

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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INTERVIEW WITH SHANTHI SEKARAN

TRANSCRIPT

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Sheíd picked him up, placed him against the bump of her belly, and took her first long look. She felt herself falling again, this time faster. From her sonís head rose a brief tremor of hair, and planted in the center of his face was a fine razor of a nose, Checoís nose, rendered by some miracle in sweet, picayune perfection.

SARIKA MEHTA: You're listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

Today, my guest is Shanthi Sekaran, author of the novel Lucky Boy, about adoption, immigration, and motherhood in Berkeley, California. Two mothers' paths cross unexpectedly due to their love for this boy, Ignacio, the Lucky Boy. One mother is documented and one is not, and the immigration system has a heart wrenching impact on the lives of both families. This outstanding story follows their lives as they each parent this child, and fight for him to the end.

Shanthi was born and raised in California, and she is a creative writing teacher at California College of the Arts. Lucky Boy is her second novel. We're here at Portland's Wordstock Literary Festival. This is Intersections Radio. Shanthi Sekaran, welcome to Intersections Radio.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Hello, thanks for having me here.

SARIKA MEHTA: Let's talk about the two mothers in this story, Soli and Kavya. Tell us about them.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Okeh, so, Soli is a young woman from Mexico, from the Oaxaca region of Mexico, and when we meet her, she's planning to come to California, and she doesn't have papers, so, we as readers end up following her across the border. She ends up in Berkeley, I won't give away anything about her journey, but she ends up in Berkeley, California, and she finds out shortly after that she's pregnant.

And so we also meet Kavya. Kavya is Indian American. She grew up in America, she went to Berkeley, she's married to this guy named Rishi, and Kavya and Rishi are sort of your classic Berkeley couple, you know, they go to the farmer's market a lot, they get head massages,

they drink kombucha, that sort of thing.

Yeah, and they, they have a pretty beautiful life, but they can't have a kid, and that's their central struggle. So the two storylines end up converging around the fate of Soli's baby.

SARIKA MEHTA: Exactly, and this is such an intense tale, because these are two women of color, who are mothers to the same child, and the way they fight for him to the end, from what I understand the inspiration for this story was the news headline on a woman named Encarnacion Bail Romero, a Guatemalan woman whose child was adopted away from her. So tell us a little bit about that story and how this inspired yours.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah, so Encarnacion Bail is a Guatemalan woman, and she was put into a detention center after a factory raid. She was in the midwest, I believe in Missouri, and the -- when she was in detention, her young son, I think he was about six months old to a year, around a year, was taken from her and first put with relatives, but then, through a series of sort of private arrangements, ended up with this American couple, who decided they were going to adopt him.

And so when I heard about her through the news, she was trying to get her child back, she was fighting for custody.

SARIKA MEHTA: In this kind of case, you know, it's like, there's no, there's no bad guy, there's no clear bad guy, and there's no clear good guy, because everyone is fighting really hard and it kind of makes us think what we would do for our own children in this circumstance.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. You know, I wanted to understand, so, this book is not just based on Encarnacion's story, it's based on a lot of research, there are a lot of families going through similar situations. But, when I heard about this woman in particular, I wanted to understand, for one thing, what was happening on the other side of that equation, what the adoptive parents were thinking, what they were telling themselves, because it felt very natural to me that if you're the biological mother of a child, and you're willing and able, then you get to keep the child. So I wanted to really understand, you know, what both sides were feeling in this.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. I was reading this as, you know, we're both mothers, and I'm reading this as new mother, and, my son is close to the age of Ignacio in the story. How as it for you, as a woman of color, who is a mother, to write -- to write these two sides, where it is painful at points, and it is joy -- I mean, to write something that, you know, can reach us in such an impactful way. What was it like to -- that process?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Well, I mean, as a woman of color, I chose my

protagonists to be two women of color. I didn't make -- I didn't make that choice consciously as, like, a political, this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to be representative in this way. I really knew that Soli was going to be Latina, that's just how she spoke to me, that's how she came to me.

And, Kavya, I just made Kavya Indian because I make most of my characters Indian, unless there's a clear reason to make them not Indian. So, it was just sort of my natural impulse to create two women of color.

But it ended up being, I think, an important theme of the book, because it sort of illustrates how people interact now in California, what the face of California looks like now. You know, it's not black and white, it's not a binary anymore. It's much -- it has been much more diverse for a long time than we've given it credit for.

