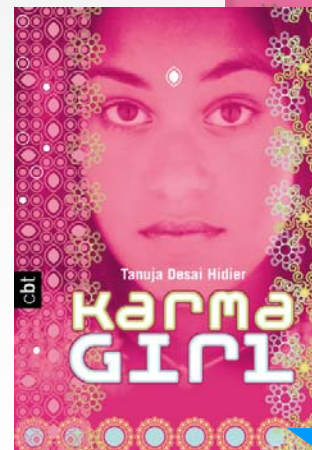
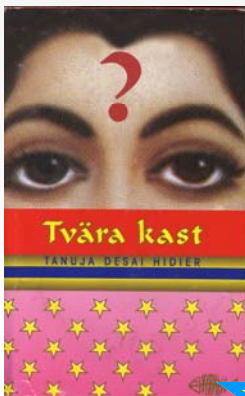


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THE SUNDAY TIMES

June 22, 2003

www.timesonline.co.uk
TIMES ONLINE

Children's **book of the week**



BORN CONFUSED
by **Tanuja Desai Hidier**
Age 14+

This unusual novel by an American-born writer of Indian parentage offers 400 pages of dense, purple prose; reading it is like walking through lush undergrowth. The setting, though, is an American high school and New York clubs, in which Dimple Lala, just 17, close to her Indian parents, passionate about being a photographer but not confident of her own charms or talent, aspires to be like her blonde, beautiful, best friend Gwyn, who gets what she wants from everyone except her mother. When Gwyn falls

for the Indian boy that Dimple's parents have chosen for their daughter, Dimple comes to understand more about friendship, love and her own identity. In this rite-of-passage book, with its vivid mix of Hindu culture, youth slang, bhangra music, teen angst, South Asian politics and the New York scene, Dimple learns the importance of being what you want to be. She has to cope not only with the confusion of belonging to two cultures but also, like any 17-year-old, with boyfriends, friendships, her parents and decisions about her future. Romantic, absorbing, thoughtful and original, this is a book to lose yourself in, and will help young-adult readers find their way through the jungle of growing up (Scholastic £12.99). **NJ**



THE INDEPENDENT

ON SUNDAY

22 June 2003

Born Confused by Tanuja Desai Hidier (Scholastic £12.99). Dimple Rohitbhai Lala is just 17; her parents want her to be one thing and she, resisting them fiercely, wants to join in with her best friend Gwyn's boy-filled American lifestyle. "I didn't want an Indian boy to appreciate me, what I wanted was even half a glance by someone cool, someone who played guitar or made movies or had long hair or even - jackpot - all three."

When she is caught trying to get back into her house slightly intoxicated after a double date, her shocked parents ring round all their Indian contacts in America

to find a suitable boy who will get Dimple back on track.

Eventually Karsh Kapoor is pinpointed, the son of her mother's old best friend from Bombay. Karsh at their first meeting had already secured himself the label of "Striking Average Boy Who Is Computer Geek And Mama's Boy To Top It Off". Dimple is at once keen never to befriend, let alone marry him. However, after her cousin introduces her to the South Asian community at New York University, she sees the "suitable boy" Karsh, DJ-ing in a club, in a very different light. She slowly discovers that she has something Gwyn can never have - her culture.

Hidier writes with a flamboyance full of rich description, flaunting the beauty and vibrancy of the Indian culture as she weaves a spellbinding story.



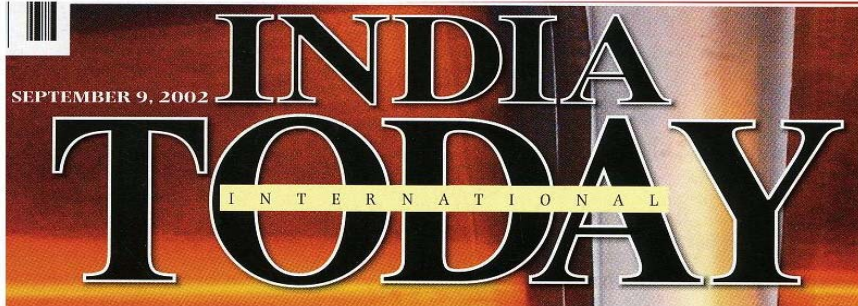
Born Confused is a stunning debut novel by Tanuja Desai Hidier. It addresses the problems of cultural assimilation, seen through the eyes of 17-year-old Dimple Lala, who is “Not quite Indian, not quite American”.

