



PREM NATH RAO/DEE

Banking on the write skills

Investment banker Lavanya Sankaran's debut book of short stories is the new buzz in the literary world

VIMMY SINHA

THERE is no pattern to my life," she declares. "But so far it's been quite a path." Here's how. Lavanya Sankaran, 30-ish, is the new Indian writer on the block. Even before being published, her literary debut *The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories* has been selected by Barnes and Noble as a part of their Discover Great New Authors Program for Summer 2005 and Borders' "Original Voices", both of which showcase exceptional writing from new and established writers.

Interestingly, Lavanya Sankaran wrote stories for the fun of it. "For me writing is a pleasurable activity and I wrote fiction for myself. I am also an avid reader and so writing came naturally to me. I had no intention of writing a book," she says.

She adds: "It was only because of the insistence of my friends that I reluctantly agreed to meet some agents in New York with my two stories. My well-wishers warned me not to feel dejected if the agents rejected me. 'It happens all the

time', they said."

But rejection didn't happen, rather there was an amazing interest in her work. Five agents vied aggressively to represent her at the manuscript stage and she finally went with Lane Zachary, of Zachary Shuster Harmsworth, New York who is famous for having the Kennedy family as client. "The best part of meeting the agents was that I enjoyed being in the enviable position of interviewing them," she recalls.

Once with Zachary, she was warned about the short story segment being a tough market and so she had to be perfectly correct. Then began her series of meetings with the top publishing houses of New York. Nine top publishers bid for her book over a three-day auction. Sankaran presumably was in a fix. Finally Zachary told her: "High time you made up your mind." She chose legendary publishing-editor, Susan Kamil of The Dial Press (Random

House). "I remember, when Zachary called up Susan and told her, 'You've got it', I heard Susan scream with excitement."

The book sold for a "significant" six-figure dollar deal. New York *Publisher's Weekly* magazine termed it as a "hot deal". Her book will be released worldwide next month, in over fifteen countries. In India, it is being published by Headline Review (UK) and will be available after May 3, this week.

What is so special about *The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories*? The book, as the name suggests, is based on Bangalore. "There is no real-life story in the novel. Everything is fiction and unconsciously I might have put in incidents that might have registered in my mind."

She denies that she has in anyway tried to exoticise India for the Western readers. "A home cannot be exotic," she says matter-of-factly.

"I was back from New York to

a changed urban Bangalore and what I've written is all based on the little observations I made. I feel Bangalore, more than any other city, heralds this chaotic change. There is fabulous energy with positive mindsets in this city."

Sankaran is a graduate from Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia, and worked as an investment banker in New York. Later, she came back to Bangalore as a business consultant. "After, my daughter was born, I began to write in the *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. I also did my little scribbles on the side, the culmination of which is this book."

Also, British and American reviewers and publishing insiders have been generously praising her debut novel: an "outstanding debut" of "a remarkable literary talent". There is even talk of her debut novel being made into a film.

Expectedly, Sankaran is currently writing her next book. She has a two book contract with Dial Press. "It is too early to disclose anything about the book," she says. ♦

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