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Sujata Massey

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About this Person

Born: March 04, 1964 in Sussex, United Kingdom
Nationality: American
Occupation: Novelist
Updated: Oct. 21, 2019

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born March 4, 1964, in Sussex, England; immigrated to the United States, 1969, naturalized citizen, 1998; married Tony Massey (a naval medical officer); children: (adopted) Pia and Neel. **Education:** Johns Hopkins University, B.A., 1986. **Addresses:** Home: Near Washington, DC.

CAREER:

Writer. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, former journalist; freelance writer, 1997--. Taught English in Japan.

AWARDS:

Unpublished writers grant, 1996, and Agatha Award for best first novel, both *Malice Domestic*, 1998, both for *The Salaryman's Wife*; Agatha Award nomination for best novel, 2005, for *The Pearl Diver*; 2018 Agatha Award, Best Historical Novel, and Mystery Writers of America, Simon & Schuster--Mary Higgins Clark Award, 2019, both for *The Widows of Malabar Hill*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

"REI SHIMURA" SERIES

- *The Salaryman's Wife*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Zen Attitude*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1998.
- *The Flower Master*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Floating Girl*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Bride's Kimono*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Samurai's Daughter*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Pearl Diver*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Typhoon Lover*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Girl in a Box*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Shimura Trouble*, Severn House (London, England), 2008.
- *The Kizuna Coast*, Ikat Press (London, England), 2015.

NOVELS

- *The Sleeping Dictionary*, Gallery Books (New York, NY), 2013.
- *The Widows of Malabar Hill*, Soho Crime (New York, NY), 2018.

Also the author of the novel *The City of Palaces*, 2014, and the novella *The Ayah's Tale*, 2013.

Sidelights

Sujata Massey was born in Sussex, England, in 1964 to an Indian father and German mother. When she was five years old, her parents immigrated to the United States. Massey grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Berkeley, California, and St. Paul, Minnesota, but never became totally Americanized because her family often returned to England; she did not become a U.S. citizen until 1998. Massey graduated from Johns Hopkins University and worked as a journalist for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* newspaper. She met and married a U.S. naval medical officer, and when her husband was assigned to a post in Japan for two years, beginning in 1991, she moved there with him.

While in Japan, Massey became fascinated with Japanese culture and history. She united this interest with her love of mystery novels to write mysteries with Japanese characters. For her first novel, she won a grant from Malice Domestic, a mystery writers' organization, to complete the work, and soon after signed a contract with HarperCollins to write more novels. Both *The Salaryman's Wife* and *Zen Attitude* feature sleuth Rei Shimura; they fared so well that Massey continued to write "Rei Shimura" mysteries.

Shimura, like Massey, is a multicultural woman. Born in California to a Japanese father and an American mother, she speaks Japanese well and can almost pass for Japanese when she needs to. On her website, Massey noted: "The most important similarity I share with my sleuth is confusion over cultural identity." Rei is torn between her two cultures, enjoying Japanese art and aesthetics but also enjoying the freedom she has as an American woman.

In *The Flower Master*, Rei is living in Tokyo, working as an antiques dealer. When her aunt, a master of traditional Japanese flower arranging, or *ikebana*, tells her that she should enroll in a flower-arranging class, Rei does so. She learns that the battles over aesthetics at the school are escalating into violence. A master teacher is stabbed to death with gardening shears, and Rei's aunt is suspected of the murder. Rei must clear her aunt of suspicion and find the real murderer. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Marilyn Stasio wrote that Massey carefully observes Japanese customs and brings a "fresh perspective" to her depiction of Japanese culture. In the *Washington Post Book World*, Paul Skenazy commented that Massey "provides us with a wonderfully detailed tour of Japan, and of *ikebana*."

In 2000 Massey and her husband adopted a daughter, Pia, who was born in South India. Massey stayed in India with Pia for two months. Although she was under contract at the time to complete her novel *The Floating Girl*, she was unable to travel with a laptop computer because she had too much baby equipment. She took computer discs with her to India and worked on computers whenever she could find one available. While in India, a computer virus erased half of the novel she was working on, but she had printed out much of her material. When she returned to Baltimore with Pia, Tony typed all of these pages into the family's home computer, and it took Massey five more months to complete the novel.

The Floating Girl explores the Japanese world of cartoon characters. Rei finds a comic that illustrates a murder, and the murder later happens. Rei must find the artist who created the comic, as well as the murderer. In *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer took notice of Massey for depicting a part of Tokyo that tourists never see and called the book an "accomplished murder mystery."

In *The Bride's Kimono*, Shimura transports a valuable kimono to a museum exhibit in Washington, DC. En route, she meets a Japanese office worker on her way to a mall to shop for her wedding. This woman disappears in the mall and is later murdered, and Rei investigates the murder. During the course of her investigation, the police accuse her of running a prostitution ring. Romantic entanglements and family issues complicate the story. In *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer mentioned Massey's use of romantic suspense as well as her detailed understanding of Japanese and American culture. In the *Washington Post Book World*, Patrick Anderson wrote that Rei Shimura, "sexy, breezy, and smart, holds our interest even as the novel veers off in unexpected directions."

