



Sujata Massey

The Pearl Diver
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An Interview with Sujata Massey

You've said that your early novels are "basically love letters to the modern Japanese people." What explains your appreciation and affection for Japanese culture in all of its forms?

I lived for a few years in a seaside town called Hayama, about an hour south of Tokyo, and a half hour from the Yokosuka navy base, where my husband was based when he was not out trolling the Persian Gulf (which was most of the time). I chose the two-bedroom house myself, and it was slightly over our budget but wonderful, with a tiled roof, two tatami-mat floored rooms, a true Japanese bath on the first floor, and no central heat. There were few foreigners in the vicinity, but many typical "salaryman" families who extended first a careful courtesy toward us, and finally, deep friendship. I feel so blessed by the kindnesses shown to me; whether it was helping me evacuate a beach crab or centipede from my genkan (home's entryway) or taking me to a flower arranging class or just sitting together and teaching me to roll sushi. I also taught English to different groups of Japanese, ranging from their military to retired housewives and junior high school students, and each contact gave me another joyful exposure to the Japanese lifestyle. I left Japan regretfully, when my husband was done with his military service and we returned to civilian life in Baltimore. I missed Japan so much that I decided to keep working on the disjointed, fledgling novel that I had started in my Japanese home. I wanted to write an exciting story, and communicate to the world that not everybody in Japan grows up to be a gangster or a geisha:

This is your second Rei Shimura novel with Washington, D.C. as its setting. Why did you decide to shift to the United States?

I set the first four books in the series in Japan because I was young and fancy-free enough to travel back to do fact-checking, even after I was in Baltimore. Doing the research was easy because everything came out of my day to day life and conversation with my friends, Japanese men and women in the English teaching community, and salarymen's wives, most of whom were quite open with an inquisitive foreigner who wanted to learn the "why" of Japanese culture. These groups of books are most focused on Japanese cultural arts — things like the culture of ikebana, martial arts, Zen Buddhism, and animation. The first one, **The Salaryman's Wife**, includes so many real places it's almost like a diary. **Zen Attitude** came about because I lived close to Kamakura, where there are so many Zen temples, and it was easy for me to meet priests through neighborhood friends. **The Flower Master** was written after I'd started studying ikebana in the Sogetsu School, using experiences of my own and recollections of my ikebana teacher's fifty years of experience. **The Floating Girl** is a mystery set in the world of animation, because I thought this modern Japanese cultural art deserved the same special attention as the older forms. The book was well-reviewed, but I personally didn't feel it worked as well as the others because anime is not a true passion of mine. I am essentially an old-fashioned girl who would rather read a traditional novel than a graphic one.

That book was also more challenging to write because I'd just become the mother of a new baby — and would go on to adopt a second infant three years later. I felt that I could not leave my babies to do the kind of research in Japan I needed. I worried that if I couldn't write authentically about Japan anymore, the series would have to end, but with my editor's encouragement, I wrote Rei mysteries that were close to home: one in San Francisco, which is where Rei was born, and two in Washington DC, where she is experimenting with living with Hugh Glendinning. I consider these books the "emotional" segment of the series — Rei deals with issues like becoming a wife (or not); and the relationship between parents and children.

Book eight (**The Typhoon Lover**, to come out in Oct 2005) and book nine (its working title is **Girl in a Box**) are set in Japan, because my children are now big enough to handle my occasional absences. I had a tremendous research trip to Tokyo last February, where I spent many hours in Japanese department stores, the world I'm exploring for **Girl in a Box**. These books, read more like international thrillers than the earlier ones; they're not so much about the murders of people Rei knows as they are about global crime and international relations crises. It's a big jump in responsibility, but I feel that Rei is finally getting the recognition she deserves, as an exceptional sleuth, by working on these official assignments. Rei may be the only spy who would think of hiding listening devices in her A-cup bras, but that doesn't make her any less effective than James Bond!

The Pearl Diver is a treasure trove for lovers of Japanese antiques from the Meiji period. Is this an obsession of yours as well as Rei's?

I like Japanese antiques a lot. In Japan, I had my first real exposure to old Asian furniture, ceramics and textiles, and I was hooked. Because I was a navy lieutenant's wife, I didn't have the funds to buy great old pieces. I lived vicariously by going to museums to admire things, and to flea-markets to buy under-appreciated, semi-antique ceramics and textiles. When I started writing **Zen Attitude**, I wrote to antiques dealers in Tokyo, telling them I couldn't afford to buy, but that I would be very grateful to learn anything they could tell me about tansu chests. I received a wonderful welcoming letter from John Adair, who owns Kurofune Antiques in Roppongi, a highly regarded antiques store specializing in furniture. Ten years later, John and I are fast friends, though he knows I can't afford to buy from him till I hit a bestseller list!

You thank a number of restaurants and their staff in your acknowledgments, and food and restaurants play prominent roles in this novel. Can you discuss your interest in food and its preparation?

My parents come from two cultures, India and Germany, so I grew up eating a lot of great food that they cooked, and it was not all Indian and German—it was often Indonesian, or Middle Eastern, or Mexican. From a young age I was eating all vegetables, chilies and spices, and loving it. I really learned to cook during my college days at Johns Hopkins, using the late Craig Claiborne's *New York Times International Cookbook*, some Madhur Jaffrey Indian cuisine cookbooks, and Molly Katzen's Moosewood books for vegetarian stuff.

Incidentally, I am not a vegetarian, though many people think I am; I eat it all, from abalone to zucchini.

