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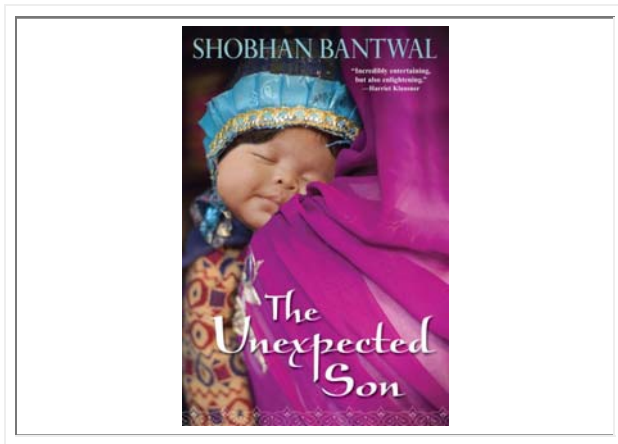
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Spicy Stories

Tales of Indian-American adventure are scented with details of the author's native culture

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By Ilene Dube



SHOBHAN Bantwal may be on her way to becoming the next Joyce Carol Oates — or at least an Indian-American version of the prolific writer. For the past half decade, Ms. Bantwal has been churning out a new novel every year, in addition to essays, short stories and articles. The author works by day for the State Department of Labor, and only began her writing career when she reached her 50s. And, like Ms. Oates, this natural-born storyteller seeks out juicy topics.

Ms. Bantwal's first book, *The Dowry Bride* (Kensington Books, 2007), is about India's

banned dowry system. A young woman is about to be murdered by her husband and his mother because she hasn't produced a child.

Gender-selective abortion is the topic explored in *The Forbidden Daughter* (Kensington Books, 2008), in which a young couple is condemned after giving birth to two daughters. Little girls are seen as a burden, and when an obstetrician suggests what is unthinkable to the parents, the father goes into a rage — possibly the reason for his subsequent murder.

The Sari Shop Widow (Kensington Books, 2009) is set in Edison's Little India, amid pungent curry, sweet fried onions, incense, colorful beads and lush fabrics. A young woman runs her family's sari shop, and juggles the challenges of business and romance.

Ms. Bantwal's fourth book, *The Unexpected Son*, due July 27, begins in West Windsor, where a woman receives a mysterious letter from India. The letter tells of a son she gave birth to in India 30 years ago, but had been told was stillborn. Now that son is fighting for his life and needs a bone marrow transplant, and she must return to India to save him. She must exercise extreme caution in revealing her past to her husband and adult daughter.

The Robbinsville resident's tales are filled with details of her Indian culture: religious beliefs, myths, legends, superstitions, foods, scents, recipes, clothing, accessories, language including slang, history and geography. Then, too, they include the elements of romance that her publishing house and editor require for her largely non-Indian-American audience.

They are set in the fictional town of Pelgaum, India, based on memories of her childhood home, Belgaum, a small rural town. In *The Unexpected Son*, the main character returns to Pelgaum after a 25-year hiatus and sees how the little town has grown to a small, polluted city.

The ideas for her stories come from watching the news or reading *India Abroad*, a weekly newspaper. "I always have hopeful endings," she says. "They are realistic — I don't want to make them too much of a fairy tale."

Raised in Southwestern India, where she earned a master's degree in sociology, Ms. Bantwal came to New Jersey for an arranged marriage. After the birth of her daughter she earned a second master's degree in public administration from Rider University.

At the mid-century point of her life, rather than succumb to hot flashes, she decided she wanted to be on stage and a writer. She wrote, directed and acted in a humorous play, and then began writing essays and articles for *India Abroad*. Her topics focused on the immigrant life: adjusting to a child leaving home, raising children in a mixed heritage culture.

She was encouraged to write short stories and won prizes. A member of the New Jersey Romance Writers since 2006, she had never studied writing and so took a creative writing class with Christopher Klim, author of *Jesus Lives in Trenton*, at Mercer County Community College, where she learned about finding a literary agent and publisher. In fact, *The Dowry Bride* started as a short story for Mr. Klim's class.

The feedback she received was that the cultural elements were loved more than the story; she added more of this for her non-Indian audience. When she was finished, Mr. Klim told her there was too much story and character for a short story and encouraged her to turn it into a novel.

Ms. Bantwal awakens at 4 a.m. to write, before leaving for work at 7 a.m. She writes again in the evening, as well as tending to her e-mail and Facebook messages. Sometimes she faces writer's block when tired, so uses this time to edit, which, she says, doesn't require creativity. She is able to devote larger segments of time on the weekends. Her husband, Prakash, retired

from FMC Corp., is her webmaster and sends out advanced reading proofs, for which she is very grateful.

Although she has just completed the outline for her sixth book, Ms. Bantwal distinguishes between “plotters” and “pantsters.”

”Plotters are regimented and create chapter-by-chapter outlines, and pantsters operate from the seat of their pants — the story just goes where it goes,” she says, adding that she falls into the latter category. “A tangent goes off in one direction and then I have to go back and fix it. You don’t know in the next chapter what will happen to characters — if they will get into an accident or invite a friend for tea. I have a general story in mind but after the first draft there are many revisions and self-editing.”

Ms. Bantwal loves to cook spicy Indian food and entertain in her home, enjoys trips to the beach after the crowds are gone, walking along the boardwalk and dining out.

When will Ms. Bantwal be able to give up her day job and write full time?

Although a great deal of effort goes into the marketing of the books, “it’s still a labor of love. I enjoy the satisfaction of creating a story and meeting other writers. What started as a hobby has exploded into a full-time volunteer job.”

She gives all the profits from her books to charities that help victims of domestic violence. “I was a sociology major, and it’s a subject I’m interested in. I’m blessed and can give to women in crisis. Not everyone has a happy domestic life.”

The Unexpected Son *author Shobhan Bantwal will read from her book at the Robbinsville Public Library, 42 Allentown-Robbinsville Road, Robbinsville, Sept. 22, 7 p.m. 609-259-2150. The Unexpected Son will be in bookstores beginning July 26 or can be purchased online at www.kensingtonbooks.com. More information about Ms. Bantwal can be found at www.shobhanbantwal.com*

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