



## INTERVIEW WITH CHITRA DIVAKARUNI

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Joy Yokoy, Rachel Savini & Emma Roles

We sit in a crowded restaurant, conversations buzzing, waiters whizzing past. The door opens and in walks author Chitra Divakaruni. She warmly shakes each of our hands before sitting down.

Chitra Divakaruni is an award-winning, bestselling author of seventeen books and counting. She has been published in over fifty magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*. She has been featured in *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*. She is a Creative Writing Professor at the University of Houston. When asked if she has a favorite piece of work, she is unable to answer. “They’re all like my children. If I had to say, I guess I love the baby the most.”

She divides her time between teaching classes and stocking up on ideas for her next projects. Between glances at the menu, she tells us how she keeps a writer’s notebook. “Anytime I come up with a writing idea, I write it down there. The wonderful thing about that is when I’m done with a project, I always have new ideas for my next projects.”

Divakaruni has a preferred routine of waking up early to write and meditating to assist her creative process. “Meditation is really good for me because it calms the mind and it’s a good place for creativity.”

Most writers suffer from perfectionism, but Divakaruni seems to have a handle on it, admitting to us that “not everything I write is going to be good, because I have to do a lot of revision and I’ll throw away a lot of stuff.”

She asks us if we are familiar with the phenomenon of the “fictive dream.” She smiles at our puzzled looks and proceeds to explain to us the dream landscape writers fall into.

“Keep in touch with your writing and stay in that fictive dream—that’s what I try to do. Because that world is very real to us and we feel that world if we keep in touch with it. If I do fall out of it, it’s hard; I have to do a lot reading and get into the mindset of the characters.”

Writing novels isn't an easy process. Divakaruni is constantly working on several projects at once. Finishing a single novel—with all the researching and drafting—takes around two to three years.

“What would you say is the most difficult part of your writing process?” we ask.

“Everything,” Chitra says with a chuckle. “And nothing really gets any easier because each project is different.” She thinks for a moment and then continues, “If I were to say one thing, it would be figuring out the voice. In the beginning, I rewrite my first chapter over and over again until I can find the voice. Once I get it, things start flowing and my books become somewhat voice-driven.”

Writing a novel is no easy task. It often requires multiple drafts to get the voice of the characters just right.

“I like to try all kinds of perspectives before I decide on a voice,” she says. “A lot of times, I'll speak out what my characters are saying and hear it out. I tell my students that if you take more time in the beginning, it'll save you a lot of time at the end.”

She also advises her students to step away from their work to get a better idea of what's working and what isn't. “We're too close to our work,” she explains. “Everything seems perfect, but it's good to take a break after a few chapters or scenes and show it to somebody and ask, ‘What are you getting from this?’ and hear them out.

“One of the things that has been really good for my writing is that we have a writers' group,” she says.

“It's really nice because they're all people who went to [University of Houston] so everyone is close and they can be really honest. It's usually a once-a-month conference call over Skype, about one to two hours.

“So first I'll show things to my writers' group. Then I send it to my agent; my agent is very hands-on, and wants to read everything that I write. There's a couple of other readers in her office, they'll also read. Then it'll go to my editor.”

Instead of planning extensively like some other authors, Divakaruni allows her stories to take their own shape.

“When I start writing, I’ll have an overall idea about what I want it to be like, but I won’t plan out the little details because I want those to be spontaneous.” With a smile, she says, “Sometimes I’ll be pleasantly surprised when a new idea comes up while I’m revising. I’m always happy to rewrite it because it’s usually an idea that improves the book or character or scene.”

She takes a bite of her appetizer, fried eggplant and tofu. “I personally don’t like to plan too much, but everyone writes differently. I know some wonderful writers who have to plan everything out. But there comes a certain point where I know what’s going to happen and then I’ll plan it out.” Her face lights up and she eagerly says, “Another thing that I do—and I often tell this to my students—is that when you finish your first draft, even if you didn’t plan before, look at it and make an outline. Because when you make the outline, you will see the gaps and what needs to be added in. It’s like a reverse outline and it’s helped several of my students.”

Divakaruni’s stories have a big focus on family. Her stories are inspired by the merge between Indian and American culture, often playing with the tension in mother/daughter relationships. But her favorite familial relationship to write about is the grandparent/grandchild relationship. “That’s important for me to explore,” she explains. “I’ve written about it several times. Or between cousins, as in *Sister of My Heart*. Or the joint-family structure. What’s the bride’s relationship with other women in that family?”

