Writing One Reality, Returning to Another:  
*Shankari Chandran in Conversation with Birte Heidemann*

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Shankari Chandran is a novelist and a lawyer whose experience in the field of social justice informs much of her creative writing. Born in London to Sri Lankan Tamil parents, her life and work have been shaped by the cultures of three countries in three continents. After growing up in Australia, she spent ten years in London working as a lawyer before returning to Sydney in 2010 where she started her writing career. Her debut novel *Song of the Sun God* (2017) – a family saga chronicling Sri Lanka’s war through the history of a Sri Lankan Tamil family – was recently commissioned for television. Moving from a historical novel to a dystopian thriller set in the future, her second book *The Barrier* (2017) creates a world devastated by religious war and the Ebola epidemic. She is currently working on her third novel, which combines the generic elements of her previous two works: a political thriller set in post-war Sri Lanka.

**Birte Heidemann:** Shankari, you grew up in Australia and began working as a lawyer in London. Only in 2010, after moving back home and giving birth to your fourth child, you decided to commit to creative writing. Could you tell me a bit more about what prompted you to switch careers and become a full-time writer?

**Shankari Chandran:** We moved back to Australia because I wanted to bring our children back to my home, to the home of my childhood. But when I returned, I felt disillusioned and
disappointed, and I felt that home was not home. And through that sense of
disappointment, I felt lost, and I turned to writing in order to work through my feelings. I
began by just blogging for myself, and it actually attracted a following. After the following
grew, the blog was picked up by a lifestyle website that introduced my writing to a much
broader audience in Australia. This gave me the confidence to attempt a novel. To attempt
something that I had always wanted to do but previously never had the time or confidence
to do. And so I wanted to give that one great novel a go, a novel I think so many feel within
us. In 2012, after a year of blogging, I attempted what eventually became Song of the Sun
God. It was the first time in my life since I was young that I was not working for money
because I had chosen to be the stay-at-home carer for our family. We were having our fourth
baby, and it seemed like an opportunity to pursue that ambition.

Birte Heidemann: For how long had you been contemplating with the idea of
writing?

Shankari Chandran: I think it was only in 2012 when Song of the Sun God took form and
substance that I realised how much I loved doing it and that I really wanted to keep doing it. I
wanted to create a career out of it, and I wanted to be published. There's a certain point
when you are writing where you realise that you don't want to just write but you want to be
published.

Birte Heidemann: You want to share it, your story.

Shankari Chandran: Yes, you want to share it with a wider audience, and you also want
the validation of being published. With this particular novel, it's from my heart and it's for my
people, so the motivation to share it with a wider audience became very powerful. You
know, there is something that seeks that external validation. In terms of how long I wanted
to be a writer for, I knew that I loved writing from the time I was a child. I could sense that I
enjoyed it. ‘Enjoy’ is such an empty word – I loved it. When I was in fifth grade, my teacher
gave me a diary and she literally said to me: ‘just keep writing’. And so I used to journal on
and off from then, and I would write short stories but never consistently and never critically.
I would write something but never go back on it and try to make it better. But writing has
always been a way of comfort for me, a form of therapy and also one of affection. I loved it
since I was young.

Birte Heidemann: It's interesting that you are using words like ‘comfort’ and
‘therapy’. I wonder whether it was the very act of writing that helped you
navigate all these shifts in your life at that time?

Shankari Chandran: Absolutely.
Birte Heidemann: Admittedly, the process of writing and sharing your story with a wider audience could be equally unsettling. Does the act of writing – developing a story, its characters, a setting – still serve as something settling or comforting for you?

Shankari Chandran: I think, one hundred per cent, yes, it does. Overall, I am, as a person, far more grounded and at peace with myself when I am writing. It comforts me, it uplifts me, and it connects me to myself. I feel my most authentic self and very present when I am in the middle of writing. It might seem contradictory that I feel very present when I have deliberately taken myself to another world. When I am writing, I am one hundred per cent in that world to the point where my husband is concerned that if there was a house fire, I wouldn’t be aware of it. So I don’t write and don’t even edit on screen when my children are home. I will research when the children are in the house, and I will edit on paper. I can sit with them and do a bit of editing, but I would never work on the first draft of a manuscript or an idea when they are around because I am too deeply absorbed into that world. It’s not fair for them, and it’s not safe for them. I owe them as their mother the mindfulness and the presence. I need to give that to them when they are with me.

