
LITERARY ARTS

Featured speaker Rakha to discuss her book, *The Crying Tree*

by Sara Toth
Staff writer

Students in the workshops offered by Chautauqua Writers' Center come from vast backgrounds; some are novices, others are professionals. One professional workshop-goer is returning to Chautauqua Institution to speak about a book she recently published.

Naseem Rakha, author of *The Crying Tree*, has been coming to Chautauqua for almost 20 years and participat-

ing in workshops for several sessions. She is the featured speaker at the Writers' Center open mic at 5 p.m. Sunday on the front porch of the Literary Arts Center at Alumni Hall.

A former journalist, Rakha covered the first execution in Oregon in more than 30 years. After retiring from the field, she started work on *The Crying Tree*, a work of fiction inspired by interviews conducted during and after the case.

"After I covered the ex-

ecution, I went around and started to do a lot more research about the death penalty," Rakha said.

An interview with Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, led to interviews with former death row inmates, prison employees and families of murder victims — people who forgave, and others who refused.

"I found people waiting for the person that had harmed them and their family member to die, and thinking that this was going to bring closure," Rakha said. "I also met others that had gone through the anger and the grief and the hate and then realized that they couldn't

do it anymore, they couldn't keep on hating and gave it up and forgave the person who had harmed them."

Rakha found that arc of emotions — from the most desperate kind of pain and loss, to forgiving the person who had been the cause — "tremendously compelling." The author said she found that there was much to learn from writing that story.

"I explored the subject, really, for me, to understand how you forgive the unforgivable," Rakha said. "I learned that forgiveness is a very, very personal journey ... I learned that your moral compass is totally thrown off in those situations and you

hope that you'll find your bearings again; and if you're lucky, you do."

The most interesting people Rakha encountered in her research, she said, were the people who work in the prison system: guards, administrators and other workers.

"Like it or not, you are going to plan out and then execute somebody," Rakha said. "Whether they support the death penalty or not, there was a toll they had to pay, and they would talk about that toll. The emotional toll, the family toll, how when they went to sleep at night they would see eyes, the eyes of the people they had helped to kill."

When Rakha began work on this story, she said she had a very clear sense of how she wanted to book to end, at least on an emotional level: melancholia, with a sense of redemption and hope.

"I knew what kind of emotional landscape I wanted to leave my readers with when they said goodbye to

my characters," she said. "I wanted them to say 'My goodness, that was a journey. That was profound, that was life-changing, it was hard and redemptive and joyous.'"

From start to finish, Rakha called the process of her book a Cinderella story. She showed *The Crying Tree* to only one agent. The agent loved it. He called her immediately to say he wanted to get the book published. While her book was never part of a workshop at Chautauqua, Rakha said she was looking forward to returning to the Writers' Center that provided help and inspiration. She encouraged people to stay after the reading to discuss *The Crying Tree*, which she also will be signing.

"This place is a Mecca for intellectual and spiritual growth," Rakha said. "I love hearing people's stories and discussions; I'll stay and talk about this for hours. I feel like through these discussions, I'm making this network of friends."