So, I chose these two women, and writing their stories, you know, it's kind of a dance, when you're a writer, it's kind of a dance between feeling very deeply for them, but also stepping back and being very technical and surgical, and asking yourself, am I telling this the right way? Am I using the right words, is this going to affect the reader in the right way?

SARIKA MEHTA: Actually, that brings up -- that brings up one of my other questions. Writing a character who's Indian American, it's not like we can just paint a broad brush, and we can do that just because we happen to be Indian American, but it might come easier. When you're writing a character like Soli, who comes from Oaxaca, and has this pretty treacherous journey throughout the book, I mean, you have to do it carefully, for one thing, I know that.

Where I'm coming from is just seeing other writers, who are white, trying to write from the perspective of characters of color, and how that doesn't always work out properly, or how it, you know, there's a misrepresentation, so, how did you feel about writing the character of Soli?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. So, writing Soli was a pretty daunting undertaking. I was writing about someone who was Mexican, which I'm not, and undocumented, which I'm not, so like you said, I knew I had to do it really carefully. I started with some research, and, you know, one thing that I had to do for myself was accept my limitations. I was going to have to accept that there are things that I can never know about Soli's experience, there are limitations on me because I'm not Latina, so I would have to just do my best, really.

And, so, I think it was a combination of doing tons and tons of research into people like Soli, and what their experiences were, what their personal, like, like, reading their personal testimonies, and

learning about policy, and then, finding the point at which I personally can connect to Soli. And that was through motherhood, that was through, you know, knowledge of what it is to be a young woman, to be in love, to want to make something great of your life, to have that impulse that drives you forward. So, that's, that's what I did.

SARIKA MEHTA: Tell us more about the research, because, there was the story of Encarnacion, which you talked about earlier, but then, like you said, you were, you know, what you did to research into writing the character, Soli. But not just Soli, like Kavya, and everybody.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah, so I started out, you know, learning first of all how people get across the border, what that journey looks like, what the dangers are, what the methods of transport are. I learned a lot about immigration policy, I spoke to every immigration lawyer or policy person who would talk to me, really. I found some great reports about families in detention, and specifically how parents lose their children through the detention process.

And, on the other side of it, I had to research adoption, and foster care, and the technicalities of that, but also the emotions of it, you know. A lot of people spoke to me about their own experiences, and fertility struggles. I know, unfortunately, plenty of people who've been through those, and so I was really just trying to plug in emotionally to what I was learning factually.

SARIKA MEHTA: All of those issues come up in this story, all of those intense issues. When you were doing this research, were there any stories that came up that were just unforgettable, or still stick in your mind?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah, you know, there are stories from sort of Kavya's side of the equation. There are stories of foster parents who took in children, fell in love with them, and had to give them back, or thought that they were going to adopt a child, and then found out that they couldn't have that child.

I learned a lot about the precautions that you take, as a foster parent. When you, you know, you know you're taking in a child that is not biologically yours, and you put up, you try to put up these emotional blockades. But, you, you're dealing with a child, you know, and it's so hard to maintain a distance when you're caring for them every day.

SARIKA MEHTA: That made me think of, I mean, the whole point of fostering a child is for them to have stability and love and care, and how do you do that when you have to put up these emotional blocks? How do you do that with emotional blocks, knowing that this may or may not become a forever situation?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Right. And that reminds me a little of the kinder transport, in World War Two, you know, the -- the transport of young Jewish children out of the countries that were in danger, to places like the UK, and I sort of learned about that, just out of personal interest, and I remember learning about families who were, according to the children that were sent there, who were just like very distant, like, sometimes parents would just be like, okeh, like, we're going to feed you and keep you safe, and that, you know, there was very little emotional connection.

And I remember at first being very judgmental about that. You know, how can a parent do that? But, now I sort of respect that distance that people force on themselves. I don't know if I could do it myself, but, I understand that there has to be, often, a sort of safety net for parents, as well.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah. Wow. I, I don't know why I didn't think about that before, even reading the book. Well, it brings up another one of my questions. The issue of adoption, and adopting outside of your race. And typically that is discussed from the lens of white parents adopting outside of their race. We never talk about people of color adopting outside of their race. I mean, it is pretty rare when that comes up, and in this situation, we have Indian American parents who are adopting a little Latino boy. Talk about that dynamic.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. So, you know, Kavya, I wrote this whole history of Kavya that didn't end up in the book, but she was very much an activist in college. She was very into, like, solidarity with other people of color, so it came naturally to her to, to love and want to take care of this little boy, who is Latino.

