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A Proud Inheritance

With storytelling in her blood, novelist Kiran Desai '99SOA wins the Man Booker Prize.

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When she submitted her master’s thesis to the graduate writing program in 1999, Kiran Desai ’99SOA was in the catbird seat. More than six months earlier, the work

had been published by Grove/Atlantic Press as *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, with an emphatic blurb from Salman Rushdie. While most thesis conferences are humbling affairs focused on manuscript revision, Desai's, according to novelist and Writing Division professor Binnie Kirshenbaum '80GS, concerned "what we liked about the book and what she was going to do next."

Desai's plan, according to Kirshenbaum, was "to catch her breath and then pursue a larger work."

On October 10, seven years after that thesis conference, that "larger work," *The Inheritance of Loss*, was awarded the Man Booker Prize, given to the year's best English-language novel by a citizen of the British Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland. Unlike the Pulitzer Prize — whose advisory board can and has used its veto power against jury recommendations such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) — the Booker is selected by an independent jury, which adds to its reputation as one of the world's most prestigious and unassailable literary awards. Desai, age 35, is the youngest woman to receive the prize in its 38-year history.

To call Desai a prodigy or wunderkind, as some have, would be a mistake. Both characterizations imply effortless bravura, and Desai's process in realizing *The Inheritance of Loss* involved astonishing (and transcontinental) effort. In essence, she has been studying her subjects — citizenship and immigration — all her life.

Born in 1971, Desai spent her first 14 years in India, mostly in New Delhi, before moving to England and, one year later, to the United States with her mother, novelist Anita Desai, a three-time Booker Prize finalist. As a high school student in Amherst, Massachusetts, Kiran was bent on studying science. But her focus shifted abruptly when she took her first writing class as a student at Bennington College, taught by essayist Phillip Lopate '64CC. Desai has called it "a revelation."

"I learned that science was suspect and much closer to fiction," she says. "By the time I was 20, I knew I wanted to write. If I wrote, I'd be happy."

Desai graduated from Bennington in 1993 and spent the next six years studying writing at Hollins University in Virginia, then at Columbia. While two MFAs may seem redundant, it's hard to argue with the results. In a writing program, Desai says, "you feel legitimate, that it's okay to attempt to be a writer. It's important to be in a place where writing is not considered irresponsible. I needed that space." At Columbia,

where Desai studied with Magda Bogin, James Lasdun, Randall Kenan, and Michael Scammell ’85GSAS, she finished *Hullabaloo* and began what would later become *Inheritance*. The two novels have thus far netted her £60,000 in prizes.

Grove/Atlantic editor Joan Bingham remembers her initial encounter with Desai’s *Hullabaloo*, a story set in northern India and centered on a would-be prophet named Sampath who climbs a tree and doesn’t come down. “I fell in love with it,” Bingham says. “It was a charming fable, fresh and original and imaginative and with so much humor.” The book received an equally warm welcome from critics. Along with Rushdie’s gushing praise (“lush and intensely imagined”), the book won exaltations from high-profile reviewers and a coveted first-book prize, the Betty Trask Award, given by the British Society of Authors.

“After *Hullabaloo* was published, I began to wonder what I’d done,” Desai recalls. “Some people called it ‘magic realism,’ but I saw it more as an Indian folktale or fable. Around that time, magic realism and fables became a very dirty way to work and to write about the third world. These were termed ‘exotic’ works about India for the Western market, and it was Indian authors providing them. They were sort of naive, magical versions of a country that made [that country] easy to destroy or not take seriously. After that, there was a desire for realism. I thought quite hard about it.”

If Desai’s first novel was eccentric and fablelike, her second takes up a greater narrative challenge, spanning multiple continents and generations and spinning multiple life stories. The Inheritance of Loss toggles between the lives of its two protagonists: Sai, a teenage girl in an Indian town at the foot of the Himalayas, and Biju, a young Indian immigrant working in several subterranean restaurant kitchens in New York City. Narrative threads loop forward and backward as the story jumps continents, and the reader is deftly introduced to a notably idiosyncratic cast of characters. In spite (or because) of that scope, the center holds, anchored in the exploration of what it means to leave or — just as profoundly — not to leave one’s homeland.

While Desai’s debut was notable, the sophomore book was stunning. *Hullabaloo*, Kirshenbaum says, “was truly a sweet first novel but was more of a folktale and less complicated. What impressed me about her second book was how multilayered and mature it is. It is the work of an accomplished author.”

Kirshenbaum compares *Inheritance* to E. M. Forster's books, as well as to other early 20th-century British novels that are "sweeping in scope, dealing with internationalism and British colonialism." Like other postcolonial writers — such as her mother — Desai sets the protagonists' personal stories against the political realities of their settings. Sai's love affair with her Nepali tutor, Gyan, blossoms under the unlikely and eventually impossible circumstances of Nepali armed rebellion. Biju's effort to settle in the "First World" is underscored by his struggle to secure a green card.