Like the author, Dimple is Indian, but born and raised in the US. Witty and self-deprecating, she is constantly comparing herself negatively with her skinny, blonde best friend, Gwyn.

Dimple’s doctor parents, following Indian tradition, introduce her to a “suitable boy”, whom she instinctively rejects.

But she realises her mistake when she sees him again as a cool DJ. The voice is lovely – teen-speak with a decisively Indian accent. An exhilarating read.

www.ft.com/artsandweekend



authorspeak

TANUJA DESAI HIDIER

American Desi

ABCD OR AMERICAN-BORN CONFUSED DESI HAS been the subject of scores of books and even celluloid ventures. Inevitably, the questions are fundamental in nature: What does it mean to be Indian? Or South Asian? And, at the heart of that, to be American?

Asking the same questions is debutant Tanuja Desai Hidier in *Born Confused* (Scholastic Press) but, as she puts it, with a difference. Hidier looks for the "soul within the heart". The identity contradictions she faced in her childhood were similar to those experienced by the second generation Indian diaspora. "When I grew up I felt more Indian and when I joined college it was the opposite. Now it is different. I don't have to identify with either extreme. I have found a joyful synthesis in the best of both sides," says the light-eyed writer, born and raised in Wilbraham, Massachusetts.

The novel traces the evolution of a second generation immigrant trying to come to terms with her cultural roots in a western environment. Though not autobiographical, the 34-year-old writer's personal experiences are central to the book. "The emotions are real, not the actual characters or events," she says.

Cultural identity has also been part of her two short-story efforts last year—"The Border", which was awarded the first prize in the fiction category in the London Writers/Waterstones Competition, and "Tiger, Tiger". The theme of her two short films—*The Test* and *The Assimilation Alphabet*—which she has written and directed is also rooted in identity. More recently, she branched out into music. Now, based in London, Hidier—she is married to a French whom she met at a Pakistani friend's Christmas tree-lighting party in New York City—also doubles up as the lead vocalist/lyricist in a melodic rock band, San Transisto. Music, like writing, has been her means of uncovering her identity, which like the lead character in her book is now simply ABD or American Born Desi.

—Anil Padmanabhan



SHASHIKALA A. DESAI

<http://www.indiatoday.com/>

TEEN SPIRIT

1. LUCAS

Kevin Brooks

(The Chicken House £12.99)

A strange boy arrives on her island, plunging Caitlin into a terrifying spiral of love and hate.

2. BORN CONFUSED

Tanuja Desai Hidier

(Scholastic £12.99)

Dimple Lala has spent years rebelling against her culture. Suddenly, everything Indian is hip – and Dimple's confused.

3 LADY: MY LIFE AS A BITCH

Melvin Burgess

(Puffin £5.99)

Everyone thinks that fun-loving Sandra will go too far one day. And she does – when she's turned into a dog...

4. LBD: IT'S A GIRL THING

Grace Dent

(Puffin £4.99)

Les Bambinos Dangereuses are mad about boys, music and clothes, but it gets complicated when they stage a festival.

