



Sujata Massey

The Samurai's Daughter
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An Interview with Sujata Massey

This book finds Rei in San Francisco much of the time and the book before (*The Bride's Kimono*) was set in Washington D.C. Is this series' geographic focus shifting? Why San Francisco?

When I first dreamt up the character of Rei, I placed her in Japan because that was where I was living and writing. While she is half Japanese, I let on to readers early on that she grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area: I liked the idea of her being a Californian because I spent a wonderful eighth grade year at Martin Luther King Jr. High in Berkeley. The Bay Area teenagers I met were smart and independent, and many came from mixed ethnic backgrounds and hippie parents. As a tribute to the Bay Area that I remember, I've involved Rei's family and friends in an Asian Language League, political protests, and both support groups and a telephone hotline for Asian women immigrants who've suffered abuse. Of course, the San Francisco of today is much more expensive than the place I remember, so I made it clear that Rei's parents bought their home a long time ago, and that San Francisco is unaffordable for many of Rei's young friends.

You talk about a lawsuit being filed in San Francisco on behalf of comfort women. Is this completely sprung from your imagination or is there some grounding in reality?

It's quite a real situation. It was in San Francisco a few years ago that a group of lawyers attempted to file a class action lawsuit on behalf of Asian comfort women. The lawsuit was shot down by a judge as not allowable in court due to the peace treaty signed between Japan and the US after World War II. Still, efforts continue in the US and around the globe to find justice for both women and men who suffered during the war. In a court in China, Chinese men who were forced to be slave laborers during the war won financial compensation for their suffering. In Japan, women forced to serve as prostitutes to the Japanese military have pressed the Japanese government for financial compensation and an apology, but have received neither. It's a tragic situation, I think, because these survivors are so old now — they may all be deceased in the next decade. I think the governments — Japan and US — think they can wait them out. It's a situation I find distressing and had to write about. Of course, because I'm writing a novel I can't make the class action exactly like the one in San Francisco, but I used the actual situation, as it unfolded, as guidance, and relied on lawyer friends for counsel on what they might do if presented with a case of this magnitude.

World War II is a topic that's both bigger, and considerably darker, than the Japanese cultural arts you've explored in past books. A lot of people read your books — and all mysteries — for entertainment. How do you balance storytelling with serious messages?

I think if a writer feels passionate about something — even something sad — that gives the necessary fuel to start a powerful story. My early books, I feel, are basically love letters to the modern Japanese people — but it is my responsibility, as a lover of Japan and a writer, to go back in time and try to reconcile Japan's recent past with its present. During my time in Japan, older Japanese would occasionally tell me of the kindness of Americans following the war, and how much they wanted to be friends with Americans. Yet I knew that sixty years earlier, Japanese attitudes toward the US were radically different. As I rode the subways in and out of Tokyo, often enjoying chats with smiling, white-haired men who appeared old enough to have been veterans of the war, I wondered to myself about the true nature of Japanese people. n invaded, and I decided to reconcile these past horrors with the present.

Rei has always been more positive about Japan than the U.S.; she's fallen into a pattern of many foreigners, including myself in the beginning years in Japan — of embracing the new place as superior, and trying to suppress the reality of where she came from. Yet it's precisely because Rei is an American woman — impulsive, assertive and questioning of authority — that she investigates her own family's role in the war and comes up with surprising findings that threaten to tear her and her own father's relationship apart.

How have the books been received in Japan?

My Japanese publisher has purchased the whole series — except for this book, which I believe might be because the theme is embarrassing to many Japanese. But I'm quite pleased that the first five books in the series were bought by Japan, although translation moves at a leisurely pace, and currently, just the first two books are in print. I receive many comments from Japanese readers via the Internet, and while Japanese people are the most restrained population I know in offering criticism, I believe from the readers that they are most interested in Rei's interpretations of the social pressures on young people, and family relationships. On the other hand, a couple of reader-critics who posted on the net that they didn't like the books had wildly diverging opinions. One said there were mistakes made about Japanese culture, and the other person said there weren't enough mistakes to be enjoyable!

Something that amuses me is the Japanese publisher's choice of cover models. Rei looks almost completely Caucasian in my opinion on these covers, while on all the US and European book jackets, she looks very Asian.

In the book, Rei has a conversation about the war with Mr. Ishida where she decides for herself that everyone is guilty. What does that statement mean?