The other part of that answer though is that I often write about very traumatic things and that is unsettling for me. It is traumatic for me because you are living that trauma. When you write, you really are inside your mind, the picture is very clear, and you are with those people. You are as close to them as you could possibly be, without being them, and that is traumatic. At the end of the day, depending on what I have been writing about, I find that I really need to take some time to pull myself out of that world and re-set my mind for reality and my children. On those days, I need to just hold them for a while to be reassured that reality is safe and secure, and that my children are ok. Even though I have been writing about other people’s children, my children are safe and everything is alright.

Birte Heidemann: In fact, I was wondering how you would manage to switch between the often-violent worlds of your writing and the all-encompassing world of motherhood. I can imagine that moving from writing a war scene onto making dinner or helping with homework can be quite exhausting. And even if the process of writing is mostly comforting for you, the task of traversing both worlds – the real and the imagined, the one around you and the one inside of you – might drain energy from you as well.

Shankari Chandran: I think one of the contradictions of writing is that it’s really energizing and exhilarating to write. I am very uplifted when I write and if I don’t write, I can feel a heaviness within myself. If I don’t write, I am difficult to be with. I am uncomfortable
with myself, and I am slightly agitated and unsettled. At the same time, though it is energising and exhilarating, it is also meditative and prayerful. And it is traumatic and draining. It is all of those things.

**Birte Heidemann: But fulfilling in that way?**

**Shankari Chandran:** Yes, ultimately, it is incredibly fulfilling. I feel very fortunate that I had a job in the law that I loved. I would wake up every morning with a rush of adrenaline and march into the office determined to do something useful today. And I feel so fortunate to have had that for ten years, and I loved it. I thought I would never love a job as much as I loved that. But when I began to write, I realised I had found something that I loved more.

**Birte Heidemann:** Judging from the two novels that came out in one year, and the third one already in the works, you are undoubtedly a prolific writer. This makes me all the more curious about your writing routines, especially being a mother of four. You already shared some of your routines but how exactly do you find the time and space to work on your manuscripts? And do you have a fixed workspace from where you write at more or less fixed times, or do you squeeze in time for writing whenever and wherever you can?

**Shankari Chandran:** That's a great question, because I love to hear how other authors do it. I'm fascinated because every author always thinks of other authors doing it so much better. I work in a very small study, which is about the size of a closet and has no windows or natural lighting. My husband finds this hilarious and a little unhealthy, too. He worries that it's just not natural to sit in a small windowless room for hours on end with the doors shut. When he tries to work an hour in the shared study, he finds it very difficult. For me, the reason I am fine with that space is because I am not there. It's because I will be inside my mind, I will be in Sri Lanka in 1932 or in 2014 and, most recently, I've been in Sri Lanka in 2009. So I am not in the room, the physical room, but mostly in the past.

From 2012 to 2016, I had a very good routine. Whenever the children were not in the house, I would sit down to write. When my youngest child started school, I was able to do this more effectively because I had no children in my house then. I used to walk the children to school, with the dog, and run back to start my day of writing. I am quite organised and disciplined and try not to do much of my domestic work during the middle of the day. I am not one of those authors who will sit down and do some laundry before they write. Chances are I did the laundry at ten o'clock the night before because I yearn for my time to write. There are a number of things that eat into my writing time but I will sit down at 9:15 to write and at 2:30 a really loud alarm will go off to give me fifteen minutes to pull myself out of war time Sri Lanka and allow myself to re-enter the leafy streets of our neighbourhood. And then I will be
with my children in the way they deserve it. So I have a really compressed writing schedule, which can be very stressful because there is so much to say in so little time. All the things that parents do, I will try and do late in the evening, like cooking dinner for the following night, bulk producing spaghetti bolognese and baking, answering the endless notes from the PTA. This is how my day used to be structured in the past.