5. GOING FOR STONE

Philip Gross

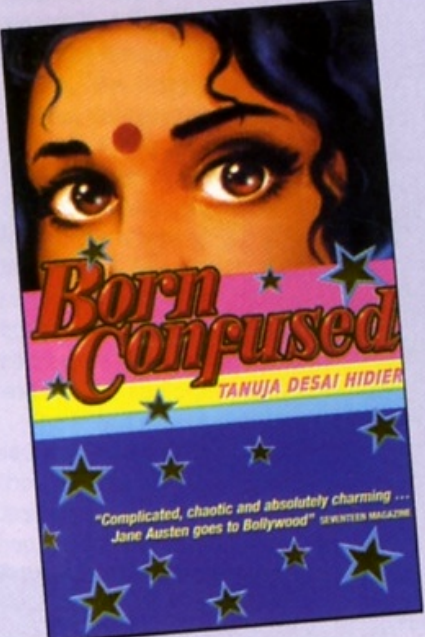
(OUP £6.99)

Nick finds himself on the streets with no money, no home. Tense, chilling thriller.

KIT SPRING



October 2003



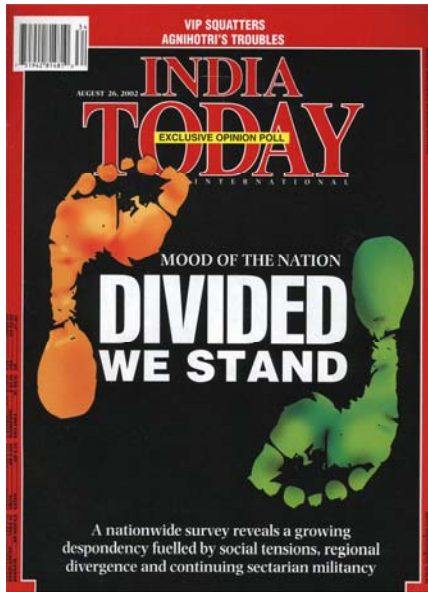
Born Confused
Tanuja Desai Hidier
Scholastic Press

Really this is a book for your younger sister, or indeed niece. So why's it being reviewed here? Because it's actually quite good (in its own teenage, hormonal, coming-of-age way), and because it involves a DJ. Tenuous, but relevant. Dimple Lala, an American-born Hindu teenage girl, is having trouble growing up in US high school society and accepting who she is – until she bumps into a nice Indian boy who also happens to be a bhangra DJ. A stoned mixing lesson ensues and then, yes, she is bitten by the dance music bug and love for said DJ. It's actually very well-written but the content, like we said, may not be for most **IDJ** readers.

"Complicated, chaotic and absolutely charming ... Jane Austen goes to Bollywood" SEVENTEEN MAGAZINE

The image shows the cover of the book "Born Confused" by Tanuja Desai Hidier. The cover features a close-up of a young woman's face with a bindi, looking upwards. The title "Born Confused" is written in a large, stylized font with stars around it. Below the title, the author's name "TANUJA DESAI HIDIER" is printed. At the bottom, there is a quote from SEVENTEEN MAGAZINE: "Complicated, chaotic and absolutely charming ... Jane Austen goes to Bollywood".

<http://www.i-dj.co.uk/>



August 26, 2002

Write Streak

■ FOR Indians born outside the country, identity is a critical issue often articulated in a seminal book for the creative. **Tanuja Desai Hidier**, a former *New Yorker*, is the latest to join the ranks. Her forthcoming book, *Born Confused*—yes, plucked from the none-too-generous reference to American Born Confused Desis—is drawing rapt attention. Considering that the Scholastic Press publication, slated for release in October, has already figured

SHASHIKALA K. DESAI



in the *Larry King* show, it is obviously making the right kind of noises in the publicity circuit. Hidier's other work, *The Border*, a short story on the Partition era, bagged the first prize in the fiction category in the London Writers/Waterstones Competition in October 2001. She now lives in London, where she is lead vocalist in a melodic rock band and is also songwriting for a virtual band project with participating musicians based in Los Angeles and London. Clearly, wielding the pen is just one among several creative traits.

Teen Fiction

When teachers go to the bottom of the class

EDINBURGH writer Keith Gray's two opening novels, *Creepers* and *From Blood: Two Brothers*, were lovely, fresh tales of adolescent kinship. *Happy* shared some of the qualities of those first two books but its subject-matter of a band compulsively practising was somewhat overindulged. It has been pleasing but also perplexing, to see *Warehouse* succeeding so well, and appearing on so many award shortlists, for it didn't seem to me to have been written with anything like Gray's true voice.

