

## Q & A with Sheena Kalayil:

**1. The story revolves around Thomas's personal journey, returning home from the urban chaos of London to a rural fishing village in Kerala. Where did his character come from?** Returning to Kerala after years of working elsewhere is not an unusual story for Keralites; what makes Thomas's return less usual is his relatively young age, and his widowhood. He was born in Vazhakulam, in the hills, like my father. His physicality and ease with the land is typical of all the men in my family on my father's side. His other attributes – his love of reading, his charm – are projections of the man I would have liked to have been introduced to, when for a very brief and unsuccessful period, my parents considered arranging a marriage for me! Contrary to what you might expect, the lack of success was not due to my aversion to having an arranged marriage, but because my parents did not regard me as easily match-able – a scenario I have tried to weave into the story of Rani.

**2. *The Bureau of Second Chances* offers the reader a window into the lives of ordinary people in India. Was representing this culture a main aim in writing this novel?** Yes. Although I wouldn't claim that it is representative of India in general, it does offer a perspective of a small slice of life in Kerala. I was in an optician's a few years ago, in Ernakulam, listening to the owner on the phone arranging to buy tickets for a jazz concert later that night. Both the setting of the optician's and the owner stuck with me (Jos in the book is based loosely on that owner). During that same sojourn, I stayed in Cherai, with my husband and daughters, and I fell in love with the fishing village.

**3. Kerala is a unique and fascinating state in India, but has rarely featured in modern literary fiction. Why do think this is?** I'm not sure. Of course, Arundhati Roy brilliantly conveyed Kerala's fascinating political history, with the Communist Party in Kerala being one of the few democratically elected parties of its kind. (Jhumpa Lahiri did the same in *The Lowland*, with reference to the Naxalites in West Bengal). There are Keralite writers writing in English, possibly more in the US where there is a very large community (one example is Meena Alexander, who wrote *Manhattan Music*). But it is possible that Arundhati Roy is a very hard act to follow, and might have set a very big challenge to Malayalee writers: to appeal to an international readership with storylines featuring the Communist government, when actually most people's lives in Kerala are rather apolitical.

**4. The novel explores and challenges preconceptions about love, and where it may be found. Do you think that people's perception of love has changed over the years?** I wouldn't say that I am an expert on matters of love, but perhaps Western notions of chance encounters that blossom into life-long partnerships are being challenged, with more people willing to engage with dating sites and agencies. One huge advantage to the arranged marriage system in India, at least in middle-class echelons where they are more arranged-introductions, is that you have a very high likelihood of getting married; this is a more fragile possibility in the Western-style marriage-for-love paradigm. What is harder for advocates of love-marriages to understand is that love can develop between the couple in an arranged marriage. However one rather large disadvantage of the arranged marriage system is the very little openness to any kind of love that does not fit the norm; be it because of sexuality, caste, class. Here is where falling in love with whomever you wish to love becomes a human right rather than a convenience.

**5. The Christian Church is an aspect of India that has often been neglected in literary fiction. How important is the role of religion in the novel?** I wanted to write a novel which read like a Biblical parable; not because I am particularly religious, but because I was brought up as a Syrian Christian, a Catholic, which is a tiny but significant group in Kerala. Growing up, and reading stories from the Bible, they included many tropes that were familiar: the sea, the fishermen, the separateness of women and men. Religion permeates Indian society, but the presence of the Catholic Church in Kerala might have encouraged more social justice than it does in other countries. A Syrian Christian family, at least in my parents' generation, often includes several nuns and priests: not always an indication of religious fervour, but a practical solution. Nuns/priests have access to education and families can avoid dowry payments!

**6. Do you have a favourite book or writer that inspired you to tell Thomas's story?** Graham Greene is a big inspiration, not least because of his reflections on Catholicism, but because of the exotic settings of many of his novels. In *A Burnt Out Case*, the protagonist is also named as the father of a baby by a woman he has never slept with. I wanted to write a novel with a similar dilemma, and relocate it to Kerala.

**7. What advice would you give to other aspiring writers?** At the heart of the answer there must be this: you believe there is a story that only you can tell. Find that story.