Massey next published *The Pearl Diver*. Rei helps to decorate a local Japanese restaurant in the nation's capital, but finds that a kidnapping will put an end to business as usual. Cindy Lynn Speer, writing in *Mostly Fiction*, reported that "Massey cleverly weaves the various aspects of the mystery together, and ... you slowly realize that the ending to the story" will be an unexpected one. "Filled with the usual and interesting aspects of Japanese and American culture, we also get a look into the restaurant world. All these aspects make for an exciting mystery," Speer added. In an article for *RT Book Reviews*, Sheri Melnick claimed that "this novel is top-notch, thanks to the author's superlative writing skills." *Booklist* contributor Jenny McLarin predicted that "Massey fans will delight in the chance to gain more insight into their heroine." A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* observed: "The ending is improbable and sappy, but Massey's pungent take on mixed marriages and East-West culture clashes is first-rate."

In the eighth novel in the series, *The Typhoon Lover*, Rei encounters a former lover, Takeo, in Tokyo while searching for an ancient Iraqi pitcher. Natalie A. Luhrs, writing for *RT Book Reviews*, acknowledged that series fans might "enjoy" the story but also cautioned that "the unlikely plot and narcissistic heroine will probably turn off new readers." Reviewing *The Typhoon Lover* in *Kirkus Reviews*, a critic wondered: "Where has Massey's humor gone?" *Booklist* contributor McLarin noted, on the other hand, that "Massey is masterful at contrasting Japanese and American culture and customs."

Massey next published *Girl in a Box*. In this adventure, while posing undercover as a sales clerk at a store called Mitsutan, Rei discovers a web of murder and intrigue at a retreat for company executives. Stephanie Schneider, reviewing the novel for *RT Book Reviews*, revealed that "this book definitely leaves readers wanting to join Rei on many more assignments." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* opined that "readers will find Rei's cross-cultural escapades as engrossing as the department store's shenanigans." *Booklist* contributor Sue O'Brien found the novel to be part of "an increasingly strong series mixing crime and

multicultural awareness," and a *Kirkus Reviews* writer commented that "a voyeur's tour of consumption-crazed Tokyo is the real point here, with Rei-san, as always, a companionable guide."

The tenth novel in the series is *Shimura Trouble*. After her father's stroke, Rei promises to look after him. When the pair go to meet a long-lost relative in Hawaii, they discover hidden and ominous motives for this reunion, along with danger and adventure. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* observed that the novel "meanders a bit, but the upbeat narrative and resourceful heroine make for an appealing read." Emily Melton, reviewing the novel in *Booklist*, mentioned that the Hawaiian setting adds "a heftier dose of romance to go with the suspense and humor." A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* commented that "an appealing protagonist and memorable supporting characters blend smoothly with lessons in Hawaiian and Japanese history."

Massey writes at her home in Baltimore but travels to Japan on a regular basis. She wrote at her website: "I always return to Baltimore five pounds lighter and lugging a suitcase jammed with antique textiles, photographs of my travels, and notes for the next book." She also offered advice to aspiring writers: "I rewrote my first book more than fifty times before submitting it to an agent. There is something to be said for not proceeding until you are as polished as you can be."

In 2013, Massey published her first novel outside of the "Rei Shimura" series, a book called *The Sleeping Dictionary*. In an interview with Amulya Malladi on her eponymous website, Massey discussed how she became inspired to write the book: "I'd wanted to write about India for a long time but struggled with many different ideas, unable to find the right one. After ten years of false starts, my imagination was visited by a lovely young Bengali peasant girl who whispered in my ear about the adventures she would have with her friend at boarding school, and then as a secret fighter for Indian independence. I'd also be able to preserve the last of the historic Calcutta landscape I love so dearly." In an interview with a contributor to the *Suprose* website, Massey commented on the meaning of the book's title: "I was reading a historical account of Bengal, which mentioned this old nickname, employed by the European would-be colonists for the women who taught them languages, manners, and lived with them. It's an erotic, mysterious, and literary term. It also works well because the heroine's favorite book is the *Oxford English Dictionary*."

In the book, ten-year-old Pom lives in India during the 1930s. Her parents die during a tidal wave. The British are in control of the West Bengal region where Pom lives, but Gandhi has begun organizing a group hoping to push out the colonizers. When she is hired as a maid at the Lockwood School, a boarding school for British girls, she endures disrespectful behavior. Called Sarah at the school, she begins learning to read and gains confidence and knowledge. One day, someone accuses her of a crime she did not commit, so she runs away. She boards a ship toward Calcutta, but she accidentally gets off at Kharagpur, a smaller city. She takes the name Miss Pamela there. Finally, she makes it to Calcutta, where she gives herself the name Kamala.

In a review of the book on the *Book Dragon* website, a contributor commented that *The Sleeping Dictionary* "is an intricate journey that occasionally lingers a bit too long ... then suddenly speeds through rather too conveniently to its ending. ... That said, learning the original meaning and history of the title alone was worth the read." In a more favorable review of the book, Bridget Thoreson, writing in *Booklist*, described it as "an utterly engrossing tale of love, espionage, betrayal, and survival."

