

Forgiving the unforgivable

'She has to forgive the man who killed her son, or she'll die. She'll just die from her own hate.'

By David Jasper / *The Bulletin*

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Naseem Rakha's debut novel, "The Crying Tree," looks at what it takes for one woman to forgive her son's killer.

On Sept. 6, 1996, convicted murderer Douglas Franklin Wright was executed, the first person in more than 30 years to be executed in Oregon.

According to Oregon.gov, "Wright, 56, became the first person executed by lethal injection in Oregon. With promises of jobs, the convicted murderer lured five homeless men to the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in 1991 and shot four of them in cold blood. The fifth man escaped and alerted police. Wright was convicted on October 6, 1993 of eight counts of aggravated murder, among other crimes, for three of the murders."

Author Naseem Rakha had been a public radio reporter for just a year when she was assigned to cover Wright's execution.

"I took it on very soberly," she explained last week by phone from her Silverton home. "I remember it was the night of the execution, and all the press pool was

on the grounds.”

She was not, however, one of the four journalists randomly selected to watch the execution, so she stepped outside the Quonset hut set up for journalists on the prison grounds.

Whereupon she listened.

“I was listening to these people celebrating outside the gates, celebrating that the execution was about to happen. They were in a countdown and they were cheering and they were singing. I was tape recording that sound, and I just remember, at that moment, knowing that whatever I produced for the next day would never get to the depth of this issue, of what it is and what it means when you decide to kill someone, and all the people who are affected, including the people in the prison who have to carry out that procedure.”

Her debut novel, “The Crying Tree” (Broadway, \$22.95), seeks to plumb that depth. Publishers Weekly says “this complex, layered story of a family’s journey toward justice and forgiveness comes together through spellbinding storytelling.”

This week, Rakha will make several appearances in Central Oregon to read from her book (see “If you go” on Page E1), which tells the story of a family that moves from its long-established home in rural Illinois to the High Desert of Central Oregon, where, a year and a half later, the family’s son, Shep, is murdered.

Did any certain Central Oregon town serve as Rakha’s model?

No, she says, several of them did.

In addition to being a former radio journalist, she previously worked for a nonprofit teaching holistic resource management to ranchers in Central and Eastern Oregon.

“I’ve spent a lot of time on ranches (and) ... towns all around that region. So

what I did was kind of take the most miserable things I could think of in a lot of these towns and put them in one,” she says. “It was not because I dislike Central or Eastern Oregon — I have a deep love and passion for that land and that country and the people there — instead, it was for what I wanted to do to my characters.”

She wanted, she says, “to take them from this humid, bucolic area of southern Illinois, where it’s green everywhere, everything is growing on top of everything, and slice them out of that, and just plop them on a High Desert plateau, where nothing’s protecting them,” she adds. “I wanted to put them in what would be, to them, a much more hostile environment, because they’re so exposed to everything. There’s not even shade.”

Rakha, whose Persian first name comes from her Indian father’s side of the family, has lived in Oregon for the last 18 years. But she knows equally well the Midwestern setting in which her book is partly set. She spent the first 24 years of her life in Illinois, 18 in her native Chicago, and six in the town of Carbondale, home to Southern Illinois University.

As budding novelists are wont to do, she studied geology.

Wait. Geology?

“I’ve always loved to write. That’s the first thing you should know,” she says. “But I went into geology because I always loved science.”

Her academic background led her to work for a nonprofit working on strip mine reclamation, trying to get farms back to their prime farm status. When the farm crisis hit, the focus of her work shifted to saving family farms.

For another year, she worked at another nonprofit teaching sustainable farming practices around the country and Canada. She spent about half her time on the road. One day while driving, she heard a National Public Radio story, and she had the realization she wanted to stay home more and tell stories through the radio.

She got training at a public radio station in Portland and then began going to the state capital, 15 miles from her home.

“I just started doing stories on my own,” she says. “When a job came up, I had enough stories to apply for the job.”

That assignment to cover Wright’s execution led Rakha on “this path of interviewing people like Sister Helen Prejean (“Dead Man Walking”), seeking out men who had been on death row but were exonerated because they were innocent and finding out their stories.”

Then in 2003, Rakha met a woman in Silverton, “and I mentioned that she looked tired,” Rakha says.

“She said, ‘Oh, I’m fine. I’ve just come from a trip to California. I was at San Quentin visiting a friend who is on death row there.’”

“I go, ‘Oh, wow. That’s interesting.’”

“And she goes, ‘Yeah, it was the man who stabbed my daughter to death more than 20 years ago,’” recalls Rakha, who told the woman, “We need to talk.”

“Because my son was 3 years old at the time, and the mere consideration that anything could happen to him, let alone being able to forgive whoever may hurt my son was incomprehensible to me,” says Rakha, 49.

At the end of her interview with the woman, Rakha told her, “I don’t know what I’m going to create, I don’t know if it’s going to be a radio show. ... I’ll do something, but I don’t know what it will be.”

Being a journalist helped inform the writing of her novel, which she began writing in 2004 and finished in 2007.

“Writing for the radio is so much like storytelling, because you are really aware of voice and sound and details that you can bring into a story to try to place your listeners into that story,” she says.

At the end of 2007, she found an agent.

Within 20 hours of being submitted to Random House, the publisher asked for a “pre-empt,” an arrangement in which an author and agent agree not to show the book to other prospective publishers.

Rakha and her agent deliberated for a long time. “She did point out that ‘If you did say “No,” it will generate a lot of buzz.’ And that’s exactly what happened.”

“I was very thrilled. Very few books get to go to the auction slate,” she says. “But publishers were very excited about this.”

The Silverton woman who befriended her daughter’s killer was among the first to read an early version of “The Crying Tree.”

“Her reaction has been similar to other victim survivors’ reactions, which has been really startling to me, and very gratifying,” Rakha says. “They all say ‘You nail it. You nail the intensity of the emotions of that loss, the intensity of the emotions of the hate that follows, this desperate need for vengeance, how crippling it is and how debilitating it is.’”

Ultimately, Rakha says, the mother in the book, Irene, has the same realization that other parents in similarly tragic circumstances have come to.

She realizes “she has to forgive the man who killed her son, or she’ll die. She’ll just die from her own hate. They say that it comes off as very true to life, that it’s not this awakening that happens overnight. It’s this slow, dawning realization that you really have very little choice.”

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