And, the only sort of obstacle that she comes up against within her own family is from her mother, who has a problem with adoption in the first place. You know, she comes from a very traditional mindset that says, you know, our children come from us, they come biologically from us, we know what's in their genes, we know their family history. So that was her mother's problem with adoption. It wasn't the fact that Ignacio was Latino.

So, I kind of just, like, put these two together, and I didn't -- I tried not to think too much about the race element, of having an Indian American adopting a Latino. Part of that was just that I didn't know, you know, it doesn't happen very much.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: So, it's just, as far as I know, it's in my book, it probably happens out in the world, and it played out how it played out for my characters.

SARIKA MEHTA: It doesn't happen much, at least, in our community, because of exactly what you said. You know, with Kavya's mother. That was a pretty accurate representation of how people think about family, that it's, like, as close as we can get to our genetic makeup, you know, it's the community, it's the caste, it's the region, it's -- and, any degree outside of that is, well, brings up some drama. So, if we're talking about adoption, it's like -- I mean, I've heard people, you know, just talking about it, like, this isn't their real child. That kind of language, unfortunately. I'm hoping it's changing.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: You know, I think, in most communities, but I know in the south Asian community, a lot of progress happens through seeing other people doing --

SARIKA MEHTA: Right.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: -- certain things. And seeing that it's okeh, seeing that it's accepted by the community. I think it started that way with my experience of inter-racial marriage, where, you know, the first kids of my generation to marry outside of the race, it was really sort of a big deal, and the parents had a kind of a problem with it.

But then, by the time it came round to my brothers, by the time it came round to me, you know, we had seen other families do this, friends of ours, and it was accepted, and it was fine, and it was great. And, so it's that sort of community acceptance that I think leads to progress. We sort of look to each other to see what's okeh.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah. Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, this story, I think it's in the genre of literary fiction. From what I have heard, the ending of the story changed a few times, and it's almost a different genre from the rest of the book. And I'm curious, what are your thoughts on this, and what was the process to coming to the ending? Without telling the ending.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah, so, the ending, it tends to move faster than the rest of the book, you know.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: The first part of the book was a lot of character building, and it just moved slowly. And the ending, I wanted it to be suspenseful, and, it did change, it sort of, like, did a 180, reverse. It did a full, a full reverse, basically, with the ending, from one draft to another.

And, I had realized that my old ending was not, it was not delivering the punch that the book needed. You know, there had been a lot of build-up, and then it kind of just, like, went quiet at the end. And

so, the new ending, I think, packs a lot more, a lot more drama. It's a little nuts. I felt a little crazy writing it. But I think it works.

SARIKA MEHTA: It is a little -- wow.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. It makes sense to me for my characters.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: You know. It makes sense within the context of who my characters are and what they've been through, and that was the most important thing. And I think it delivers on what has been promised in the book.

SARIKA MEHTA: How did you feel -- well, if the ending changed a few times, how did you feel about, I mean, the characters come to life. There are winners and losers, so to speak, and how did you feel about that, because we get so attached to all the characters, and like I said, there are no bad guys and there are no good guys, everybody is flawed. So how did you feel about how this plays out, for who ends up, so to speak, in a very simplistic manner, becoming the winner and who becomes the loser?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Right. Well, I knew from the beginning that I'd have to choose, you know, I couldn't make one of those Hollywood endings where everyone's happy.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: So I knew that this would be the situation, and the way that it plays out, you know, the people who sort of didn't get what they wanted, I still think about them. I still, it's like, they're these -- it's like, that character is, is a friend who had to go through something really hard, and I still think about that character. So it stayed with me.

When I was writing it, I was very cold and technical on, like, this is what's happening, and, you know, I made it happen. But now that I reflect back on it, I feel it like a reader might.

SARIKA MEHTA: I mean, especially you've invested a lot of time. How long did this book take to write, publish?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: From the conception of the idea, to the final edits with my publishing house, it took about six years.

SARIKA MEHTA: You've invested time and, you know, a lot of emotional energies. But at the same time, even if -- if the ending had gone in a different direction, that means that somebody else is the loser. I mean, so either way, we are heart broken, and also at the same time

relieved.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: I've had people write to me and basically they're mad at me, for who, what I did, you know, to various people at the end -- at the end, but, I had to do something to someone. So, I'm like, well, sorry. I mean, it would have been the other way, and maybe that would have made you happy, but --

SARIKA MEHTA: Right.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: -- but, I did what I thought was right.

