

The Red Carpet Welcome

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ONCE in a while, after hearing hard luck tales about talented people who go through rejection after rejection, you come across a person with a lucky streak. A person who has it going for them, right from the word go. That's the way it is with debut author Lavanya Sankaran.

Originally an investment banker, Sankaran says she always loved to write. "I wrote for the *Wall Street*

Journal," she tells us. "But I wrote fiction on the side." Writer friends in the US, where the Bangalore-based author travelled on work, saw her writing and urged her to show it to an agent. "Most agents in the States don't accept non-complete manuscripts," Sankaran says. "But five agents saw two of my stories and really liked them." She finally chose Lane Zachary of Zachary Shuster Harmsworth, New York, agents to many of the Kennedys, some Pulitzer Prize winning writers and top-notch

CNN correspondents. "Lane just said 'Go and write'," laughs Sankaran. "So I went to Bangalore and wrote for two years." The result is *The Red Carpet* (Headline Review, Rs 295), a book of short stories all based in urban Bangalore.

The 37-year-old author seems a little stunned with all the media attention and the buzz her book is creating. "I'm a privacy freak," she tells us, shying away a little from the camera. "Do we have to take my picture?" But she can't very well avoid it considering that about nine publishers, whom she declines naming, auctioned hotly for her book, finally ending in a "substantial six-figure advance" won by Susan Kamil of Dial Press, an imprint of Random House. The UK rights were then bought by Headline Review, which is also distributing it in India.

What is it about her book that made all these publishers want it? "I was trying to capture the world I saw in India," says Sankaran thoughtfully. "I read many books about India and they were all very well-written, but dealt with either magical realism or poverty or the India the authors had left behind them in the 1980s." *The Red Carpet*, on the other hand, deals with India as we know it—socialites, software programmers, convent schools, young modern couples—an India of changing times. "What was incredible is that this resonated in New York," says Sankaran, still looking a little awed.

And why did she choose foreign publishers, we ask. "Well, there was a lot of interest among Indian publishers as well," she says. "But I found that they weren't able to market books separately—as literary fiction, as a memoir, as about grandmother's pickles—plus foreign agents are unwilling to take you once you are already published in India."

Sankaran has a two book contract with Dial Press, and she's already hard at work on her next book—a novel. "It's still very much a work in progress," she says, smiling and adjusting her scarf. "But it is set in a very similar landscape." She also mentions that there have been murmurs about making a movie out of one of her stories. Out of a short story, we ask disbelievingly, "I know!" she exclaims, smiling widely.

The worldwide release of *The Red Carpet* is planned on May 3.

