



BALTIMORE WRITERS CLUB

The Nuts and Bolts of Mystery Writing: Q&A with Sujata Massey



by Mark Wadley
July 5, 2023

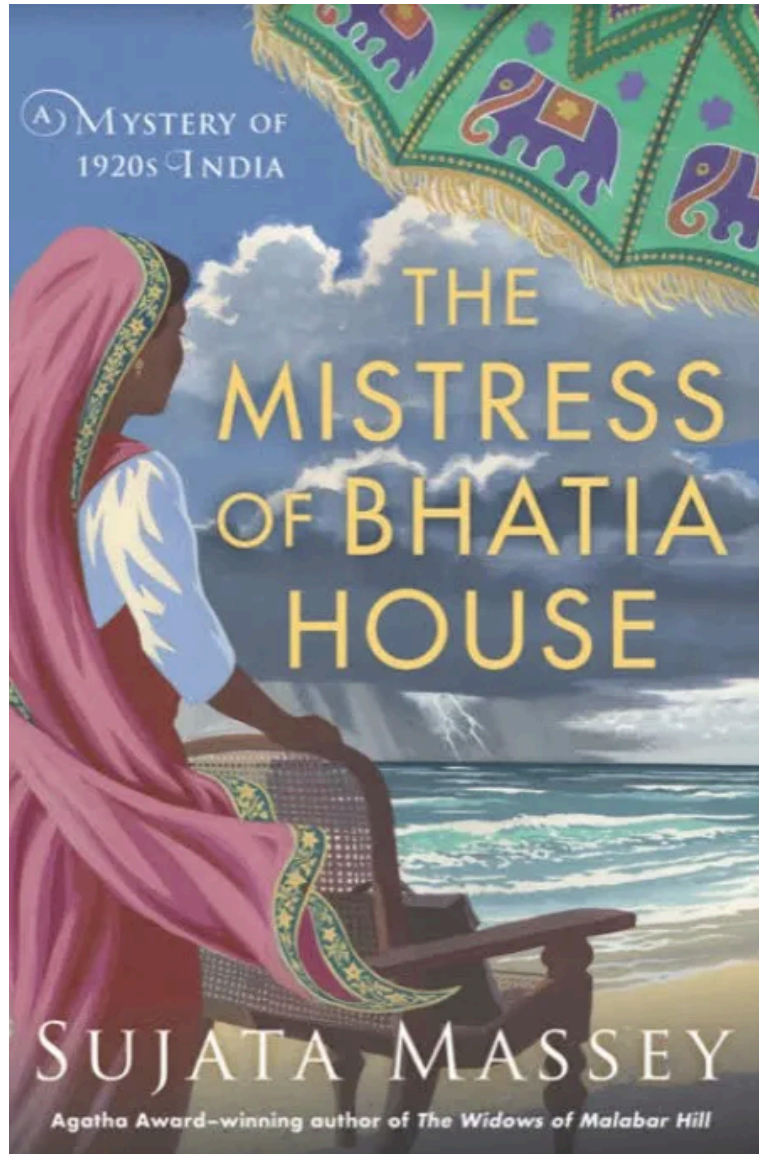


Sujata in a courtyard in Udaipur City Palace, Rajasthan, India

Since 1997 Sujata Massey has published at a rapid rate, with a new mystery hitting the shelves every couple of years. Her 16th novel, *The Mistress of Bhatia House*, is the fourth book featuring Perveen Mistry, India's first female lawyer, set in early 20th century Bombay during the British occupation.

Drawing on copious research and her own family history, Massey approaches the traditional mystery form with an eye for historical accuracy and a deep interest in the burgeoning social issues of the period. Perveen's Bombay is a lovingly rendered city characterized by the constant interaction between multiple Indian, Middle Eastern, and Western cultures—a true melting pot of languages, politics and clashing social morés that backgrounds and begets shocking but believable intrigue. Following a fundraiser for a women's hospital, Perveen gets involved in the case of a household servant falsely accused of abortion—a crime fabricated to protect the reputation of a powerful man. What follows is a twisting mystery in the tradition of classics by Christie and Doyle wedded to a surprisingly detailed exploration of cultural and social progress in the complex world of pre-Independence India.

On a beautiful day in late May I met with Sujata on the front porch of her historic Wyndhurst home to talk about the hard work of mystery writing.



The cover of Sujata Massey's book "The Mistress of Bhatia House."

Baltimore Fishbowl: You started your writing career as a reporter for *The Evening Sun*, but didn't publish any fiction until your first novel. Had you written mystery fiction before that first book?

Sujata Massey: I'd always loved mysteries as a kid and my parents had a bookshelf with all these old Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle novels. So I always had an interest.

While I was at Hopkins we had a visiting faculty member who was a very famous *New York Times* best-selling crime writer, Martha Grimes. She taught a class on detective fiction and I think I took it twice! It was excellent. Martha presented writing as a way to actually make a living. She talked about writing as a lifestyle and writing popular fiction. That was a really good addition to the writing seminars, where there was a lot of emphasis on going to graduate school and having stories published in magazines.

BFB: All of your books have been set in these times or places with a lot of information you need to get right—how do you go about nailing all the historical and cultural details?