After a six-year break from her "Rei Shimura" series, Massey released *The Kizuna Coast*. The book begins in 2011, with a description of the devastating earthquake that hit Honshu, Japan. At the time of the quake, Rei is at her Hawaii home with Michael, her husband. The two have been playing mah-jongg when they discover what has happened in Japan. Rei quickly contacts her family, learning that they have not been harmed in the quake. However, she has a difficult time getting in touch with Yasushi Ishida, her mentor. Finally, Rei learns that Mr. Ishida is alive, though he sustained an injury to his head. Rei impulsively travels to Japan to help him recover, despite Michael's pleas that she stay home. In Japan, she looks for Ishida amid the destruction, first stopping at his antiques store and seeing that it has been burglarized. Next, Rei volunteers in the relief effort to get closer to where Ishida is. When she finally finds him, he tells her to look for his devoted employee, Mayumi. Her search offers a window into Mayumi's tumultuous life. Meanwhile, Michael is sent to Japan to work on a project related to the damaged nuclear reactor, and Rei worries about his safety.

Lelia Taylor, a contributor to the *Buried under Books* website, asserted: "Sujata Massey writes a cracking good mystery (with a fabulously helpful cast of characters!)." A writer on the website *It's Either Sadness or Euphoria* commented: "The plot is a little predictable but it doesn't matter, because Rei is a warm, fascinating character and Massey does such a great job making you care about her and those with whom Rei is dealing. And as always, there's even some fascinating information about Japanese antiques thrown in for good measure." A *Publishers Weekly* critic described the novel as "moving" and remarked: "The book's most effective portions deal with Rei's role in the relief efforts."

In *The Widows of Malabar Hill*, Perveen Mistry does the paperwork for her father's law firm in 1920s Bombay. Her opportunity to meet with clients comes when an issue of inheritance comes up with three women living in seclusion who are forbidden from meeting with men. After she pushes her concerns over them donating all their income to charity, violence ensues when the back story becomes clearer.

A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* claimed that "the period detail and thoughtful characterizations, especially of the capable, fiercely independent lead, bode well" for Massey's ability to continue this series. *Booklist* contributor Jen Baker noted that "each of the many characters is uniquely described, flaws and all, which is the key to understanding their surprising roles." Baker found the novel to be "well-constructed." In a review in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, Marissa Stapley reasoned that "the story of the three widows and their children, who lead such an isolated existence in a bungalow on Malabar Hill Road, is parcelled out in tandem with Perveen's own story about a disastrous past she very nearly did not escape. Her tale is one that is just as absorbing as the murder mystery and has a quiet power all its own. Each thread is carefully paced; Massey clearly knows just what she's doing, which is giving readers both a captivating whodunit and a lasting base for more books featuring this same cast of characters." Writing in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, Carole E. Barrowman observed that Massey writes "with compassion and understanding."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

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- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), January 25, 2018, Marissa Stapley, review of *The Widows of Malabar Hill*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 1999, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 490; April 1, 2000, review of *The Floating Girl*, p. 429; August 1, 2001, review of *The Bride's Kimono*, p. 1071; January 15, 2003, review of *The Samurai's Daughter*, p. 114; June 1, 2004, review of *The Pearl Diver*, p. 521; July 15, 2005, review of *The Typhoon Lover*, p. 768; July 1, 2006, review of *Girl in a Box*, p. 657; April 15, 2008, review of *Shimura Trouble*.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 1999, Francine Fialkoff, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 149; April 1, 2000, Darryl Dean Jones, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 160; February 15, 2003, Jackie Cassada, review of *The Samurai's Daughter*, p. 173; November 1, 2003, review of *The Salaryman's Wife*, p. 144; August 1, 2004, Rex E. Klett, review of *The Pearl Diver*, p. 59.
- *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 5, 2018, Carole E. Barrowman, review of *The Widows of Malabar Hill*.
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- *New York Times Book Review*, May 2, 1999, Marilyn Stasio, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 28.
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- *Publishers Weekly*, April 13, 1998, review of *Zen Attitude*, p. 72; April 5, 1999, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 225; April 17, 2000, review of *The Floating Girl*, p. 54; August 6, 2001, review of *The Bride's Kimono*, p. 66; February 24, 2003, review of *The Samurai's Daughter*, p. 56; July 19, 2004, review of *The Pearl Diver*, p. 148, and Mary Ann Tennenhouse, author interview, p. 147; August 15, 2005, review of *The Typhoon Lover*, p. 37; July 10, 2006, review of *Girl in a Box*, p. 52; March 10, 2008, review of *Shimura Trouble*, p. 61; January 26, 2015, review of *The Kizuna Coast*, p. 152; November 6, 2017, review of *The Widows of Malabar Hill*, p. 59.
- *School Library Journal*, September 1, 1999, Pam Spencer, review of *The Flower Master*, p. 244.
- *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL), October 26, 2005, review of *The Typhoon Lover*; September 6, 2006, review of *Girl in a Box*.
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