Much has been made of Desai's connection to her mother: *Inheritance* is dedicated to her, and Desai accepted the Booker Prize by saying, "To my mother, I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine." Interviewed by Dinitia Smith for *The New York Times*, Desai described days of working side by side with her mother in the sleepy New York village of Cold Spring as they toiled over their respective manuscripts, capping some evenings with dinner and rum.

While working on *Hullabaloo*, Desai took time away from her studies at Columbia and traveled extensively during the seven years she was developing *Inheritance* — including trips to Latin America and India, where her father lives.

"I was a funny student at Columbia," Desai says. "I was already going through the realization that while the writing program had allowed me to begin writing, I was writing in a different way. I needed to go back to an older approach that I understood from my mother's way of working. It was much harder for her, to work without something like a writing program, but I think you get something else from falling out of that. Writing a novel requires isolation. There's a time to be educated and a time to move out."

Though hardly mentioned in recent articles about Desai's literary coup, her father, Ashvin, also played a significant role in her development as a writer. "He is the reason I've maintained a connection to India, that constant being in touch with all the issues this book talks about," Desai says. "To be one of those Indians who does go back. And my father is a great reader. He sits up on a rooftop and reads. He read my book in January and said, 'I predict this will get the Booker. I have read every Booker [novel] for 20 years, and this is going to get it.'"

Desai is now back in her Brooklyn apartment, where she is well aware of the riddle New York City poses for writers with its million distractions. “It’s a constant battle,” she says. “It’s even a huge strain to study in New York. On the other hand, it’s extremely good to study in New York for the same reasons — because you do see what the whole publishing world is about, with access to agents and magazines, and you get to understand the fashion of the publishing world. In another way, it’s hard to write once you know what it’s about. Publishers are very conscious — ‘Oh, memoirs are being bought now.’ But writing doesn’t come from that at all.” Explaining her own itinerant process, she adds, “I really vanished so drastically because you need to push yourself to lose that self-consciousness.”

Desai admits that since winning the Booker, with all of the resulting media and social obligations, right now she doesn’t *have* a writing life. Future work, she predicts, will require both temporal distance from the prize and physical distance from New York. “I am so self-conscious now,” she says. “I can’t work at all. This book was with me seven or eight years. I miss it terribly. I can’t wait to get back to writing.”

Excerpt from *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai

The incidents of horror grew, through the changing of the seasons, through winter and a flowery spring, summer, then rain and winter again. Roads were closed, there was a curfew every night, and Kalimpong was trapped in its own madness. You couldn’t leave the hillsides; nobody even left their houses if they could help it but stayed locked in and barricaded.

If you were a Nepali reluctant to join in, it was bad. The Metal-Box watchman had been beaten, forced to repeat “Jai Gorkha,” and dragged to Mahakala Temple to swear an oath of loyalty to the cause.

If you weren’t Nepali it was worse.

If you were Bengali, people who had known you your whole life wouldn’t acknowledge you in the street.

Even the Biharis, Tibetans, Lepchas, and Sikkimese didn’t acknowledge you. They, the unimportant shoals of a minority population, the small powerless numbers that might be caught up in either net, wanted to put the Bengalis on the other side of the argument for themselves, delineate them as the enemy.

“All these years,” said Lola, “I’ve been buying eggs at that Tshering’s shop down the road, and the other day he looked at me right in the face and said he had none. ‘I see a basket of them right there,’ I said, ‘how can you tell me you have none?’ ‘They have been presold,’ he said.

“Pem Pem,” Lola had exclaimed on her way out, seeing her friend Mrs. Thondup’s daughter come in. Just a few months ago Lola and Noni had partaken of fine civilities in her home that had harkened to another kind of life in another place, quail eggs with bamboo shoots, fat Tibetan carpets under their toes.

“Pem Pem?”

Pem Pem gave Lola a beseeching embarrassed look and rushed past.

“All of a sudden wrong side, no?” said Lola, “There is nobody who won’t abandon you.”

On the ledge below Mon Ami, among the row of illegal huts, the sisters had noticed a small temple flying a red and gold flag, ensuring that no matter what, into eternity, no official — police, government, nobody — would dare dispute the legitimacy of the landgrab. The gods themselves had blessed it now. Little shrines were springing up all over Kalimpong, adjoining constructions forbidden by the municipality — squatter genius. And the trespassers were tapping phone lines, water pipes, electric lines in jumbles of illegal connections. The trees that provided Lola and Noni with pears, so many that they had cursed it, “Stewed pears and cream, stewed pears and cream every damn day!” had been stripped overnight. The broccoli patch was gone, the area near the gate was being used as a bathroom. Little children lined up in rows to spit at Lola and Noni as they walked by, and when Kesang, their maid, was bitten by one of the squatter’s dogs, she screamed away, “Look your dog has bitten me, now you must put oil and turmeric on the wound so I don’t die from an infection.”

But they just laughed.

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