SM: Research is a wonderful form of procrastination—I do like it. It can be very challenging, but I do the best I can. I travel and I make friends with people who are experts in things that I'm interested in writing about.

The history of law, for example—I need to know all kinds of specifics. And sometimes people in the United States can help me, but a lot of times it's people overseas, in India, who help. It took me three books to find an actual police historian, but I found one. And I'm still finding people who will say, "Oh, I know all about this thing that you're interested in! I know all about trains." There's a man who just loves the history of trains in Bombay, and so he has published a couple of books about these train lines. So I reach out to him when I try to figure out the train route.

BFB: At what stage of research do you decide you have enough to get going? Or is that something you do in parallel with your writing?

SM: I do a lot of research while I'm drafting an outline because I can't have something happen that would be incongruous with the truth. So there's probably a month and a half—a really happy period—where it's all about researching. It's talking to people, it's writing an outline, and then the work starts.

And usually starting isn't hard. I think when you get to the point where a character dies or there's a big crisis—that's the complicated part. That's when you have to get into the weeds. Everybody knows you start off a mystery with a big event. For some people that's a dead body in chapter one. That's not my style. I'm a little bit slower than that.

BFB: Your book does have a more atmospheric build to the death—a lot of stage setting, getting across the idea of what this culture and the specific people within it are like. These people trying to create a women's hospital is such an important jumping-off point for the rest of the story.

SM: If a book can bring you along that far, it means that there's enough going on that you're interested in the characters and the setting—there's enough of a story and theme before somebody dies. I think that makes a good mystery.

BFB: You're clearly very interested in social and political issues—gender, class, culture clash. India becoming modern really drives so much of the story. I'm curious how those ideas started coming together and what you were interested in tackling with this book.

SM: I really wanted to do this book about reproductive rights. In the 1960s my grandmother and some other women started a maternity hospital in Calcutta. They were filling a need that nobody else was interested in filling. It turned out that most hospitals and many schools in Bombay were created by philanthropic Indians, not by Westerners. So I was really interested in writing about how a group of women would have accomplished something like that when they didn't have any money of their own.

I was also interested in the rules around abortion and birth control then. One of the people I turned to a lot for help with research is a professor of law at the University of Wisconsin—her name is Mitra Sharafi. I always mention her in my acknowledgments. When I told her I was interested in writing about abortion law she sent me a 45-page article she had just published in a scholarly journal that used all these different case histories of what happened when people were charged and who got charged in these cases. So I was really excited to have that real example to help me when I put together this story.

BFB: Your first novel came out in 1997. *The Mistress of Bhatia House* is your 16th—that's a whole lot to write. You start with a month or two of research and then get into outlining—how does it proceed from there? What's your schedule like?

SM: I just start writing chapter one. I try to write about a thousand words a day. I usually write in the morning and try to give myself time off in the afternoon. I do better if I write every single day. If you keep that up you can have a first draft in a few months. I turn in a second draft to my editor and then there are usually two to three more before proofreading. It's a long editing process.

BFB: I'm sure—especially with a mystery you have to nail down all the little details that support the plot.

SM: It's good to have your primary editor, a copy editor and a proofreader because they see those things. I also tend to give the copy-edited manuscript to people to help me fact check it for cultural details. For example, I had at least four people who grew up in Gujarati households read this book. Because I was so worried about getting something wrong. And all of them found things that needed changes—but they weren't the same thing! So you really need more than one person.

BFB: I'm a big fan of mysteries, but have always felt overwhelmed by the idea of trying to put together a story that's so knotted up with all these moving parts and different characters that need to play into it. How do you tie all those threads together?

SM: Well, that's the magic of the subconscious—but only when you're working. You can't plan it out. For me, it's only when I'm working that I can see those things. So that's another impetus to work every day, right? Because if you don't work, you're paralyzed. Working brings the ideas. Occasionally I will share my pages with somebody and ask them for advice. I did that recently with a good friend of mine who also writes mysteries. He could see that I was giving away some things too soon that would be really great later on. Then we drilled down into some character motives and came up with some directions for the plot.

BFB: Do you typically decide on who the murderer is going to be and work backwards?

SM: I usually do, but not always. Sometimes I have in mind a bunch of characters who could have a motivation, and after I've been writing for a couple of months I know who I would want it to be. Sometimes I know right away. But the danger is when I know right away I can give it away too easily—like I might structure my plot in too obvious a way. So I prefer to be a little bit in the dark.

BFB: You're writing in a tradition that's been around for well over a century—from Poe to Doyle to Christie and so on. How do you work within that model and keep it interesting?

SM: Well, a lot of those earlier mysteries had very clever plots and twists, but they didn't have that much characterization and they didn't have dialogue that sounded like real people talking. So I think historical mystery writers today—not just me—we really strive to do that. And those classic mysteries very rarely dealt with big social issues, injustice. You would admire the characters for being highly cultivated, and there might be a servant character for color. So my mysteries are about social issues. This one was about women's health. The one before was about the freedom movement and political expression.

I think readers today ask a lot more from a mystery. They want it to matter, they want to be moved. They want realistic people and lots of different geographic and ethnic backgrounds. They want to be able to see themselves in the characters, to travel somewhere and learn about a place in more interesting way than reading a guidebook or a history.