My personal belief is that while there is light within every person, there also exists a capacity for darkness. Yes, absolutely heinous crimes against people were committed by Japanese soldiers during the war. But at the same time, we must recognize that people outside of the military were complicit, too — from the owners of big Japanese companies, who used captured Asian people as slave laborers, to

the Korean recruiters who kidnapped or coerced Korean girls to serve in the Japanese military brothels. At the same time, inside the United States, innocent Americans of Japanese ancestry were thrown into internment camps. Many of them suffered because the houses and farms and possessions they trusted their neighbors to watch over for them were actually stolen by these neighbors. So we are hardly the ones to throw stones.

Despite the profound aura of grief over long-ago violence, there is hardly any blood spilled in the book. This is a crime novel — why so little actual violence?

I have always enjoyed classic mystery stories where strong characters, terrific psychological suspense and enterprising detection are the things that carry the story along. Right when I started, I decided that I would never write a scene in which Rei uses a gun, even in her own self defense, because I'm a strong believer in gun control. Japan works well because it has gun control, and there's little chance Rei will come face to face with a gun. Frankly, I think it's more fun to come up with unorthodox weapons — from a container of soy sauce to a pair of ikebana shears.

At the same time, I don't believe criminals just commit crimes out of a basic evil personality — I try to explore the motivations behind crimes. Anyone who has read the whole series will recall that some criminal acts go unpunished, just the way it happens in real life. I like to think justice is served at the end of the book, but it's not always a hundred percent happy ending.

Speaking of happy endings, what is going on with Rei and her two boyfriends?

In the six books so far, Rei has gone back and forth between two men — a Scottish guy, and a very traditional Japanese. Hugh and Takeo, I like to think, reflect the two sides of Rei — the easy familiarity of her roots in the West, and the tug at her heart from the East. When I started the book, things seemed so strong between Rei and Hugh that I was almost positive I was going to write a wedding scene. But as the book drew to a close, I began to get cold feet. It seems rash to commit a girl like Rei to matrimony; I fear that she will be far less adventurous because she has such a clear responsibility to a partner, and maybe possibly, a child.

As for Takeo, many of my American readers, but especially Japanese readers, like him — it was fun for me to invent a male character who arranges flower but is incredibly, charismatically, masculine. He will come back in the series very soon, and he'll definitely give Hugh Glendinning a run for the money.

A new character in the book I found interesting was the acupuncturist Ramon Espinosa: How did you come up with the idea of working acupuncture into the book?

I met an American acupuncturist at a book signing who told me that there the acupuncture tradition in Japan is upheld almost entirely by blind men. I was fascinated by this idea of someone not being able to see, but being so deft and sensitive physically, that he might be able to read signals that people had missed. This character comes from the Philippines, originally, and Rei is convinced he can tell her more about the experience of Japanese violence during the war. His own desire to put his past behind him, though, hinders her efforts. In the end, she has to decide whether her campaign to find truth is really in his interest or her own — or even Hugh's, because the class action will make a lot of money for the law firm. There are very few of us that do things completely out of the goodness of the heart. Many of us do bad things thinking were helping others, like Rei's brilliant historian grandfather, whose textbook writings on Japanese history shock Rei.

In many right wing movements, it's not the actual people on the front lines that are the danger — its politicians who present cleverly remixed messages, government propagandists, and all of those who can reach the most minds. I have seen this situation play out in my parents' home countries, India and Germany, as well as the U.S.

What's next for Rei Shimura?

At this particular book's end, Rei has gone too far for the government's taste, and she must pay some penance. The Pearl Diver, the next book, starts off with Rei is trying to make the best of her new residency situation by taking on a job decorating a stylish Japanese fusion restaurant. At the restaurant, she learns a lot about food from a fascinating Japanese chef, and about the nature of restaurant people from its young, international staff, including the restaurant's sulky hostess, AndreA: Andrea asks Rei to help her track down the truth about what happened to her own mother, a Japanese immigrant who disappeared in Washington, DC in the mid-seventies. In the middle of all this drama, Aunt Norie visits from Japan and hinders things as much as she helps. At the same time, Rei and Hugh go through the hardest test of their relationship, and come out of it changed. I'm unsure of how their characters will play out in the next book.

Does that mean that you don't have an entire storyline laid out in your mind when you start writing?

My theory is that the people who can plot a book end-to-front were good at geometry proofs, and I was miserable at that. So I work in a completely right brain, intuitive mode. First, I figure out the cultural aspect of Japan that I wish to explore — say, flower arranging, or war history, or fashion — and then think of a way that I can get Rei involved in a crime pertaining to it. I write an outline of the book for my editor that has a victim and a crime, but no villain. Then, once I start writing the book, I work along with Rei, to puzzle out what happened. The answer is there, buried — it's just a matter of plumbing my subconscious to get to the truth. It's quite an exciting process — and a lot safer doing it in front of a computer screen than in Rei's Asics sneakers.