SARIKA MEHTA: And it kind of speaks to a bigger issue, you know, this is a work of fiction. But, it is based on all of this research of real life events. So if we're feeling this way about fictional characters, what does that say about people who are going through these experiences in real life. I don't know if I, if this is a spoiler, but Soli ends up in detention, and that is a completely horrifying section of the book as well, that experience.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. Yeah, you know, I think -- I think that readers, they look to fiction to understand things that are happening in the real world. And, it's not that far from what's happening in the real world. I mean, there are elements, especially towards the end where we really get into fiction worlds. You know, things happen that, that's what fiction is for, for that, that extra sort of dynamite that you get to put into a story.

But, we -- we have always culturally related to real issues through fiction, through television, through film, you know, so this is a continuation of that.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, speaking of which, how have the communities that might be reading this, who feel their -- themselves represented. How have they responded?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah. I was a little wary of that, because I'm writing about a young Mexican woman, you know. I was a little worried about how the Latinx community would respond. Because it's not my story, and I'm telling it.

It's been very warm. It's been a good, warm reception. I've had, you know, Latino groups at Google, and Latino USA interviewed me, and, just, people out in the world who have somehow found my book, and written to me, and said, I'm glad that you wrote this. I'm glad that someone from outside our community is caring enough to represent us, and tell our story.

So, it's been pretty warm, in that sense. And, I've heard from people who had been adopted themselves, and, you know, they like that I, I

don't glorify the adoption process. I don't -- I don't turn adoptive parents into saints, you know, they're humans, Rishi and Kavya are very human.

So, it's, I think it's been generally positive. And if it hasn't, they just haven't told me.

SARIKA MEHTA: I think what you did is not easy, writing the perspective of somebody that, that you don't have any experience with, that's not easy. And I think that's taken for granted a lot. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about that we didn't bring up?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: I just went to Mexico to promote it.

SARIKA MEHTA: Oh wow.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: I just got back two days ago.

SARIKA MEHTA: How was it?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Well, I just got back a couple of days ago, and, yeah, I went to the Oaxaca Book Fair, and this book takes place in Oaxaca, and I had spent two weeks in that region, researching the book, so it meant a lot to me to go back. And I -- my position in Mexico right now is that my Spanish edition's just come out. No one really knows who I am, you know, this is my chance to sort of wave to the audience and be like this is who I am, this is my book, this is what it's about.

So it was a very introductory trip. But I found that the Mexican media, I did a lot of interviews, and they, they asked completely different questions from the American media, of course, because they're looking at it from the Mexican perspective, and we talked a lot about motherhood, and what, you know, what this means for immigration, what my book means for immigration as a whole.

So it was a great experience going there, and sort of bringing my book home, in a way.

SARIKA MEHTA: Wow. I didn't realize you had a Mexico component of your tour, that's amazing.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Do you want to read us a part of your book? If you have a favorite part, or something we've talked about?

SHANTHI SEKARAN: I'll read a few paragraphs that I don't normally get to read. This is from just the moments after Ignacio is born, the few days after he's born. And a lot of this actually came from my own

journals after my own son, my first son, was born. You know, it's such a -- it's such a new experience, when you have your first child, it kind of like blows your mind, and I found myself writing down just every detail, and coming up with all these, like, details, that I was noticing about being a mother, and having a child. So here we go.

He was smallest at night, when shadows lapped at his edges. In the dark, he was magically small, a miracle. A sprite. It was easy in the hours before dawn to think Ignacio might die. Only because it seemed impossible that such a creature could live a whole week, and then two, then three, and four. It was impossible to think that four weeks could grow into a lifetime.

Love wasn't a word that meant anything to Soli, not when she looked at her boy. Love was a television word. Soli held her sleeping son, his fists balled and eyes shut tight, clinging to a dream. What she felt for him was epiphany. She had awakened, sprouted a new layer of skin, pink and raw and wholly vulnerable.

For the first time since arriving in America, she was well and truly scared. And so she named him Ignacio, for the patron of retreats. At times, the fear consumed her. Fear that Ignacio would stop, simply stop. That each breath, the revelation that it was, could surely not lead to another.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was my guest, Shanthi Sekaran, author of the novel Lucky Boy. Shanthi Sekaran, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

SHANTHI SEKARAN: It was a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com. Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And join the Facebook community at facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio. You're listening to Intersections Radio. I'm Sarika Mehta. Thanks for listening.