

An Interview with Krystal A. Sital, Author of SECRETS WE KEPT



In her debut memoir, Krystal A. Sital paints a vivid picture of life in Trinidad, which to any tourist's eyes must seem like something of a paradise. Blue-green waters, intersected by rapid streams and jungle vegetation: the inhabitants of Trinidad are surrounded by the call of the Caribbean filled with carnivals, rum, calypso, and soca music.

For the people born and raised in this island paradise, of

course life is littered with far more harsh realities. Extreme poverty, land unsuitable for farming or sustaining life, lack of education or opportunity, a caste system determined by money, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, and other accidents of birth.

The book begins as Krystal and her family, now living in the United States, learn that her grandfather, Shiva Singh, has suffered from a life threatening brain aneurism. As the reality of his condition grows more critical, Krystal is confused by her grandmother's reluctance to immediately approve of the suggested procedures recommended for his survival. In contrast, Krystal's mother, Arya, the daughter of Shiva, seems devoted to him and sits day and night by his side.

As the entire family grows more weary and distraught over the multiple surgeries and the harsh reality that Shiva will never fully return to normal, Krystal wants to know why her mother and grandmother have such wildly divergent emotions for him. One evening, she finds a way to question her mother.

Secrets We Kept is the story Krystal draws out in her gentle interviews with her mother and grandmother. The story is brutal and nuanced and unfortunately, timely. In the first pages, I am immediately reminded of the Rob Porter domestic abuse scandal in the White House, the #metoo movement, and even my own family's history we avoid thinking and speaking about—those times when our father beat the crap out of our mother and us, and how that treatment made life and love of him so confusing.

Q: Did you have any idea that the release of your first memoir would come at a time when the topics it addresses would make it so political? Even if that timing wasn't taken into consideration, there must be some feeling that it lands when conversations around it bring it into a political space. How does that make you feel? What if any reaction have you had

from it in this caustic political time?

Krystal: It's both fortunate and unfortunate that this book comes out during such a politically charged time. Unfortunate because, as human beings, we are still viciously fighting about things like immigration, domestic abuse, and women's rights and health; and fortunate because since there is still so much silence and inequality, a book like this helps sharpen the focus on important discussions and hopefully laws around these topics.

Now looking at it as a work of art in this particular political sphere is maddening. Arts and humanities are being obliterated across the US and so it makes it extremely difficult for books that deal with issues like violence against women and children, immigration, colonialism, race, and class to make it into the hands of the right people. The political climate we're caught up in right now is detrimental to the arts from every angle and so it's important we all fight for it. Art, at its most micro level, is a voice being heard and we need to make sure we never squelch that.

Q: When I think of a Caribbean island, I imagine the beauty as a place to go to as an escape from the harshness of everyday life. That picture might serve as somewhat of a metaphor for the relationships your mother and grandmother lived. Strong, beautiful women who make choices they think will most help them escape the poverty of their circumstance, but instead land them in ugliness they cannot escape. Is that an accurate way of seeing this story?

Krystal: That's such a lovely insight! Can I use that as though I'd planned it the entire time? I'm just kidding. It's very interesting hearing and reading how others interact with the characters and the islands, what readers bring to the table and what they thought my intent was.

Having lived in America now for more than half my life, I see

how people here view the Caribbean. From here it is this place of intense beauty, a place you want to escape to, not from. And Trinidad is a beautiful island, the kind of beauty that absolutely takes your breath away, the colors so vibrant you wonder if what you're seeing is actually real. But the islands—both Trinidad and Tobago—are so much more than that and so I wanted to use the island as both a character and a backdrop. While divine in its appearance, here was this island where horrific things happened and these horrific things were never spoken about except when passed from mother to daughter, this cycle of storytelling that's never been broken but also never recorded. And I think that's what bothered me the most about this—is that the stories of women by women were always lost in the Caribbean while men were the ones who dominated and dictated history and we, as women, didn't take our rightful place in the history of the Caribbean, of Trinidad and Tobago.

Questions like this is so fantastic for a classroom setting because it explores a body of work on multiple levels. My students and I often discuss the reader's interpretation of literature versus the authorial intent. How you manage those two becomes a very individual choice but I strive to find some kind of harmony there when I read books, balancing the author's purpose with my own response and history as a reader.

Q: Some would read this story as a cautionary tale about the violence of men and yet, in the second to the last sentence in the acknowledgements of your memoir, you write; "My beautiful partner, my husband, Pawel Grzech, I love you. Thank you for creating a beautiful family with me." That line makes me believe that you have been able to carve out a loving and respectful relationship with your husband which is so different from that of the older women in your life. How did their experiences help or hinder the family life you now have?