During my first career as a newspaper reporter, I wrote a lot of food stories, including many cookbook reviews and interviews with restaurateurs and food writers. My knowledge of food come out of my habit of constant home cooking, rather than dining out, although I love to eat at restaurants in Japan and anywhere else in the world that I am. We are close to Washington DC, where I did a lot of eating to shape the backdrop for Bento. Some of my favorite real places in Washington's Penn Quarter neighborhood are DC Coast, Burma, Zaytinya and Zola, all of which are visited by Rei. The Asian fusion restaurants that come closest to being like my fictitious Bento I've found are in Hawaii. Roy's restaurant, and Hiroshi Eurasian Tapas, are outstanding establishments where Rei would be very happy to eat the kitchen scraps.

Hugh is not the first man with whom Rei Shimura has had a serious relationship, and *The Pearl Diver* leaves the fate of their relationship up in the air. Are you willing to give your readers a sense of what their future holds?

Hmm, I never like to give away a future that's waiting to be read, so I'll let readers learn the truth for themselves this October in **The Typhoon Lover**. What I will reveal is that while writing **The Pearl Diver**, I had some indecision over whether to make things work out between the two characters or not. There is a romantic scene at the end between Hugh and Rei that is somewhat disturbing; while I tried to be clear this was an episode between consenting, in-love adults, some negative reactions from readers have led me to examine what this scene says about the relationship. For me, the act that Hugh and Rei engage in raises questions about insecurity, and inequality, and whether love can really conquer all. At the moment as I write this, I think Rei really needs some time to stand on her own, and be her own person, before she makes the ultimate commitment to anybody.

When you start writing a mystery, do you know the whole story, or is the arc of the plot something that comes to you more fully as you write?

I'm an intuitive writer, which means I choose not to decide the ending of a book before I start writing. I believe strongly in the power of the subconscious, that a good story is hanging out in the ether, and it's my job to bring it down to earth. So, while Rei starts puzzling over clues, I go right along with her, solving my own mystery of what will be written. I do know what the book's going to be about: usually a general theme, such as "an Asian fusion restaurant in Washington DC, where Rei is decorating the space." Then I think about the characters who will be in the story—Hugh, obviously, because they are in Washington and a fabulous chef based on those real Iron Chefs from TV, and a slick restaurateur. I created Rei's cousin, Kendall, because I wanted to give her American side some attention and to describe a peculiar type of affluent-young mother-type who would give Rei a good deal of angst about her own station in life. About eighty percent through my first draft, I was no longer struggling with where to go next, and I wrote many pages in one sitting—up to 16. I was writing day and night, unable to sleep for long until I was finished two weeks later. I was actually worried about my insomnia, but everything returned to normal when I was through. And now I go through this pattern every time I really start cruising. In fact, I only had 3 to 5 hours sleep every night, for the past week!

How did your background as a journalist prepare you for writing mystery novels?

I loved every minute of my time at the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, where I got my foot in the door as a college intern, and stayed for five years after graduation, writing for the features section. The thing that made shifting from journalism to fiction challenging was that I had to write very short articles, and I couldn't put any personal opinion in my writing. Showing a viewpoint is vital in fiction, as is sitting on your butt for years, sometimes, to finish one book. However, in journalism there is always a deadline, a feeling that work can't go unfinished, so my newspaper training helped me finish the book, and I still set deadlines for myself way before the HarperCollins deadline comes up. The other skill I learned in journalism was site description. I had to show the reader, through words, the atmosphere of a place, and that is what I have to do all the time in fiction, whether I'm writing about Japan or the United States.

Can you discuss some authors or novels that you feel have influenced you as a writer?

An early book that influenced me a lot was Pico Iyer's collection of travel essays, *Video Night in Katmandu*. He described the atmosphere of different Asian countries brilliantly by talking about what kind of music people were listening to, the slogans on their clothing, and so on. He taught me the charm of pop-culture detail is something to notice as carefully as traditional architecture. As far as fiction goes, I love many different kinds of mysteries; the ones that hit me hardest have a great deal of emotion in them. Michael Connelly, James Lee Burke, Laura Lippman, Lisa Scottoline and Ruth Rendell have been inspiring. The thriller writer I most admire is John LeCarre, who has really gone out on a limb with two recent books, *Absolute Friends* and *The Constant Gardener*. I so admired his brave tackling of serious international problems that I have strived to do the same for Rei in *The Typhoon Lover*, and the book that follows it.

What is your next project?

The Typhoon Lover comes out this October (in case you didn't yet catch my constant sales pitches!). This is the most ambitious book for me, to date; it's a suspenseful story wherein Rei is tasked with finding an important antique pitcher looted from the National Museum in Iraq. The priceless antique is believed to be in the hands of a corrupt Japanese collector living in Tokyo, to whom Rei has personal ties. I wanted to write about the cultural side effects of war, and also to give Rei a believable route back into Japan, after her prolonged absence. For this book I had to learn about spy-craft, a field which fascinates me so much that the book after that will send her on assignment to a fabulous Tokyo department store. These thrillers have more of an intellectual world-view than my earlier books, but are not complete departures from the series—they're still told in first-person narrative by Rei, and are packed with Japanese cultural factoids and are pretty non-violent. I'm striving for Rei to move past her own problems and take some responsibility as an American citizen during a time of war and hardship around the globe. Rei's rationale in taking official assignments for the government is that she wants to make sure foreigners don't get an unfair shake, and she winds up ensuring that, as well as working toward the Japanese goal of making harmony among groups that are in conflict.