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September 2014

Announcing Talking in the Library Speakers Fall 2014

SEPTEMBER 1, 2014 7:06 PM

Fall 2014

October

Padma Venkatraman – Writing for Young Adults: From Oceanographer to Young Adults Author

October 7, 2014

4:30 p.m.

The author of the acclaimed young adult novels *Climbing the Stairs*, *A Time to Dance*, and *Island's End*. As a young child she developed a keen interest in Mathematics, Sciences and Literature. As a result of the tug-of-war between her passion for the world of numbers and her passion for the world of words, she moved to the United States from India at the age of nineteen to pursue a graduate degree in oceanography. Currently she teaches at URI.

Adam Braver – Lincoln in Fiction

October 28, 2014

4:30 p.m.

Adam Braver is the author of five novels, most recently *Misfit*, a novel about the life of Marilyn Monroe. His books have been selected for the Barnes and Noble Discover New Writers program, Borders' Original Voices series, the IndieNext list, and twice for the Book Sense list, as well as having been translated into multiple languages. At Roger Williams University, he is on faculty in the Creative Writing program, and Writer-in-Residence with the University Library.

November

Taylor Polites & Jeffrey Meriwether – From the Stacks to the Pages: How Research Tells the Stories from History

November 18, 2014

4:30 p.m.

Taylor M. Polites is the author of *The Rebel Wife* (Simon & Schuster, 2012). His work has appeared in the anthologies *Knitting Yarns: Writers on Knitting* (W.W. Norton, November 2013) and the upcoming *Providence Noir* (Akashic Books) as well as in local and regional arts and news publications including *Provincetown Arts*, *artscope*, and *the Cape Codder*. He teaches in the Wilkes University Creative Writing MFA program, at Roger Williams University and the Rhode Island School of Design. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island with his small Chihuahua Clovis.

Jeffrey Meriwether is an Associate Professor of History at RWU. A U.S. Navy Reservist when he began his career at Roger Williams in 2001, Meriwether's zeal for all things historic has only grown since he arrived in New England. In 2003, Meriwether took full advantage of the region's colonial roots by signing on as a Revolutionary War re-enactor with His Majesty's Tenth Regiment of Foot, one of several British regiments stationed in the Boston area during the Revolution.

All lectures will be held in the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center, University Library



Behind the Book: Padma Venkatraman

SEPTEMBER 1, 2014 5:38 PM

A Few Minutes with Padma Venkatraman



By Abby DeVeuve

Padma Venkatraman is a remarkable woman who refuses to pigeonhole her passions — she has been an oceanographer, a teacher, and a novelist, among many other things. She was born in Chennai, India, and lived there until age 19, when she moved to the United States to begin her graduate work as an oceanographer. Although Padma's initial career path was in the field of science, she has always harbored a love of literature. Even while she was conducting research around the world or working at the University of Rhode Island, she was pursuing her love of writing.

She has written math and science books, children's books, and most recently young adult novels. For her literature she has won numerous awards and honors, including starred reviews in Kirkus, Booklist, VOYA, SLJ, and BCCB for her most recent young adult novel, *A Time to Dance*.

As part of the Talking in the Library series, Padma is visiting RWU on October 7 at 4:30 PM in the Mary Tefft White Cultural Center in the University Library.

But, as a sneak peek, *Connecting with Your Library* intern, I caught up with Padma over email to talk about Padma's novels, her life, and her inspiring advice to young writers!

Abby: First, I want to get to know you as a person a little better — how do you spend your time? What is a day in the life of Padma Venkatraman like?

Padma: These days I am quite limited in what I do because spending time with my husband and child is my priority, other than writing. I'm lousy at tennis but like it, I ice walk (holding on to the boards, while my family skates), do yoga every morning, and read a lot! I used to hike, snorkel, canoe, [and] cross-country ski but that was pre-child. I also did more volunteer work at that point.

Abby: Your primary occupation was in the sciences as an oceanographer, but of course you are a successful novelist as well — how do these two aspects of your life come together, or do you keep them apart? Do you use your scientific knowledge to inform your writing?

Padma: I pretty much keep them apart when it comes to writing. Science writing is by nature didactic and full of explanations — two things a good novelist avoids.

Then again, I feel science informs my life as a writer. It gives me a great appreciation for the vastness of space and time, for the immensity of the universe, and thus, I hope keeps me from getting too self-obsessed.

