

Naseem Rakha

by Linda L. Miller,

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If someone you loved were murdered, could you forgive the killer? That's what happens in Naseem Rakha's debut novel, **The Crying Tree**, when Irene and Nate Stanley's teenage son is shot to death by a 19-year-old man. Although the young man is sentenced to death, nothing abates the Stanleys' grief. While Nate broods silently, Irene comforts herself with alcohol as the days, months, and years go by with the killer still awaiting his execution on death row. Finally, making an attempt at healing, Irene pours out her rage and despair through letters to her son's killer. What she doesn't expect is that he will write her back. Nor does she expect that one day she would be able to forgive him.



Photo courtesy
of Gretchen Dow
Mashkuri

Why this topic for a debut novel? The former broadcast journalist explained, "In 1996, I was assigned to cover Oregon's first execution in over 30 years. At the time I had never given much thought to the death penalty and what it would take for the state to plan out, prepare, and then kill a man. After the assignment, I wanted to learn more so I began to interview death row inmates, the people they had harmed, and the men and women we entrust to carry out our nation's most severe sentence. During that time I heard many stories, some of them abhorrent and some heartbreaking, but by far the most compelling were those told by the people that had come to terms with the murder of a loved one and no longer felt it necessary to seek retribution for their pain and loss. This arc, from the most desperate kind of anguish to reconciliation and even love, stunned me and compelled me to write **The Crying Tree**."



Rakha, who now lives in Oregon, was born and raised in one of the first HUD projects in Chicago which she describes as "an ethnically rich and exciting place to grow up" and nothing like the later "projects built to house the cities poor." Her father was from Hyderabad, India, and her mother was of German descent.

"I attended the same elementary school (The University of Chicago Lab School) that the Obama children attended when they lived in Chicago.

After that, I earned my bachelor's in Geology from Southern Illinois University. Then in 1995, I was listening to NPR and heard one of those 'driveway moment' stories and thought 'I want to do that.' So, I went to our local public radio station, learned to cut and splice tape (there was no digital editing then), and then headed to our state capitol and began reporting on the issues that interested me. I loved the work and the challenge of telling all sides of a story and was awarded for my efforts by the Associated Press and Public Radio News Director International. Then in 2003, I was diagnosed with cancer. I left my reporting, and after treatment I decided to take on my life-long dream of writing fiction. My hope was that by creating compelling and real characters, people would be better able to see, feel, and learn about the complexities of some of the moral and social issues we deal with today. Journalism does this, but only to an extent. I wanted to take my audience further."

While the book is not overtly didactic or preachy, it does expose the perils and emotional costs of the death penalty. Rakha favors "creating a stronger network of social programs that addresses the key causes of crime: mental illness, addiction, poverty, history of abuse, and lack of family, school, or community support." While she understands that these programs cost money, she says, "The cost of this preventative approach is far less than the exponential costs associated with building and maintaining more courts and prisons, as well as the related costs of the crime itself. Once a person is in prison, all studies indicate it costs anywhere from four to ten times more to put someone on death row than it costs to keep them incarcerated for life with no possibility of parole." In addition to the financial savings, she also favors this option "because we do not consider the full emotional or psychological tolls that arguing for, planning out, and preparing for an execution exacts on the people we call on to do these jobs. In addition, killing offenders stops the opportunity for victims to meet and hear from their perpetrators. In many cases, these meetings are proving to be cathartic for both parties, and often lead to a sense of forgiveness and well being that could not have happened if not for the chance to see one another face to face, to speak and be heard."

Rakha invites readers to visit her Web site at www.naseemrakha.com to find contact information, lists of upcoming events, and lots more.