



Desai's inheritance of success

By Lisa Mitchell
BBC News, Sri Lanka

"I have become a secretary to myself," sighs Kiran Desai.

The youngest woman to win the Man Booker Prize has had a three-month whirlwind since judges hailed her second novel "magnificent".

Book tours followed interviews across continents and now she finds herself at a literary festival in Sri Lanka.

It is in sharp contrast to the seven years she spent in seclusion writing *The Inheritance of Loss*.

"I didn't want it to take that long," she smiles. "If you spend that long working on one thing I think you become quite odd."

Odd is not how she appears. Beautiful, elegant, articulate, slight are adjectives which suit her far better.

Her mother, Booker short-listed Anita Desai, told her not to be a writer, but Desai, 35, says she watched her go into her study and close the door.

"She seemed content when she shut us out so I knew there was more to it."

'Very sweet'

The family left India 20 years ago, first for a year in London and then settling in America.

Her first novel - *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* - was a "very sweet" version of India.

"I was trying to hold onto what I knew I was losing - everything I loved most about India."

The Inheritance of Loss, she acknowledges, is altogether darker. Set in a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas, all of the characters are deeply flawed.

In a sad way, the older generation tried to hold onto their colonial heritage of marmalade and Marks and Spencer knickers.

Meanwhile, the young are searching for a way out of their village lives. One goes to New York and falls into the shady backstreets where thousands of illegal immigrants scratch a living.

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Kiran Desai

"I meant to write much more about my experience as an immigrant but I realised it was too small a story," she says.

The result is what Hermione Lee, chairman of the Booker panel, called "movingly strong in its humanity".

The village, Kalimpong, is a real place, and Desai was criticised by locals who did not like how they were portrayed.

"I got a huge amount of hate mail," she says. "I was worried about the response. I didn't quite understand it."

Book burnings behind her, Booker celebrity has taken her to Galle, a Unesco world heritage town in the south of Sri Lanka which is holding its first literary festival.

So new to the scene, it is quite a coup to boast the current Booker winner.

"I asked to come!" she says modestly.

Messy process

Her friend and Pulitzer finalist Suketu Mehta was the catalyst, along with a love of Sri Lankan authors.

Both are products of the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop - which lists several Pulitzer prize winners among its alumni including Philip Roth and Jane Smiley - but say it was only when they left that their writing really took off.

"In the end it somehow felt that writing for group approval and producing something every 30 days produced sanitised writing," says Desai.

"Writing a novel doesn't fit that kind of profile. It's a messy process. So I started writing much like my mother."

So will it take another seven years for the next Desai novel?

"Writing requires such a difference style from what I'm doing now. Normally I do nothing at all all year.

"Sometimes I'm worried I won't be able to get back to writing.

"But," she says, "there's no pressure," as she heads off for another book tour on another continent.

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