**Birte Heidemann: So how has your routine changed, and what prompted you to do so?**

**Shankari Chandran:** With my third novel, I tried out something different. It was very deliberate because that year of my life was a very unsettled one. We had a lot of sickness in the family, and I had a lot of commitments for the children during school hours. So I had things that pulled me away from writing, and I was becoming increasingly stressed and anxious that I was not writing my third novel. I had an idea but I was not able to create or protect the time to write. I remembered Stephen King’s book *On Writing* where he says: ‘just put superglue on your bum and bash it out’. It’s easy for Stephen King to say this because he is a full-time, successful and well-paid writer, but I thought, ok, let me try this. He sets himself very aggressive targets, like 3,000 words a day in six hours of writing. I was at a stage where I just couldn’t give it six hours of writing a day. But I could put superglue on my bum, and I could set some targets for myself. I am very target orientated, perhaps because I am a lawyer. If you set me a target, like a robot, I feel the need to achieve that target. So I would say 500 words a day or 1,000, and I would secretly be aiming for 2,000. I wrote the first draft of that third novel in eight weeks because in every spare moment, I would try to channel Stephen King. Even if it were just ten minutes, I would sit down and just bash it out. I didn’t look at it again. I didn’t read it. I didn’t ask myself if it’s any good because those questions are the death knell. I just tried to bash it out. And then I had to stop when my first and second novel came out, so I didn’t look at the draft until some four months later. I was terrified to open the document, to look at what I had actually produced. I went back to it very anxiously but, for a first draft, it was okay. It needs a lot more work and it needs energy and it needs time. I have been doing that this year, but I need to do more. As a first draft, it was good enough though, and I was relieved to realise this.

**Birte Heidemann:** Indeed, it must have been very reassuring to realise that you were able to pull this together despite your disrupted and unpredictable schedule. How would you describe the next stage of writing a novel, that is, your process of editing a first draft?

**Shankari Chandran:** It’s different, but it’s a big job. For the next round of edits, I really feel that I need a lot of time because I actually need to restructure it. I can edit language
while I’m in the car waiting to pick up a child from their guitar class but, for a structural edit, you need to step back and look at the whole novel. Then, you need to step in and look at individual scenes. You constantly step out and step in, and this process requires time. I don’t have much time anymore because I’ve recently returned to running a social justice program. Given that writing is not necessarily a way to create a sustainable income for a family of six, I have focused back on being a lawyer at this stage in my life. I feel very fortunate to return to the law after several years of not working in the paid economy, and I am very fortunate that it’s a job that I love.

But I do hope that I will be able to write at least a minimum amount that nourishes my soul. Time and fatigue are my worst enemies. I need to, once again, think about Stephen King and work out how to make time my friend. And I do have an hour or two in the evening if I can overcome my fatigue. Of course, we also have to allow ourselves to not write. We have to recognise that all the other things that we’re doing are valid and necessary because, as writers, all we want to do is write. That’s all I want to do. I want to be with my children and my husband, occasionally hang out with friends and then write some more. I would very happily have a completely binary life where I am either with my family or writing, either writing or with my family.

**Birte Heidemann:** Maybe one day…

**Shankari Chandran:** One day, one day.

**Birte Heidemann:** A final question about the process of your writing. I was wondering how you gather and develop ideas. Do you simply type them into your computer? Or do you prefer to keep a notebook where you can jot down notes or map out more complex ideas like the intricate web of family relations in *Song of the Sun God*?

**Shankari Chandran:** I make notes of interesting ideas or scenes – sometimes a scene will just flash into my mind – or words. I love words. I’ve actually got lists of words. I have a notebook where all of this just gets dumped but sometimes I will put up a file on my computer where I collect ideas for future books. I keep this document secret somewhere in my computer because I think my husband would be terrified to see it – ‘what? You haven’t finished with the third book?’ But when I write, I write directly onto the computer. For *Song of the Sun God*, I did do some writing on a notepad because my children were much younger then, and I needed to often sit in a doctor’s waiting room or one would have speech therapy, and for an hour or so, I would just handwrite scenes. But nowadays I write directly into a computer and I actually prefer it because it is very fast, and it allows me to check my word count. A good day of writing, though, is a day when I forget about the targets because I am
absorbed into my world. And when I emerge from that world, I realise that in those few hours, I wrote 2,000 words. You know, that's a beautiful day. And there are days like that. They are a real joy, and I feel that they are good for me.

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