He is triumphantly back on song in *Malarkey* (Red Fox, £4.99), his new teenage novel. This, without a doubt, is Gray's best novel to date. Opening with a breathless bag chase, it doesn't let up for a second. *Malarkey*, a newly-arrived "Year Eleven" boy at Brook High, soon discovers that the place is run not by the teachers, but by a manipulative, sadistic Adidas-trainer-wearing gang called the Tailors.

Gray has made strides in this book, writing not about friendship and relationships, but about an individual against the system. Yes, we are to some extent in *The Chocolate War* territory, and yes, the book is well-enough written to bear the comparison. Particularly impressive is Gray's ability to write conversation that conveys an adversarial undercurrent. Pages 72-75 might be used in a novelists' masterclass on the art of dialogue. The book deserves to out-do *Warehouse* in the award field.

Big Mouth, Ugly Girl by Joyce Carol

Oates (Collins £4.99) is about not one but two individuals pitted against an establishment. To begin with, they fight their fights separately, however, the two outsiders increasingly find themselves drawn towards one another. Oates, as you might expect of an accomplished adult novelist, conveys this gradual bonding extremely convincingly.

Matt Donaghy (*Big Mouth*) finds himself accused of trying to blow up the school. So paranoid and lacking in a sense of proportion and humour is the school hierarchy that all Matt's wise-cracking attempts to plead his innocence fall on deaf ears. *Ugly Girl*, aka Ursula Riggs, has stormed out of the basketball team in a fit of pique after messing up in a game.

None of Matt's so-called male friends speak up in his defence, counselled at home to keep their school record clean. *Ugly Girl* does speak up and the two of them consolidate a friendship via e-mail. Their relationship is further cemented when they become embroiled in a blackmailing.

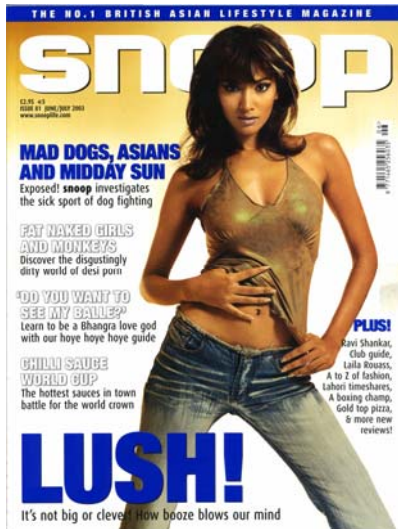
Oates loses her grip on the book somewhat in its final section, when the kidnapping of a dog reads like a sequence from a younger juvenile novel, but this is nevertheless a most rewarding and vivid read.

Scorchea by Josephine Poole (Hodder £4.99) is a very British novel. "Gerald Maltberry was a historian." So begins Chapter Two. Not only do the characters' names have a slightly black-and-white-movie air about

them, some of the character description is also decidedly chintzy. "In spite of her bosom, she wasn't in the least sexy." I'm surprised an editor didn't blue-circle "bosom". It's just plain wrong in a contemporary novel. But, in a sense, the wrongness in this chillingly sinister country story about a teenager's fixation with a stranger is what sets it apart and adds to the menacing atmosphere. A book in which the main character can break the neck of a baby bird and then contemplate life's "grossness" won't be to every adolescent's taste, but it's an accomplished metaphysical horror story nevertheless, and seems to me to be a parable about innocence preyed upon by cynical experience.

Quite, quite different is *Born Confused* by Tanuja Desai Hidier (Scholastic, £12.99), a fabulously free-flowing coming-of-age-story about a girl from an Indian family growing up in New York. Books in which female narrators describe adventures with a friend slightly more outgoing and adventurous than themselves usually work well. Think of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*. There's nothing country bumpkin-ish about Dimple Lala and friend Gwyn. They are rich and savvy city teenagers. Hidier writes in an infectiously energetic freeflowing style, with occasional Kerouac cadences, and her editor's willingness to pass by verbal oddities such as "I could feel my blackheads biggen" is to be applauded.

