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AUTHOR INTERVIEWS, LIFESTYLE

## Not having roots in any one place will make any writer a citizen of the world

by Voicu Mihnea Simandan • 12/03/2015 • 0 Comments

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### Interview with Indian writer Kamla K. Kapur

Kamla K. Kapur is an Indian writer who lives in Southern California for half the year and in the Indian Himalayas for the other half. In this interview she talks about her love for the written word and her upcoming novel, *The Singing Guru* (Mandala, 2015).



**You've written quite a few books... When did your passion for writing start?**

When I was eleven years old. We had returned from a family trip and my father asked me to write about it. That's how I got started. My father had always wanted to be a writer, too, and did a lot of it after he retired from the army.

**You live in both the USA and the Indian part of the Himalaya. Which location influenced you the most in your writing?**

I have only been living this split life for 12 years now and have been writing for 55 years. Location wasn't an important part of the equation in this sense. My father was in the army and we traveled everywhere. But in another sense, it has influenced me greatly - not having roots in any one place has made me a citizen of the world. Location, however, continues to be an important part of my work, even when lack of location is the point.

As far as how the split life influences me now - primarily, I can write anywhere. The laptop is one of the greatest inventions of mankind. My focus, some might say addiction, is writing - I cannot live without it. So, India or Southern California, I am good to go.

But there is more matter in this question. Half of my writing is definitely based in India because that is where I grew up. Even though I have lived in the US far more than in India by now, the Indian life, family structure, existence, is ingrained in me and provides material for a lot of my

work. The novel I am working on right now, *Coherences*, is based in India though the characters have lived in the US for much of their lives; another novel that I have completed but which hasn't been published yet, *The Autobiography of Saint Padma the Whore* shifts back and forth between India and the US. The fantasy I am in the process of completing, *Malini in Whirlwood*, starts off in India but progresses in a sort of psychic landscape beyond geography.

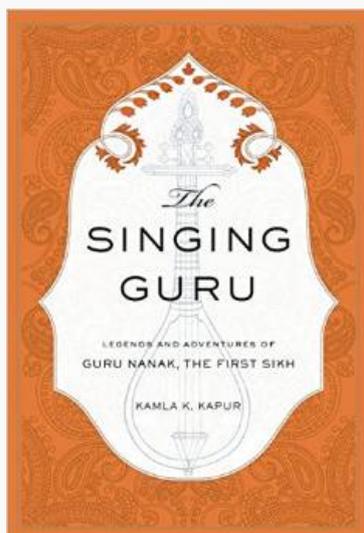
I am spending so much time on this question because location and geography has been of concern to me. Not crippling, but curious. I have worried about falling between the cracks as a writer but believe in my core that rather than being a handicap it is a strength.

**Your upcoming novel, *The Singing Guru*, deals with the life of Guru Nanak. Why have you chosen this topic?**

My father always wanted me to write this book. I grew up in a fairly traditional Sikh family. My mother is one of the many sixteenth generation descendants of Guru Nanak and I heard a lot of the stories that are embedded in the larger narrative arc of the book while I was growing up. I quote from the introduction of *The Singing Guru*:

"I am eclectic about spiritual wisdom, and glean it from all sources. I have written two books from the Hindu and Muslim traditions: *Ganesha Goes to Lunch* (now reprinted in India as *Classics from Mystic India*) and *Rumi's Tales from the Silk Road* (published in India as *Pilgrimage to Paradise: Sufi Tales from Rumi*). This eclecticism and egalitarianism is an integral part of Sikhism. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, contains the songs of seven Sikh gurus, including Guru Nanak, who composed and sang, and the songs of fifteen Hindu and Sufi saints."

Guru Nanak's definition of a religious person is "one who looks on all as equal." Brotherhood and sisterhood of all on this planet is Sikhism's basic tenet; music is at its heart. What better subject to write about than one I resonate with?



**What sources is your story based on?**

Several, which I acknowledge in the book, but mainly these two:

*The Electronic Sentence-by-Sentence English Translation and Transliteration of Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Translated by Kulbir Singh Thind and Singh Sahib Singh Sant. Arizona: Hand Made Books, PDF.

Macauliffe, Max Arthur. *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*. Vol 1. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2008. First published in 1909 by Oxford University Press.

**Do you identify yourself with the Purantan Janamsakhi tradition which you describe in your book?**

I grew up with the Purantan Janamsakhi tradition, which is a compilation of the generally accepted life and legends of Guru Nanak. But the wonderful stories here are very skeletal. While basing *The Singing Guru* on them, I have bent and stretched and reinvented them. I did not attempt to follow the chronology of the traditional and canonical version of Guru Nanak's life. Narrative and thematic consistency guided me more than the factual timeline.

Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, who has written the foreword to *The Singing Guru*, begins with a quote from Salman Rushdie: *Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are*

*powerless, because they cannot think new thought*

**Your website's motto is "Exploring the many facets of the written word." I have a feeling that this is what you tried to do in *The Singing Guru* too... Pls. comment.**

First, about the motto: my husband, Payson R. Stevens, came up with it and I loved it. I try to explore the word in many genres: poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction and fantasy.

I combine my familiarity with all these genres in *The Singing Guru* as well. Dialogue, poetry, history, fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, is woven together in its fabric.

The word is my single, overarching passion. If I could only have one book on an island, I would choose *The American Heritage Dictionary*. My other favorite book is the Sikh holy text, called *The Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. At the heart of Sikhism is Name, Word, song.

I quote a section from one of the chapters in *The Singing Guru*. The central character, Mardana, who is Guru Nanak's accompanist on the rabab, is captured by some savages and is carried like an animal strung on a pole. He muses, thus:

"As I dangled back and forth on the pole I wished they had plugged up my ears as well, for the barbarians grunted and growled so loudly they hurt my ears. What a difference, I thought, to the sound of Baba's (Guru Nanak's) melodious voice that spoke such sense! These savages knew nothing of the beauty and subtlety of language. How dear were words to Baba! How frequently he praised them in his songs! Slowly, mindfully, so as to savor the words and let their meaning sink like rain into the parched soil of my soul, I recalled some of Baba's words and images: *God, the Arch Writer, wrote one word with his ever flowing pen, the world came to be and millions of rivers began to flow; as He writes, so it comes to be! He writes the drama of our lives then sits back and watches with joy.*

*Wah, wah*, I said to himself as I swung back and forth on the pole, my wrists, ankles and neck sore and in pain. What a drama He writes! What interesting characters he creates! What stories! In one of them He wrote 'Mardana was captured by savages and carried on a pole.' Is He watching me now, I wondered? Is He suffering with me now or laughing? Probably both, I thought. Does He know what is going to happen to me next? Is it all, as Baba says, written in the cells of my brain? Does He know how I'm going to end up?"

**What's next? What are you working on right now?**

I am finishing up *Malini in Whirwood*, which is the first part of a trilogy; I am half way through the second book in The Sikh Saga Series (which, the Universe willing) I hope to complete by the end of my life. There are at least five more volumes in it.

**Thank you for your time.**

**Voicu Mihnea Simandan**

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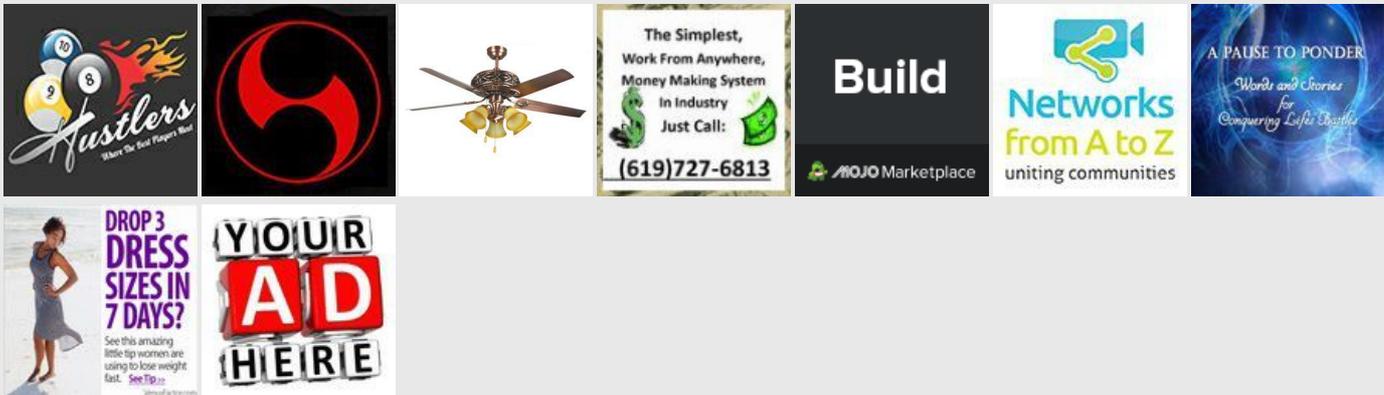
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