

Turning Pages

Baltimore novelist Sujata Massey details a long-ago Bombay

BY ADRANISHA STEPHENS

For more than 22 years, author Sujata Massey has made Baltimore her home and has written 14 novels, two novellas and numerous short stories here.

On Sept. 14, Sujata Massey and Laura Lippman will talk about writing mysteries at the Pratt's reopened Central Library.

While the city has been this writer's real-life setting, it's not always the backdrop of her work. Massey's latest release, a lush new mystery, "The Satapur Moonstone," is set in Bombay in the 1920s. It's the second in the Perveen Mistry series — the first was "Widows of Malabar Hill," which is also a historical mystery set in India at that time.

The popular series follows the life of Bombay's first woman lawyer, a fictional character who was educated at Oxford and returned to India to practice law with her father.

"Many of the cases Perveen investigates relate to the rights of women and children, and as all this is unfolding at a time when Britain ruled India and there is an international political tension," Massey says. "In my current book, Perveen discovers what it's like in the princely states ruled by maharajas, which Britain allowed to coexist as part of the empire. There are loads of animals, fabulous jewelry and a hint of romance."

Even though she has been scripting stories and writing poetry since a young age, it was during college at Johns Hopkins University that Massey decided to study writing. She received a bachelor's degree from the writing seminars program but didn't expect to launch a fiction career.

"I thought it was just for fun," she says. "I went into journalism right after college, working at the *Baltimore Evening Sun* as a features writer. I didn't realize that the kind of stories I was reporting about notable people, food, clothing and Maryland's culture, past and present, was the perfect training for a novelist."

Once she found her passion, she went on to master other literary devices, including the ability to shift fluidly between various cultures. She's had some training: Born in England to a

father from India and a mother from Germany, Massey was raised mostly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

To research "The Satapur Moonstone," she stayed in an old palace complex in Rajasthan "that was part museum, part hotel and even home to the current maharaja in the family line," Massey says. "It was a luxurious and romantic experience to stay there and also quite illuminating. When I toured the part of the hotel called the *zenana*, where the royal women slept and spent all their time, I had such a feeling of claustrophobia. It gave me a sense of how removed from outside life these elite women were — and I knew it must have been frustrating for some."

Readers are smart, Massey says, and want to "trust that the world they're entering in a historical novel is close to reality." That means she also researches what kind of silk sari a lady like Perveen would have worn and what foods would have been served at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel or a real Maharashtrian palace.

"I interviewed local historians and residents and used libraries to read old newspapers. I also stayed in a historic section of Mumbai (as Bombay is now called) and walked through the scenes," she says.

Massey is currently working on her third Perveen Mistry novel in which Perveen assists a family whose teenage daughter died suddenly on the grounds of her college campus in Bombay.

"Very few women students attended this college, which is a real place, and I used student accounts from a magazine to draw a picture of the tensions of student life during this time," Massey says. "It also was an era when Mahatma Gandhi was building support. With all the richness of this history, she adds, "I hope to be writing about Perveen for quite a long time." □



WHAT SHE'S WEARING

DRESS, PARKER NY, \$318, FROM SASSANOVA; SHOES, ALL BLACK, \$143, AND NECKLACE, \$16 BOTH FROM POPPY AND STELLA; WATCH, MODEL'S OWN

MODEL: SUJATA MASSEY

PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID STUCK

ART DIRECTOR/STYLIST: EBONY BROWN

MAKEUP: IDA M. SLAUGHTER

LOCATION: ENOCH PRATT FREE LIBRARY, CENTRAL LIBRARY