MICHAEL THORN



books



born confused
TANUJA DESAI HIDIER, SCHOLASTIC

DIMPLE Lala is a 17 year old Indian-American who is trying to 'find herself' and realise her true identity.

Resisting the traditions her parents are trying to inflict upon her and trying hard to be more like her American blonde-haired, blue-eyed best friend, Gwyn, Dimple is seriously confused.

She is thrown into further disarray when her parents introduce

her to a 'suitable boy'. Initially unimpressed, Dimple develops feelings for him, trouble is, so does Gwyn.

Hidier's debut novel treads along a predictable path and is ridden with clichés, but the dialogue is comical in places and makes for a pleasantly light read.

And it's all new territory for ABCDs (American Born Confused Desi), so you can let them off.

<http://www.snooplife.com/>

Michael Thorn rounds up the year's finest teen fiction

THIS has been a good year for teenage fiction. Many terrific books have not quite made the cut of my Top Ten which, it will not surprise those who know my tastes and prejudices, does not include a single fantasy or instalment of a trilogy. Three recently released titles are, as they say, chart-breakers – coming in at numbers six, eight and ten. A debut novel, which I didn't review earlier in the year, is given a deserved Top Five slot.

1 *The Fire-Eaters* by David Almond (Hodder, £10.99)

A story about the dreams of good and ordinary people being endangered by power, corruption and illness. The ability to exalt rather than sneer at basic decencies is a mark of a truly great writer, and Almond's books are always moving, uplifting tributes to the human spirit.

2 *What The Birds See* by Sonya Hartnett (Walker, £7.99)

Hauntingly poetic. Hartnett is the kind of writer who takes your breath away on every page. An unflinching account of how a careless, impersonal evil leads a timid, friendless child towards his fate.

3 *Feed* by M T Anderson (Walker, £4.99)

A nightmare vision of a Western world driven by technology and consumerism, and a youth culture enervated by a febrile pursuit of the bizarre. In the permanently affronted voice of Titus – "I was like, 'What?'" – Anderson is lampooning, warning, empathising, all in a prose of quite exceptional vision and passion. It's a mindblower. I can still feel its shockwaves.

4 *Inventing Elliot* by Graham Gardner (Orlon, £7.99)

Best first novel of the year, without a doubt. A compelling account of the way a boy's determination to present a powerful image and not be victimised draws him in to the bullying hierarchy at his new school.

5 *Born Confused* by Tanuja Desai Hidler (Scholastic, £12.99)

Fabulously freeflowing coming-of-age story about a girl from an Indian family growing up in New York. The author is also about to release a CD of songs based on the novel. See her website for details: www.ThisIsTanuja.com

6 *I Is Someone Else* by Patrick Cooper (Andersen, £5.99)

A 15-year-old schoolboy hitches a ride in 1966 that leads to adventure on the Hippie Trail. Perhaps it's because this is set in the period of my own youth but for me this book about love and adventure on the open road is quintessential teenage reading.

7 *The Braves* by David Klass (Puffin, £5.99)

A sporty boy called Joe finds himself pressed into a corner from all sides, not least by the bullies who call the shots at his high school. This stands out from the crowd of teenage books about bullying by virtue of its sharp dialogue, the characterisation of its supporting cast and the convincingly tentative nature of Joe's amatory ardour.

8 *Locked Inside/ Black Mirror* by Nancy Werlin (Hodder, £5.99)

Two highly original psychological thrillers, the first a kidnapping mystery, the second a murder mystery. Both riveting reads.

9 *Malarkey* by Keith Gray (Red Fox, £4.99)

Malarkey, a newly arrived "Year Eleven" boy at Brook High, soon discovers that the place is run not by the teachers, but by a manipulative, sadistic, Adidas-trainer-wearing gang called the Tailors. Opens with a breathless bag chase and doesn't let up the momentum for a second.

