

Q&A

with Nanda Reddy



1. What was your inspiration for the book?

This story came to me a few years before I wrote a word of it. I was on vacation in Costa Rica, and a tour guide made the honest assumption that I was from India. I didn't correct him because it didn't bother me, and there wasn't time to discuss the Indian diaspora, but the idea of an Indo-Caribbean woman who hides her true identity popped into my head. I was intrigued by the idea of someone who allows others' assumptions to shape what they know about her, someone who reinvents herself to erase her past. I didn't know the details of the story then, but I knew I'd end up mining small truths from my life for the book.

As an immigrant who is brown, I've grown adept at code-switching. I'm aware I will always be perceived as an other, at least initially, anytime I meet someone, and that acting and sounding "American" changes how they behave toward me. That's always fascinated me, and it's something I explore with my main character. I also examine the idea of curating a life to hide all the ugly things, the secret, unfaceable things. On some level, it's something I think everyone does, hiding parts of ourselves and showing only the pretty stuff. My protagonist builds a life on this for the most part.

"I knew I'd end up mining small truths from my life for the book."

2. Your own immigration story is quite different from that of your protagonist. What was your experience as a young immigrant to the U.S.? In what ways did it inform this story?

Unlike my protagonist, I arrived in the U.S. with papers and with my entire family. We were welcomed by my father's extended family, with whom we lived for about a year, who set my parents up for success by facilitating jobs, helping with rides, watching us kids, etc.

Even so, I was a fish out of water and floundered upon arrival. Ah, the shock of it! I was nine, and all I knew of America were the things relatives had brought to Guyana during visits.

Apples and Crayola crayons; store-bought clothes and dolls. With my accented English, braided hair, homemade clothes, and shy demeanor, I did not fit into the treacherous American school culture. We were the last of my father's family to arrive, so I didn't even fit in with my many cousins, who'd arrived years before me or were born in America. This compounded my sense of isolation, and I assumed there was something wrong with me. Feelings and experiences from that time definitely informed my character's journey.

3. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist becomes an expert at code-switching. How do you think code-switching factors into our everyday lives in today's culture?

In my novel, the young protagonist speaks a form of Creole English, and she's judged negatively for this, even by the Guyanese people among her. She works to "fix" her speech, but she quickly learns that acceptance into American culture requires more than just language. Much of her identity shifting in the story is related to learning to code-switch on a macro level to survive.

But I believe code-switching occurs at a micro level for most people, particularly as we've grown accustomed to social media. Everyone everywhere understands that most profiles are curated to some degree, that posters follow a code in their profiles, and that nuanced, messy, honest selves might implode their personas. I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with this; I think it's natural for us to speak and act differently in different situations, at work versus around friends, for example. But, I'm not sure we fess up to our own multiple selves, much less examine and come to terms with them.

4. What was behind your choice to include several deaf characters in the novel?

I didn't set out to write deaf characters, but they showed up as soon as I started writing. That's likely because I have a deaf sister, and we mine from our lives, us novelists.

Q&A (continued)

In one of the first scenes, the protagonist is with her deaf older sister, and there's a dynamic in which she wonders what her sister is thinking but can't just ask. She serves as her sister's interpreter, but their communication is coarse and rudimentary, and they've reached an age where it's stopped serving them. She's also desperate to be alone and leave her sister, who's always by her side. A similar dynamic once existed between me and my deaf older sister when we were young; I leaned into this and exaggerated it in the fictional setting.

In my early draft, I worried people might assume the sister relationship is autobiographical, but Roshi is very different from my sister, and their lives are drastically different. I kept the character because she quickly became pivotal AND because I felt her representation mattered. And my sister was excited to know I included a deaf character in the book.

The protagonist's deaf son and her husband's deaf sister were created for tension since she keeps her sister a secret. Plus, I loved the idea of showing a utopic deaf world full of sign language, something my sister, sadly, did not live.

5. This book features a notably diverse cast of characters. How did you address differences in language from Guyanese patois to sign language to Spanish in your writing process?

Authenticity was important to me as these characters sprung up and spoke, and I often went by intuition as I wrote. But my intuition was fed by experience. I grew up in Miami in a diverse neighborhood and attended diverse schools where Spanish was prevalent; as someone who was self-conscious about her accent and speech, I studied how different groups spoke—their slang and their mannerisms. I had no idea this would serve me as a writer in my adulthood. For the patois and sign language, I created a style guide to stay consistent on the page. I also worked hard to represent the characters and their speech with respect, which is important to me.

6. Your protagonist is a book lover. Is there a novel that has been particularly influential to you?

The books cited in the novel have been influential during different periods of my life.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou, was one of the first books I read that showed me honest, gritty stories by non-whites can be told. *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand, was influential in my late adolescence, though I no longer believe its tenets. *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver, was one of the first novels I read that addressed colonialism in a critical light, and it was the first time I began thinking critically about Guyana as a British colony. But the book that made me want to read again and inspired me to write is *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch. Its poetic prose felt like magic, and I wanted to try my hand at it, though I did it secretly and badly for years!

7. What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

I hope this book causes readers to think about the dimensionality of identity. Their own identity—the versions of themselves that have existed. And others' identities, which we often try to pigeonhole, not wanting to deal with complexity and nuance.

I also hope this book helps readers look at immigration and assimilation in a nuanced and critical way. There is no right-wrong position presented in this novel, but there is a complicated situation that's worth discussing. Finally, I hope readers are curious about Guyana and the Indian diaspora there—enough to learn more about it.

I hope this book causes readers to think about the dimensionality of identity.

8. Can you speak to your writing process a little bit? Do you follow a set routine and schedule, or were you looser in your approach to writing this novel?

I wish I were the sort of writer who sets a schedule and sticks to it, but I'm a lot looser than that. In drafting this book, I signed up for a course that forced me to meet word count deadlines, and I learned that showing up often triggers the muse. But sometimes it helps to let story ideas marinate; I've learned that, too.

9. Are you working on anything new?

My WIP is a departure from this novel, a psychological thriller that addresses the aftermath of a kidnapping. But the protagonist is also a Guyanese-American woman, and identity is also a theme.