

VARIETY



PRINCE GOES TO BOLLYWOOD P21
The action-comedy flick will be directed by Krishna DK-Raj



In The Atelier
LAVANYA SANKARAN

She writes almost the whole day and calls her husband "extremely supportive" of her solitary hours spent in her atelier. He is also her first reader who offers "insightful critiques" for every draft that she shows him. Since writing can get lonely, she packs her laptop and sets off to a nearby coffee shop during the day and spins her yarn over "one cup of coffee and a bottle of water". She loves reading and says that she has a strange compulsion to finish the book "whether I like it or not". When writing, she is inaccessible to the world (her phone is on the silent mode throughout the day) but otherwise she loves to spend time with her teenage daughter. Her book *Hope Factory*, part of a two-book deal, hit the stands as her debut novel. Her first book, a collection of eight short stories, *The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories* (2005), has led her through a literary route that she found surprisingly easy.

I am a tough editor of my own writing

She calls herself a literary writer who carries her readers along and makes them think of the world they live in. Lavanya's debut novel has characters plucked from urban lives

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Hope Factory seems to be like a reality check on the myriad hopes that dwell on the minds of urban people. This is the second time that you are showing a ringside glimpse of a city where you live. What is the story that you wish to tell?

Hope Factory is a story of opportunities in big cities like Bangalore. But what I wanted to show is that opportunities go hand in hand with obstacles. People come to cities to pursue their dreams, but life is challenging for them. I have shown the lives of characters inspired by real-life observations. Take Kamala, for instance. She is a single mother, a widow, who is struggling to give private school education to her 12-year-old son by working as a domestic help. The inspiration comes from a single moment of one rain-filled evening when I had to fire a maid in my house for repeated absenteeism. When she turned to leave, I saw her son waiting for her at the open door, he had heard every word. He picked up her bag and, his arm protectively about her shoulders, walked his sorrowing mother across the street into the rain. I have never seen him again, but he has stayed with me, and I knew his voice the

minute I wrote it. The inspiration for Anand, another character, came out of a chance watching of a National Geographic documentary on American pioneers. They survived in such hostile conditions. I realised I was seeing something similar all about me. For years, I had been watching Indian business people struggling to build world-class businesses in an environment that didn't support them in any crucial way.

Your transition from a banker to a writer must have been a life-changing phase.

I graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia and worked as an investment banker in New York for a while before I returned to India where I worked as a business consultant. I have always loved writing and have been at it since I was a child. On a visit to the US, a friend told me to attend a writing conference to get an idea of how things worked. I spotted a writing conference where I was visiting and decided to attend it since I had two short stories with me. That was one big happy mistake. The conference was on writing that specialises on romance and murder stories. There I was, in the wrong conference and with just two short stories that didn't fit the genre. But there were a few literary agents present and one of them read my stories and directed me to Lane Zachary. She was amazing and before I knew it I was at the auction where my manuscript was bid by nine publishers. That got me the two-book deal of which *Hope Factory* is the second. They say short stories are hard sell, but for me, it wasn't.

How was your writing experience?

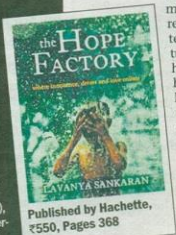
I found it challenging. I thought it would take me one year to complete the book but it actually took me five years. However, if I don't find it challenging then I am not doing a good job, right? *The Red Carpet* is the first time that the literary section was looking at the new India, a glimpse of the urban life, but *Hope Factory* was bigger, more complex. When I write, I write for the art.

You call yourself a literary writer. What makes you different from, say, popular writers?

Literary writers are also popular. But having said that, let me tell you what makes for a literary writer. Such a writer will concentrate on the craft and art of writing apart from telling a good story. A popular writer, on the other hand, will have an extremely good and entertaining story. A literary writer will carry their readers along and make them think of the world they live in. What I do know is that I am a tough editor of my own writing. I will probably read my work at least 50 times and do the necessary changes. I am tough on myself.

Which genres do you read? Does it have to be literary or nothing else?

Not at all. Reading is the best benchmark for your writing. I usually read 70 per cent fiction and 30 per cent non-fiction. The ones I enjoyed reading recently are David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad* and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*.



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