

A Family Affair

Like her mother, Kiran Desai is a voice to be reckoned with

BY AVIVA WEST IN BANGKOK
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Kiran Desai, the 35-year-old daughter of renowned Indian writer Anita Desai, made literary history when she became the youngest woman ever to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.

Only her second attempt at a novel, the book was described by critics as a “radiant, funny and moving family saga”.

Desai’s win was made all the more interesting by the fact that her mother, Anita Desai — author of *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Feasting* — had been shortlisted for the prize but never won.

“We are delighted to announce that the winner of the Man Booker Prize for 2006 is Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*,” announced the judging chair, Hermione Lee, at the awards dinner at the Guildhall in London, England. She added that the novel demonstrated humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness.

“The winner was chosen after a long, passionate and generous debate from a shortlist of five other strong and original voices.”

Born in India on September 3, 1971, Desai enrolled at Columbia University’s Creative Writing Programme. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was widely praised and an excerpt was featured in the New Yorker India Fiction issue and in *Mirrorwork*, Salman Rushdie’s anthology of Indian writing.

Desai is the first woman to win the Man Booker since 2002 when Canadian Margaret Atwood won for *The Blind Assassin*. At the awards dinner she was presented with a cheque for £50,000 (US\$92,815).



GOOD GENES: Kiran Desai holds a copy of her Booker-winning novel *The Inheritance Of Loss*.

Beyond the prize money, the young Desai is almost guaranteed an increase in sales and recognition. Each of the six shortlisted authors, including the winner, receives £2,500 (US\$4,640) and a luxury-bound edition of his or her book.

“It is clear to those of us who’ve read Anita Desai that Kiran Desai has learned from her mother’s work,” commented Lee.

“Both write not just about India but about Indian communities in the world. The remarkable thing about Kiran Desai is that she is aware of her Anglo-Indian inheritance — of Nair and Narayan and Rushdie — but she does something pioneering.

“She seems to jump on from those traditions and create something which is absolutely of its own. The book is movingly strong in its humanity and I think that in the end is why it won.”

The novel is set in the northeastern Himalayas where in a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants nothing more than

to retire in peace when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge’s chatty cook watches over Sai but his thoughts are mostly with his own son, Biju, who is running from one miserable New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the immigration police. When a Nepalese insurgency threatens Sai’s new-sprung romance with her handsome Nepali tutor and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they, along with the other main characters, are forced to confront their colliding interests.

Kiran’s mother was not at the awards dinner though the novel is dedicated to her.

Explaining her mother’s absence at the Guildhall, Desai said: “I think she was so terrified on my behalf that she retreated as far as she could. She gave me lots of advice and now she is without a phone and without a television in a village in India.”

In accepting the award, Desai dedicated her success to her greatest source of inspiration.

“To my mother, I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine. It was written... in her wisdom and kindness, in cold winters in her house when I was in pieces.

I really owe her this book so enormously. A minute isn’t enough to convey it.”

THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

The Man Booker Prize for Fiction is one of the most prestigious literary prizes. First established in 1969 and initially sponsored by the Booker-McConnell company, the award was renamed the Man Booker prize in 2002 when the investment firm Man Group became the major sponsor.

The prize is awarded annually to an English-language author from the British Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland. The winner is chosen by a panel of judges, largely made up of prominent writers, critics and members of the publishing industry. The 2006 jury included the biographer Hermione Lee as chair, Anthony Quinn, Fiona Shaw, Candia McWilliam and Simon Armitage.