Krystal: I have indeed been able to find love; respectful, honorable, egalitarian love, and the person with whom I spend

my life with is everything I've said. While people often tell us we're lucky, I don't think luck has anything to do with it. I am with him for many reasons—too many to ever list—but my grandmother's and mother's stories played a vital role in my decision when I chose my life partner. Their tales were, as you've said—cautionary. As much as we were working together to write women into Caribbean history, their first instincts were to arm and warn me. My grandmother didn't want to settle for what was prescribed for her, shunned to the outskirts of society, so she left and spent her life paying for her decision but she was able to make a choice, one that was completely hers and that is what she shared with her daughter. I won't give anything away from the book but those moments where Arya bears witness to her mother time and time again, are isolated and incredibly important because those are the moments that shape Arya and influence the decisions she makes when choosing a husband and then later on as a mother.

I very much feel as though I owe these women and the women before them, my life. This book, a small gesture in the grand scheme of things, is to honor and thank them for helping me become who I am today and allowing me to have choices, to grow up in a space where I don't feel forced into a decision because it's the best one at the time. They've endured everything for me and while there are narratives and lives that follow unbreakable and inescapable cycles, they've worked their entire lives to make sure I'm outside of that. That kind of altruism is powerful.

Q: I grew up in a household where my father's violence made loving him extremely complicated. After my parents divorced, they both became happier people, but it was difficult to square the man he became without remembering the man he was, especially since he never admitted the violent and terrifying world he had created. After hearing the stories, how would you describe the emotions you have for your grandfather and father now?

Krystal: Thank you for sharing that with me. I need to acknowledge your story because our voices and stories as women are often separate and though many of us hail from different cultures and places, when we come together, we realize how universal they also are.

My emotions for both men remain complicated. Even after writing this book and writing through some very difficult questions I found myself asking and attempting to answer, I've come to understand that we are not only shaped by our experiences but by that of our family members as well. That is something I would have vehemently disagreed with twelve years ago but now I bear the burden of inherited violence, history, and loss. At the same time, I've learned to step back and allow my mother and grandmother to narrate the experiences and relationships they've had with my father and grandfather. Those experiences have helped to mold me through their retelling but cannot define or influence my thoughts completely. Just as I give them space to be, they must understand that as a being wholly separate from them, the same people we've known throughout our lives can be very different to each of us.

I feel like I need to say I love my father dearly. We have a wonderful relationship and a very unique bond, quite similar to the type of bond I have with my mother but that can't come through in a book like this because in this book I am part historian, part daughter, part granddaughter, part storyteller (to name a few!), and there are only so many perspectives I was willing to take on. Our story—mine and my father's—is for another time.

Q: Not only is this story about the highly charged domestic violence issue, it touches on the equally charged issue of immigration. By the end of the book, you ask your mother if she ever thinks she would live in Trinidad again. She answers with one word. Never. I know you wrote a piece that was published by the New York Times, [*When Agents Came Knocking*](#). As an immigrant in the U.S. today, how does the current climate

make you feel about the America?

Krystal: As an immigrant, I'm terrified! The US is not a very welcoming place right now and because I am a first-generation immigrant, I constantly feel as though I'm a part of several worlds which doesn't help because I don't feel completely anchored here. But then I remind myself that the people who are making immigrants feel this way are no more native to this land than I am. Sure many of them were born here but their history with this place is much more explosive than mine ever will be. They are the descendants of immigrants and it's a fact that they keep forgetting. The only natives America has are the Native Americans. These two groups of people (one of which I am a part)—Native Americans and immigrants—are being attacked, murdered, mutilated, and forgotten. The thunderstorm of immigration, as you so poetically put it, is something that should touch us all. What is happening in this country right now has happened in other parts of the world throughout history and the reason we study history is to understand, learn, and prevent, something we're clearly not doing at the moment.

As someone who has lived here as an undocumented immigrant for a long time, I do feel a particular responsibility to others, especially to the DREAMERS. I could easily be them and they are frightened. Circumstances and political climates change but the fear of a child being left behind, a mother being ripped from her children, a father being torn from his family, remains the same. No one would want that for themselves regardless of how they came to be in that desperate situation so instead of carelessly throwing around blame, we need to stand by immigrants and Native Americans. As a race—the human race—we need to rediscover our humanity because I think we're losing it.

Q: The cruelty of the violence is sometimes displayed as something through which the men experience pleasure. There are hidden smiles and other indications that these are not just

bouts of temper. Have you come to any conclusions as to the source of this violence? Any opinions of what Trinidad or even the US can do to reduce or prevent such violence in men?