10 *Star* by John Singleton (Puffin, £9.99)

Powerful first novel about a teenager being mistreated in a care home. Conveys the adolescent male nervousness of femininity very convincingly. Not to be dismissed as an "issue" book.

Saturday 25 October 2003

नूतन वर्षाभिनिंदन

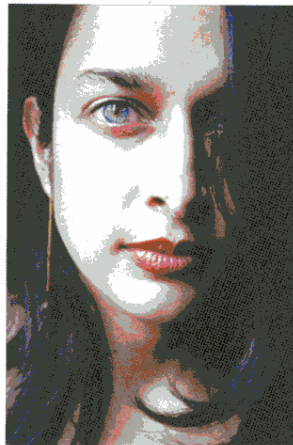
American born creative Desi

By Payal Nair

As far as debut novels go, Tanuja Desai Hidier's first literary offering could not have made a better entrance onto the world stage of international writing. And what is more she has tackled the neo-popular subject of young confused American Desis with aplomb and a fresh, new perspective. Born Confused has already accrued numerous accolades including being the American chat show host Larry King's pick of the week, The Sunday Times book of the week and the Financial Times magazine's best summer tales pick. And since its release in May 2003, it has been voted number two in The Observer's top 5 beach read picks, and at the end of May, the novel came in at number five on the independent bookstores bestsellers list for fiction in Canada.

Meeting Tanuja at a west end café, (she moved to England last year with her French husband Bernard Hidier) I immediately get the sense that she is a very confident woman who is totally comfortable with what she is – an

Indian American, and in her own words, "has come full circle" in the endless quest to find "one's own cultural identity." The refreshing element



Born creative: Tanuja Desai Hidier

case, photography) plays in helping clarify issues of identity. "My aim was to explore how a hyphenated culture is still a whole culture, whereby a person can be 100 percent Indian and 100 percent American too", says Tanuja. She adds, "being human is never a fifty-fifty situation".

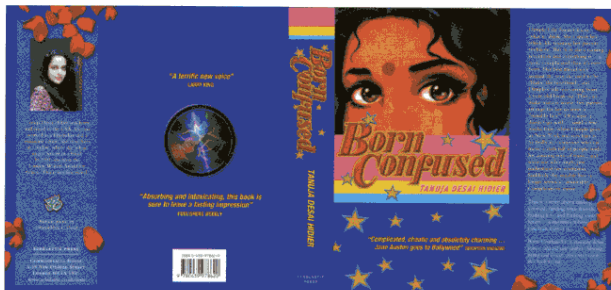
One can easily see from Tanuja's outlook on life that she has fought the

I did not have access to, or was not so aware of, growing up like I did." Born near Boston, the thirty-something grew up in the predominantly white, middle class town of Brookline. Her Gujarati father Dhiroobhai, who comes from the town of Varad near Surat, and her Bombayite mother Shashikala immigrated to America in the sixties, where they both worked as doctors.

However, following in her parents' and older brother Rajiv's medical footsteps was not for Tanuja. From early on, she had a great love for reading and literature and wanted to go down this route. "I was a real bookworm as a child", she recalls. "I always had my head buried in a book and knew that I wanted to write from about the age of six." Her love for the written word led Tanuja to major in Comparative Literature at Brown University in Rhode Island, not far from Boston, Massachusetts.

After graduating, Tanuja decided to make the move to the bohemian capital that is New York in the early 1990s. Although she worked all sorts of jobs while over there, including waitressing, dogwalking, and mostly writing and editing for magazines and websites, it was in New York where she really began to explore fiction more seriously. "It was while over there that I decided I wanted to explore the theme of South Asian America, and this still holds my interest now."

