

# Fiction review: 'The Crying Tree'

by Elen Urbani, Special to The Oregonian

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To describe Naseem Rakha's debut novel, "[The Crying Tree](#)," by its plot points is to risk marginalizing it, to render it a series of clichéd caricatures: the mother who forgives and befriends her son's redeemed killer, the prison superintendent whose ardency yields when confronted by the process of execution, the cop-for-a-father whose stoicism melts in the face of gentility. On the first page a 15-year-old boy is murdered -- cue a family falling to pieces, enter the sister-turned-prosecutor stage right -- but 353 pages later, peace reigns. The flap copy itself virtually resonates with the string-heavy soundtrack of a Hallmark mini-series wherein hate cedes to love under the influence of a brilliant sunset glimpsed through the bottom of a bottle.

Beware not to judge too quickly.

The seed of the idea for this book began germinating in Rakha in 2003, when she attended a peace rally in Silverton. There she met the mother of a murdered child, recently returned from a visit with her daughter's killer on San Quentin's death row.

"For years, she had lived for this man's death, believing that his execution would end the pain of her loss," Rakha said. "What she found, however, was that after ten years of waiting and hating, she had to give it up ... That arc -- from the most desperate kind of anguish to reconciliation, and even love -- stunned me."

More than a novel detailing the oft-chronicled and frequently patsied nature of forgiveness, this is a colorful and creative biography of hate -- about its insidiousness and ferocity but also its fateful familiarity. In ways both subtle and overt, Rakha names it, gives it form and

consequence: "Remember that rash I had?" the murdered boy's mother asks. "How it spread across me like a disease? And me clawing myself bloody? Remember that? That was hate covering me. Every inch of it, hate."

No one in "The Crying Tree" is spared. Even the prison superintendent, seemingly untouched by the central disaster, is marked in the most black and white of manners. An African American, he is beset by an autoimmune disorder that relentlessly bleaches him half white. Yet here is where Rakha masterfully stirs together her symbolism: Autoimmunity is, by definition, an aberrant reaction in which an organism fails to recognize its own constituent parts as self, thereby attacking its own being. Every character does this in one way or another -- rails against himself for being something other than what he thought he should have been. Hence, what could have been caricatures become meaty, believable personas that both support and rely on the late-stage reveals that give the story its heart and clipped pace. With the exception of a too-predictable and entirely unlikely romantic entanglement, Rakha's characterizations are fresh and noteworthy for their vulnerability, for their portrayal of people who never live up to expectations but are no less true to themselves for failing to do so.

It takes courage to limn hate in this most visceral, universal form: as an endemic self-loathing that is murder to hang on to, murder to lay to rest. "It wasn't anything she'd expected," Rakha writes of one of her central subjects, "and it wasn't anything she knew how to handle." Not so for the author, who has crafted not only a compelling read, but one whose message lingers: At what point does that to which we cling for our survival become the very thing that robs us of our life?

**Reading:** Rakha reads from "The Crying Tree" at 7:30 p.m. Monday at **Powell's City of Books**, 1005 W. Burnside St.

*THE CRYING TREE* Naseem Rakha *Broadway Books* \$22.95, 353 pages