

## 2003/June TANUJA DESAI HIDIER - Publishing News

Tanuja Desai Hidier has the most extraordinary eyes - like antique, pale green-blue glass marbles, shot with a dash of hazel - even more striking than the ones that stare out at you from the cover of her just-published novel, *Born Confused*. She has been, by her own admission, an ABCD, that is, an American Born Confused Desi (desi being Hindi for 'from my country'), not some new music format.

Desai Hidier was born in the US, her mother coming from Bombay, her father from Gujarat and the family being among the first in her town - an hour and a half west of Boston - to come from India.

Lately, though, she seems to have redefined the C to mean creative: she's won prizes for her short stories, she's made movies - her short, *The Test*, winning an Award of Merit at the 1996 Sinking Creek Film and Video Festival at Vanderbilt University - she's written and edited magazines and sung in a New York punk band. She's currently the singer/songwriter in a London five-piece called San Transisto, and the band is in the middle of writing tracks based on *Born Confused*.

So why a novel, I wondered. "The written word has always been my first love," she replies. "I started with poetry, and I was a complete bookworm as a kid, I read everywhere; writing was the first thing I ever wanted to do as a kid and then, as an adult, I developed a real gift for procrastination. One reason, I suppose, was that in New York I was out eight days a week."

She couldn't, she continues, have written *Born Confused* in New York as there was just too much going on. Coming to London in 2000 gave her the time, and the distance, to begin and complete the project. "In New York I'd hit a wall with my topic and how to explore it; I felt I wasn't Indian enough to write an 'Indian' story, nor American enough to write what I narrowly thought of as an 'all-American' tale; ironically, that became the topic - looking at a hyphenated identity as, nonetheless, whole. It had been there right under my nose the entire time, and only became clear as I got my nose closer to London."

Although the book was written here in London's Notting Hill, it was first published in the US in 2002. "I'd met [Scholastic editor] David Levithan through the violinist in my band. Two days before leaving New York, I went to see him to ask if there was any editing I could do for Scholastic when I was in London. He assumed I was there to pitch an idea. I walked in and sat down and he said 'You must be here about your book', and I remember thinking 'Taxi!', and then, realising that this wasn't the moment *not* to have an idea, I told him about wanting to do the second generation South Asian American girl's story. He said he'd never seen that on a shelf before and was very excited about helping me get it there." Scholastic bought *Born Confused* on the basis of a 25-page synopsis, 50 sample pages and two short stories on the same theme, and it is, says Desai Hidier, a lot easier not to procrastinate once you have a deadline.

She had wanted to do a coming-of-age story, but at first didn't have the voice quite right when she began writing. "I'd previously been writing stories about 20+ characters and I started writing [the book] from a more cynical viewpoint than actually fits the character, so I made a conscious effort to restore a sort of innocence to the voice, and then it all began to fall into place.

"I did feel," she continues, "that in New York I'd lost, to some extent, the ability to be shocked and had to try and get back to the state of mind I'd been in when I first moved there. That only happened when I came here and another look through fresh eyes." Starting off in a New Jersey high school, the story moves to New York's vibrant bhangra/South Asian club scene, following the heroine, would-be photographer Dimple Lala, as she finds friends, romance and some unexpected truths about her own culture.

The manuscript Desai Hidier delivered turned out to be almost a third longer than the final product, her editor commenting that she seemed to have inadvertently written half of the sequel. Was she thinking of writing a follow-on story? "I'd like to someday - and maybe some of the subplot I cut will be in it. I imagine my next book will still be about multi-culturalism and hyphenated cultures, though, as it's a topic very close to my heart and one that's becoming applicable to more and more people."

While there have been many coming-of-age stories before, it seems that *Levithan* was right about there never having been one centred on the Asian American community and culture, and the book's unique take on its subject matter has garnered it terrific amounts of well-deserved review coverage. The way Desai Hidier writes is also pretty unusual: characters simply start talking after an em dash and finish with a full stop; there are no opening or closing quotes anywhere in the book. "This style began, in prose terms, with my short stories," she explains, "but it probably began with writing poetry, where you often don't have quote marks, and the same is true with songwriting. There's something I don't like about end quotes...they're too final and somehow feel untrue as conversations are never that tidy..."

