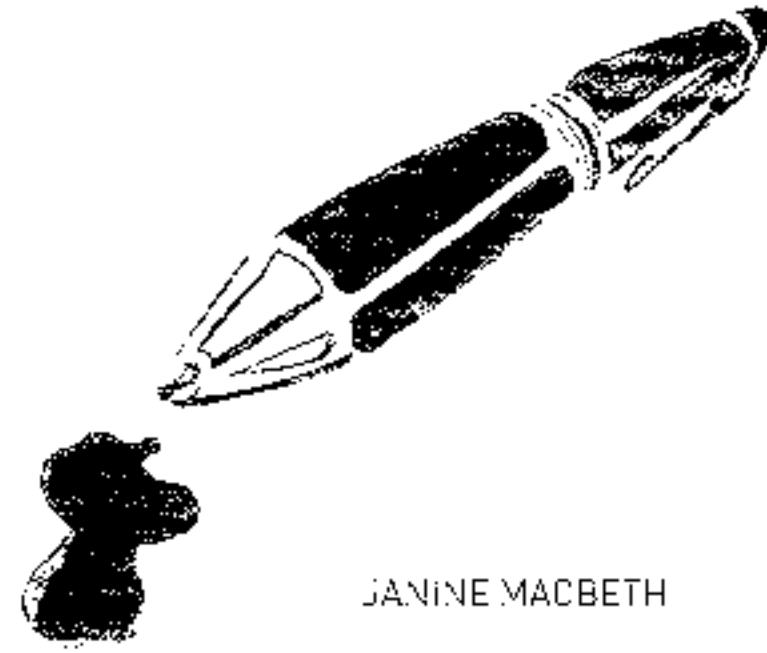


TRANSFORMATIONS



JANINE MACBETH

ON BEING DISCOVERED

As a writer, I found it carries risks.

By Minal Hajratwala

GROWING UP A BROWN GIRL in the white Midwest, I never saw a single book by a South Asian American writer. I visited the library almost weekly, tore through Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, ventured into the adult sections and occasionally happened upon that rare treasure, a novel by a writer of color: *The Color Purple*, for instance. But mostly, the stacks were unrelentingly white. Ethnic literature, it seemed, was as marginal as I was.

Twenty years later, the lit biz has discovered both readers and writers of color. A new ethnic trend sweeps through commercial publishing every few years: the Dominicans and Haitians had their day, followed by writers of Vietnamese, Latino, South Asian and now Middle Eastern descent. I hear Pacific Islanders—or maybe Tibetans—are the next big thing. Though white writers still make up the largest proportion of those published in the United States, I hope, perhaps naïvely, that our national library is becoming richer with each market-driven wave.

Still, there is something decidedly odd about the moment of discovery, when you are not Columbus but the Indian.

I was “discovered,” after eight years as a journalist, poet and performer, when I began shopping a book proposal around New York. Indo-American fiction had just made the great leap from obscure ethnic lit to potential profit machine. Everyone was looking for the next Jhumpa Lahiri, whose book received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. As I met with assorted literary people, I knew I was lucky. What I wanted to write coincided with the industry fervor—almost.

One agent thought my planned nonfiction saga about my family and the Indian diaspora had too many characters with too many difficult names; I should take some out, and then the agent would be very interested. Another said she could make me the voice of my generation. All that was required, she thought, was that I make it a memoir. And—could I focus it on the U.S. and leave out some of the other, less important countries?

The voice of my generation. It was a seductive idea; I would be on talk shows, consulted by prime ministers, idolized by thousands of readers and would-be writers. But almost immediately, it was oppressive: what responsibility, what weight! It was enough to take on the task of finding my own authentic voice, buffeted by internal criticism and doubt: How

could I aim to speak for all of my scattered, diverse, unknown peers?

I was reminded of that earlier this year as I read about Kaavya Viswanathan, the Jersey girl who was, apparently, promised something similar. The 17-year-old signed a two-book contract reportedly worth more than \$400,000, and started at Harvard as her novel came out. *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* was witty and culturally relevant, the kind of book I would have loved as a teen. Alas, its wacky plot foreshadowed the fate of its author, who was caught plagiarizing: Model minority teenager, trying to be a success, sabotages her own best-laid plans.

Apologizing on *The Today Show*, Kaavya claimed the copying was unintentional. I believe her; originality is a casualty of assimilation, which depends upon a seamless merging of our own ideas with those we are emulating. Working with teen-lit packagers who had her follow the genre, Kaavya mastered it. Thrust forth as the voice of a generation, she succeeded—failing only to find her own voice.

As readers, whether of fiction or nonfiction, we want so much to trust; to believe, to touch and be touched by another heart. A literary scandal occurs when this trust is betrayed. But the worst betrayal precedes the public pillorying; it occurs when a writer betrays her own heart. For any writer offered a pot of gold and the promise of discovery, the temptation is intense. A young person, especially one eager to please and succeed, is vulnerable to its allure. I know I would have been.

I count myself lucky that by the time my “discovery” came around, I was old enough to know something of who I was. In the end I chose a literary agent who clearly saw the book for what it was, not what it could be repackaged to be. Happily, she found me an editor and a publishing house with the same integrity.

“Ethnic” writers, those of us from communities that are being newly “discovered” by a white industry, have to remember that we are so much more than our buzz. We are voices of translation and resistance, vast reservoirs of untold stories. Our generation, whatever that is, should never be reduced to one voice—even our own. ■

Minal Hajratwala's book of narrative nonfiction about her family and the Indian diaspora is forthcoming from Houghton Mifflin Co.