She enjoys the freedom that comes with being a fiction writer, especially when it comes to writing about families. “When I’m writing a family story, it’s not my family. So I can make them go through whatever terrible or wonderful thing they need to go through and they can be as complicated [as they need] and make wrong decisions if they need to.”

Many of Divakaruni’s writings have been adapted into films and plays. Between sips of hot jasmine tea and waiting for our food, she

tells us a little bit about her experiences.

“One of the things that I had to learn early on was to let go,” she says. “The book is mine, but everything else that is a spin-off is someone else’s creative understanding. Once I figured that out I was perfectly fine. I like to talk to the directors early in the process to tell them what was in my mind and to hear what’s in their mind, but I’m never invested in those things creatively.

“I’m always happy because it brings the book to a different audience. Now sometimes it’s problematic . . . At the end of the day, what’s the worst thing that can happen? People will go see the movie and people will say the book was—”

Laughing, we say in unison, “The book was better!”

“And if the movie was better, then great! It will make lots of people buy the book!”

As successful as her career has been, she didn’t always know that she wanted to be a writer. “I only started writing after I got to [the United States]. I think the process of immigration really made me become a writer. I wrote to make sense of this whole new world.”

As Divakaruni comes from a traditional Bengali family, the move from India to the United States was drastic, which she remarks on as we shuffle our plates around to make room for all of our steaming dishes. There were very few Indians in Ohio when Divakaruni’s family moved there, and it redefined the way her family saw success.

“When I was brought up, what my mother wanted for me most of all (although she did want me to become educated) was that I would have a good marriage, a good family, and bring up my children well.” She jokingly adds, “And of course, get along with my mother-in-law.

“My mother wanted to become a writer, but she never did. She was never able to complete her education, and she was also expected to take care of the family. After we were all grown, she started writing little things and getting them published in the local Indian magazine. I think that made her happy.” Divakaruni smiles warmly. “She was a good writer. She wrote in Bengali, her mother tongue. I think she

was pleased that I became a writer. But we didn't ever talk about our writing, which was probably a good thing."

"My younger son actually writes," she says, "but he has told me that he doesn't show me most of it. And even the things that he shows me he tells me, 'I don't want comments, I'm just sharing,' and I'm okay with that."

Not only is Divakaruni a talented and prolific writer, she is an active advocate and ally for survivors of domestic abuse, especially women belonging to her own culture.

"My early writings like *Arranged Marriages* and *Mistress of Spices* are stories about domestic violence. It's intense working with domestic violence, so it's bound to influence you as a person and as a writer."

She leans in. "It's made me want to write more and more about women's issues and women who undergo a lot of challenges, not always just domestic violence. Generally, the women I write about are going through challenges, which in terms of story is also good. It's dramatic."

Yet such complicated and dark subject matter isn't always easy to work with, she explains. "It's difficult to write about, especially when you've worked in the area and you've seen so many bad abusers who in fiction we're always saying—which I'm sure is true in real life too—that people are complex. People aren't just good or bad. You see some of those perpetrators and you can't think anything good about them. But to write about it, you have to overcome that and they still have to be complex. That's a challenge."

She goes on to talk more about activism and writing and how the two come together for writers. ". . . [I]t's a fine line. We want to write about issues, but we want to make it complex. And those two things are fighting against each other. When you speak about an issue or maybe write a nonfiction essay about it, you are trying to get people to change their minds about it, and they need to understand what really goes on. Literature works differently from that. In literature, we

want people to make up their own minds instead of telling them what to think. You'll always have to walk the tightrope between the two."

We take a few moments to enjoy our dishes before Divakaruni tells us about a current social issue that is prevalent in her work, both in the beginning of her career and now. "I want to write good stories about immigrants. I want to show they're human and they're not perfect, and neither should they be asked to perfect. I think the answer is to make those characters really compelling and complex so that even though they are not perfect and have problems, readers can be sympathetic to them. It's tough to do."

She takes another moment, scooping up the last morsels from her plate.

"I haven't solved the whole conundrum," Divakaruni admits.

As our time with her comes to an end, she insists that we all get take-home boxes, as she hates to waste good food. We scrape our leftovers into the paper boxes, and out of curiosity we ask what her Hogwarts house is. She laughs. "I think I am Gryffindor. If I were Slytherin, would I tell you?"