaware, I bought a computer, sat down and wrote a novel (and another one, and then *The Twentieth Wife*)....There were no doubts that I couldn't do it, I just went into the writing with a simple faith and a confidence.

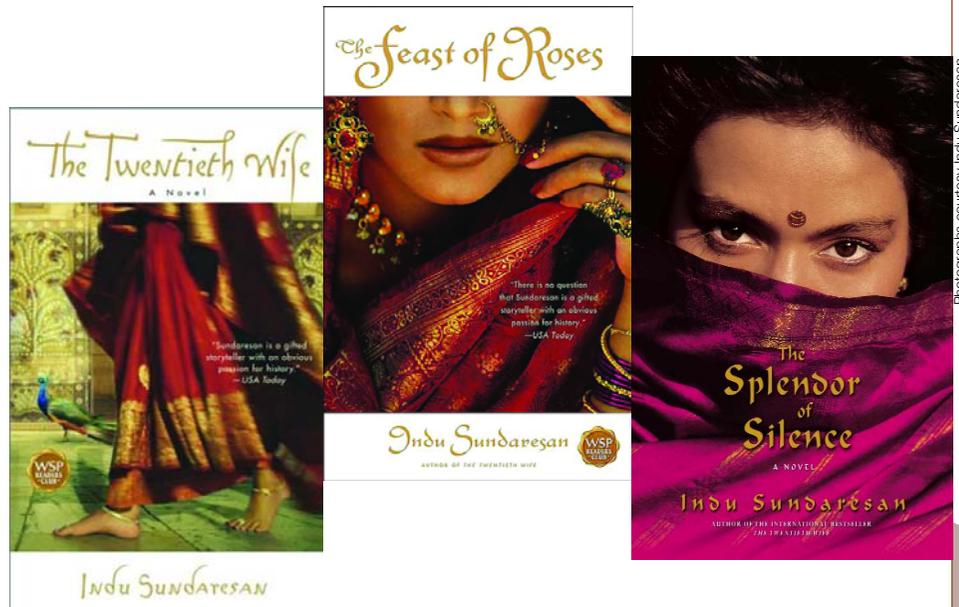
**Who are some of your favorite Indian authors and what draws you to their literature?**

There are many favorites, and most are favored because of specific books rather than the entire body of work. Chitra Divakaruni for the poetry in her lan-

were considered desirable, when she married Emperor Jahangir and came into his harem as his 20th wife (hence the title of the first novel).

This woman then, over the next 17 years of her husband's rule, became the most powerful empress in that entire Mughal dynasty. She gave public audiences (albeit still clad in a veil), made court decisions, signed on *farmans* or imperial edicts, had her own seal fashioned. She had coins minted in her name (a privilege only extended to ruling royalty, not to spouses)—the only hallmark of sovereignty that Mehrunnisa did not exercise was having the *khutba* (the official proclamation of sovereignty) read in her name. The muezzins still called out Emperor Jahangir as the ruler of the empire.

And she did all of this after stepping into a harem where there were women already well established into the hierarchy, already in favor, already powerful,



guage, Amitav Ghosh for the atmosphere he creates, R. K. Narayan also for atmosphere and language. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala because she understands her characters well.

**What kind of a woman is your heroine, Mehrunnisa? Can you tell us a little bit about her?**

Mehrunnisa was 34, widowed with a child, well past the age when women

though only within the harem walls. Mehrunnisa took power away from these women and exercised it both within the imperial harem and at court, also dealing with Sir Thomas Roe, the first official ambassador from the court of James I of England and an early representative of the British East India Company.

I could say more, much more about her...but you should read *The Twentieth Wife* and *The Feast of Roses* for more! ♣

Photographs courtesy Indu Sundaresan