

# *Off Script*



**Shilpi Somaya Gowda on  
the beauty of Canada's  
immigration attitude, and  
the tug that comes from  
feeling like you're from  
more than one place.**

BY ALLY FOSTER

S hilpi Somaya Gowda took publishing circles by storm, both in Canada and abroad, with her debut novel *Secret Daughter*, which sold more than a million copies and has been translated into 23 languages.

Now, she discusses how her family's own experiences with immigration—and the resulting struggles around cultural identity—became key ingredients in her storytelling successes.

Gowda was born and raised in Toronto, where her parents settled after immigrating from India. Gowda has travelled back to India many times. The stark differences and similarities she noticed between the West and her family's homeland are woven through both *Secret Daughter* and her latest novel, *The Golden Son*.

Considering that the Canadian government set a target of welcoming 300,000 immigrants to Canada in 2016, with the goal of opening the door to more refugees and assisting in family reunification, Gowda's insights into feeling caught in a tug-of-war between two very different cultures, and the journey to finding a balance between honouring tradition and pursuing new possibilities, are increasingly relevant.

Aside from tackling the complex emotions of cultural identity in her novels, she also focuses on the great joys and specific pressures placed on us by family members; a truth that transcends geographic borders.

Gowda spoke with *P&I* in a telephone interview from California, where she now resides with her family.

*This interview has been edited for length, style, and clarity.*

#### **Immigration is a common theme in your work. Where did this interest originate?**

"I'm the child of immigrants myself. My parents moved from India by way of a few other countries and ended up in Canada in the late 1960s. So I grew up as a first generation Canadian with all of the challenges that it presented—especially at that time—when there weren't as many aspects of Canadian culture that had been integrated from other cultures.

"Today it feels like you can go to any kind of restaurant, any kind of beauty parlour, any kind of clothing store, but at the time I still had the feeling of being an outsider.

"Then I left Canada and came to live in the U.S., so in a less dramatic way,

I repeated the pattern that my parents had started of leaving my homeland and trying to make my way in another country. Immigration is just very present in my own life, and [something] that I think about a lot when I'm writing: the tug that comes from feeling like you're from more than one place."

#### **Have you experienced feelings of cultural dissonance?**

"I think I felt pulled between the two cultures because my parents were so comfortable in Indian culture and they—and it—were so out of place in Canadian culture. But of course that's what I was

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born into, and where I went to school, and had friends, and listened to the music and ate the food—it was all Western culture. So I felt the tug that way: between home and my school life.

"Going back to India for me was less about feeling like finishing the puzzle ... and was more about understanding my parents and that bridge a little bit more.

"There's just something very deep-rooted in culture. When people migrate, that's an element that sometimes either gets lost or assimilated, or is allowed to thrive. I think today, a first generation Canadian growing up in Toronto like I did 40 years ago would have a very different experience, where they would feel a lot more supported and integrated.

"It's a wonderful thing about Canada; I know it's not a perfect immigration policy, but I do think the general ethos around

welcoming immigrants and honouring their unique contributions is one of the most beautiful things about Canada, and one of the things I remain most proud [of]."

#### **How do you feel about the changes to Canada's immigration system over the past several years? There was the creation of the 'safe countries' list for refugees, and immigrants with economic benefits, rather than family-class immigrants, were made a priority.**

"Generally speaking, I think that there can be a refugee situation in any country; depending on the political climate, depending on the gender. There are many countries that are safe for men, but not for women, and some that are safe for adults, and not for children. I think it makes sense to extend the idea of refugees coming from not just a list of certain countries.

"I do think part of what makes immigration to be successful is allowing and enabling new immigrants to have a family structure behind them, like all of us thrive with a family structure behind us. I do think that making that possible and enabling that for new immigrants is a good idea."

#### **You're currently living in California. Are there different discussions on immigration happening there than you've been hearing in Canada?**

"Historically in the U.S. there has been much more support for immigration and much more of an open feeling towards a multicultural society than there is now. It's disturbing to me that people are quick to forget that we're all immigrants, you just might have to go back several generations to find your [roots]."

Immigration is "one of the things that resonates with people about my novels, and that I hear from readers in radically different cultures, like people in Saudi Arabia and Iceland and New Zealand. I couldn't quite understand why this story, which is very much about two particular cultures—North America and India—was resonating with people in Scotland and Iceland. But I think it's because everyone has a migration story in their past. No matter where you come from, someone in your family picked up and left a place that was comfortable to them and moved somewhere challenging in the hopes of a better life. Whether it's moving from the countryside of England to the city of London, or like my parents moving from India to Canada, everybody has a story like that." **P&I**