My scientific knowledge came into play a little in *Island's End*, in which there's a Tsunami, and which is set on islands I visited as an oceanographer. I also was, for a while, the only female of color and yet chief scientist on research cruises — that gave me an understanding of what it means to lead despite being a "minority."

Abby: You were born in India and then moved to the United States — how have your life experiences influenced your writing?

Padma: I'm American now, and in most ways I'm more American than I'm Indian. Then again, growing up in India gave me both an understanding of the depth and largely accepting spirituality that prevails in that culture as well as an experience of the many unfortunate social restrictions and inequities. Thus far, this has heavily influenced my first and third novels, but not all my work will be set in India (if I live long enough to write more, as I hope to do).

Abby: *A Time to Dance* is your third and most recent novel — will you explain what it is about in your own words?

Padma: *A Time to Dance* is my most recent literary novel. It's about Veda, a dance ingenue who loses her leg in an accident. As she struggles to recover physically, she grows as a person, becomes more open and giving, and discovers spirituality. Her journey is one that progresses through the 3 different stages of love, if you will — from Eros, through Charis, to an awakening of Agape.

Abby: While your novels are very different, they often feature strong female characters facing hardship on various levels— what made you want to explore these themes? What do you want readers to take away from your works?

Padma: I had a very difficult childhood, in part because I was a girl growing up in India, in part because the family I was born into is dysfunctional. When I came to the United States for graduate school at age 19, I was one of the few women in the then male-dominated profession of oceanography. I think the challenges I underwent make me gravitate toward characters who also face hardship. I invite characters I admire into my mind, strong people whose voices I can happily listen to for years on end as the novel evolves, interesting people whom I enjoy seeing in the movie that plays in my mind as I write.

Abby: What is your favorite book (or who is your favorite author) and why?

Padma: [There are] lots of authors I like, no single favorite.

Authors I admire: Kazuo Ishiguro, Vikram Seth, M.T. Anderson, Da Chen, Laurie Halse Andersen, Ursula LeGuin, Jane Yolen — because they have such a range of media that they explore [and] they write for such a wide variety of age groups or else they've all managed to explore different types of writing, different genres.

Some favorite books: *The Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *A Step from Heaven*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Olive Kitteridge*, *The Case Against America*, *Midnight's Children*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Rainbow*, *As I Lay Dying*, *East of Eden*, *the Gitanjali*, *Savitri*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Vol de Nuit*, *Siddhartha*.

Abby: Do you have any advice to give to aspiring writers or college students in general?

Padma: Three things:

First, truly concentrate on mastering this: Learn to love the internal rewards that writing gives you. As writers we tend to crave external awards and recognition and while I doubt we can overcome this yearning, we have to learn to at least keep it under some kind of control. Without that, you can destroy your family and forget what love is. More than taking a huge number of classes in the craft of writing, which I certainly never did (given that my training is as an oceanographer), I think aspiring writers should learn yoga and meditation — so they can at least try to meet the ups and downs of this life with somewhat greater equanimity. Life is especially hard for a writer in America if you are a person of color from Asia/South Asia, I think, because we just aren't accepted or seen as American. Our work is always classified as "Indian" or whatever other kind of ethnicity.

The second thing — read. Spend more time reading than you spend writing. Read critically but never criticize a living writer in writing. Young writers may have a nonsensical notion that reading will "influence" them and steal their originality — but it can't. And if you're really worried about "influence" read whomever you think is a great writer and get influenced by them.

Third, take writing risks. Writing a book in which spiritual discovery, in a non-religious way, but nevertheless through the framework of a non-majority religion in the United States was a huge risk. Sometimes I wondered if I should just keep to the safer theme of Veda just overcoming her physical difficulty [because] that in itself is a remarkable story. But I'm glad I took up the tremendous challenge of tackling her spiritual awakening. It is the hardest thing to write — to make spirituality and the power of art concrete — but it was central to Veda's character and her story. And thanks to my having the courage to do it, I think, *A Time to Dance* has received starred reviews in Kirkus, Booklist, VOYA, SLJ, and BCCB, in addition to rave reviews online and in newspapers across the nation.

Moral of my story: be brave, experiment boldly but don't lose compassion when you experiment. Compassion and empathy, as well as courage, are the keys to writing well.

Behind the Book takes an in depth look at the world of the book through articles and interviews about the creative process, issues in publishing, and the writing life.



Roger Williams University