

WCU literary festival highlights novelist's mesmerizing disaster tale

Rob Neufeld • March 21, 2010

'Everything will be all right,' thought author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as Hurricane Ike pummeled her family to the edge of death in Houston in 2008.

She'd aided Katrina refugees in 2005 and then experienced Hurricane Rita herself, stranded in a car during an evacuation. Her family wasn't going through that again, so they stayed put with Ike. Divakaruni felt, as her house was being blown apart, an extreme calm and sense of protection

Such a predicament transfers to nine characters in Divakaruni's new novel, "One Amazing Thing" (Voice/Hyperion, \$23), as they face death in a basement office buried by an earthquake. The cast is determined by the place — the Indian visa office in San Francisco — and the meaning of "all right" is ambiguous.

Graced by stories

Divakaruni is Wednesday night's featured author in Western Carolina University's eighth annual Spring Literary Festival, a premiere event in this region, running Monday-Friday this week. She is joined by Jill McCorkle, Patricia Smith, Silas House and other standouts in the four-night series (see box).

"One Amazing Thing," Divakaruni's 11th novel and 16th book, is a suspenseful disaster tale and a brilliant showcase of storytelling power. The first character, Uma Singh, an American graduate student from Kolkata (Calcutta), brings to the unlucky site of

her entrapment a copy of "The Canterbury Tales" by Chaucer. Later, faced by her group's intemperate reaction to disaster, she proposes that people take turns telling stories.

Each story is a revelation ("one amazing thing") and a salvation. The survivors are able to feel "all right" and bridge cultural boundaries with compassion.

At the first telling, we read, "They arranged the chairs into a circle. Malathi (the office receptionist) came out with a tin of Kool-Aid fruit punch. (Where had she hidden it? What else was she hiding?) ... Cameron (the survival leader) switched off both flashlights."

The companions "were ready to listen to one another," Divakaruni writes. "No, they were ready to listen to the story, which is sometimes greater than the person who speaks it."

Gathered in the dark

When Divakaruni was a girl, she spent summers at her mother's parents' place in Gurap — a rural village a couple of hours from Calcutta.

"Every evening when it got dark," Divakaruni related in an interview with the Citizen-Times, "my grandfather (Nibaran Ghosh) would light a lantern, and he would call all of us cousins, and we would all come into his room. We'd sit around the lantern, and he would, in the dark, start telling us stories out of our folk tales and fairy tales and epics."

In her youth, Divakaruni had been immersed in her own Bengali culture. Leaving it for America as a teen, she became enamored of multiculturalism.

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