Krystal: I have some theories. My grandfather was a product of the time, culture, society, history and that's not said to excuse him in any way. He was also mentally unstable. It's just that no one was equipped with the language or skills to name it or treat it at the time. Acts of violence like beating your wife and children are things that are taught at home because children see their father or uncle or brother doing it. But my grandfather did it tenfold, with a grotesque intensity and satisfaction that no one should try to *understand* because then you run the risk of empathizing with his actions and his actions are and will always be wrong. He needed help and because of his status in the society he lived in and also the time, no one could offer that to him.

In Trinidad, the US, anywhere in the world, the only way to prevent or reduce violence is to always have a conversation about it. And that is definitely something I adore about the US—there is always open dialogue. Sometimes that dialogue can get a bit crazy and out of control but the freedom to have those conversations is always there. We need to provide a safe environment to address these conflicts and situations way before college. Women and gender study departments are crucial but they come too late in education. As a student who minored in that area my mind was blown when I realized that these things are talked about and studied. And now as a teacher of that as well, I can see my students feel the same way I did and I don't want that for them.

The key is in the literature. Choosing engaging and important texts that speak to our students and their experiences is one of the best ways to tackle this issue of violence and I know I'm not alone when I say we need to change the way schools are structured right now—to move away from testing and toward critical thinking. A step in the right direction is to change

the assigned reading materials. Get some more diversity for one. That's always been lacking but also choosing books and texts that deal with the world we occupy. It's one way but I am certain it will make an impact and a difference. I see it in my own classrooms every semester.

Q: All of the dialogue in this book is written in complete island dialect. While at first it helped set the flavor of the story, it also made it difficult at times to understand what was being said. In a space where we are often told to stay away from dialect, how did you come to the decision to handle the dialogue in this way? Did you receive any pushback from your editors?

Krystal: You're actually the first person to say it was difficult to read at times. And your reaction is what I expected every time someone came into contact with my dialogue. I kept waiting for someone to object or try to change it but it never happened. In the meantime I studied Caribbean authors like Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Audre Lorde, Zadie Smith, Jamaica Kincaid, and Andrea Levy alongside African American authors like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston all of who paved the way for me to feel free when writing dialogue. I read and studied these authors and many more like them while at school and then I taught them to my own students. These writers teach us that our voices are important and they come in all different forms and should be celebrated.

I teach in the most diverse city in the US—Jersey City—so my classroom is a rainbow of faces, representative of my true America and I get to observe how my students react to language in these texts. They played a large role in helping me decide how much of it I wanted to use and where. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains one of those books that changed my life from the language to the characters to the plot to the masterful storytelling. I accepted this as a fact until I taught the book years after

reading it for the first time. Some students just couldn't read it the way it was written so they turned to listening to it and even then couldn't immerse themselves. I had to respect that this book and the way it was written was not for everyone. There were choices I would have to make about dialogue that would alienate some. In the end I wrote it the way I did because the most important thing was the voices of the women. I couldn't claim to give voice to the voiceless if I didn't allow the women to speak for themselves.

Q: Food plays an immense role in this story. Every major scene is laced with spices and flavors that stick to you in the same way the smells must conjure up so many memories for you. It also starkly illustrates how Indian and Hindu your family's culture is, something many people probably don't understand about Trinidad. I found myself wanting the recipes. How did food influence the writing of this story?

Krystal: Food makes the world go round! At least my world. My mother loves to cook. It's like meditation to her and I understand this because she's passed that on to me. If I'm in the kitchen cooking up a storm my husband will ask no questions until I'm all finished and then reap the benefits of whatever was bothering me.

People often bond over and around food. Enticing and intoxicating, food takes away inhibitions and once I understood this, I helped create this environment for my mother and grandmother so they could tell me their stories. This proved the most effective way for me to help them open up. And along the way, I learned tons of new recipes.

Now I find it very interesting that you say it's definitively Indian. It's true that a lot of the food is Indian because it's just a fact of what they cooked but at the same time it isn't. Trinidad's cuisine, like many other places around the globe, is unique because cultures have come together to create something new and I was mindful of this. Many of the dishes I

write about are the product of Indian, African, French, Spanish, English, etc. coming into contact in one place over time. Examining any one dish on the island from the way it is seasoned to the way it is prepared, then cooked, is fascinating because sometimes that one dish can have as many as five cultures coming into contact with one another.

As for the recipes, perhaps that's a future project. Wink. Wink. (Though I'm not sure who I'm winking at).

Q: Are there any other questions I didn't ask that you wish I had? Topics you would like to cover?

Krystal: You didn't ask if I had any fun! Because while this was one hell of an emotional roller coaster ride, it was also so much fun. The characters you read about are people I created with so much care and they are people I hold close to my heart. As serious as this book is, it is also reflective of the life and desire and fun that exists in Trinidad and Tobago.

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