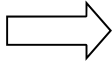
Tanuja wrote Born Confused after moving to London in 2000; after putting an outline into place it took five months to write and four more to edit. However, many of the themes of the novel were things she had been thinking about and living for years before. "I had always wanted to write a novel, and was particularly interested in telling the tale of an Indian girl learning to create harmony within a multicultural identity, turning the C for confused in the moniker ABCD to one for creative. I also really wanted to pay homage to New York City and the very



demons that most people brought up in a duo-culture experience. She tells me, "in the book I focus on those issues that affect many young people living in a mixed culture and in a way the writing process itself has been my own window into aspects of the Indian side of the story and the things

in Born Confused is that the heroine, Dimple, does not come to any black and white conclusion of being 'more Indian' or, indeed, 'more American', but during her seventeenth summer explores ways in which to make room for both, and the role creativity (in her





vibrant Desi scene that exists there. This is a story and Dimple is a heroine that wasn't around when I was growing up, in books, on TV on the movie screen and in magazines".

Her dreams of writing a novel were fulfilled by what can best be termed an act of sheer fate, "I had a meeting with the editor at Scholastic in New York. He thought I had come to pitch a book idea when in actual fact I was there to enquire about freelance editing work before heading off to London. But of course, imagine how taken aback I was when he asked me, moments after setting foot in his office, what my book idea was - I knew it was the moment I'd been waiting for, and told him about my interest in telling a South Asian American coming of age story," smiles Tanuja.

When asked whether the American born confused Desi (ABCD) theme has been overplayed, Tanuja says, "Absolutely not. It has only just begun. And it's important to hear many more voices on the subject, whether through fiction, film, music, finance, or simply over coffee because there are as many Desi stories out there as there are Desis. It

would be unfair to expect one or two films, or one or two books, to represent the whole and richly varied culture. That could just lead to another type of stereotyping," she explains. And, indeed, Tanuja so far has excelled in breaking with convention - she was born and raised in America to Indian parents, she lived in Paris, met and married a Frenchman in New York City, and now lives in the UK ... perhaps a role in the United Nations will follow!

The future too looks bright for Tanuja, "I have three short stories coming out in various anthologies over the next year. The first will be out this autumn in the Desilicious Anthology, and the next in May. The themes are still largely those relating to South Asian America, but the style is quite different from Born Confused; one story is really pretty dark," she says. Tanuja is also working

on an adaptation of Born Confused for the big screen, and has almost finished recording a CD of original songs based on the novel with her band San Transisto, "Things are quite hectic right now," she says. "But it is such a gift to be busy doing things you love."

I had always wanted to write a novel, and was particularly interested in telling the tale of an Indian girl learning to create harmony within a multicultural identity

When asked how she would define herself, as an Indian or American, now that she has written Born Confused, she replies, "I am still the same person I always was, but in a sort of full-circle way. I wouldn't choose between Indian and American, I choose both. That is something Dimple taught me. A human being is so much more complex a creature than that. If anything, I can finally say that I am a writer, my dream has come true."

To find out more about Tanuja Desai Hidier including her exciting debut CD launch log on to: www.ThisIsTanuja.com

TRAVELER'S INDIA

V6.N3.2002

Voices

Asian Voices in England

Interviews with Lavina Melwani in London

Tanuja Desai

Hidier, author of the acclaimed coming of age novel, 'Born Confused' and a rock musician: "After a decade of living in New York, it's fascinating to be in a city where South Asian culture is in many ways a generation further along in the assimilation process. The local 'mainstream' grocery store, for example, carries spices

that my mother still drives nearly two hours to obtain in the States. A recent performance series at the Barbican, which took on different cities as themes, chose three South Asian musical acts, ranging from break beat deejays to classical tabla players, as the sole reps for London. The music scene here is a thrill in general, and it's been great fun being a part of it directly as well: My melodic rock band, San Transisto, in which I sing/write lyrics, has been gigging around town; we are currently working on a number of new songs for our set."



Tanuja Hidier photographed by Mohammed Jaffer during a visit to New York.



BOOKCLUB

Ever since Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, the market has been flooded with female authors putting pen to paper to produce great works of fiction. *Desi* looks at this literary trend and focuses on five new Asian authors set to make their mark this year

With a track record for producing exceptional fictional work, established female authors like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shoba De, Medha Patkar and Taslima Nasreen have paved the way for other female writers of Asian origin to enter the world of literature.

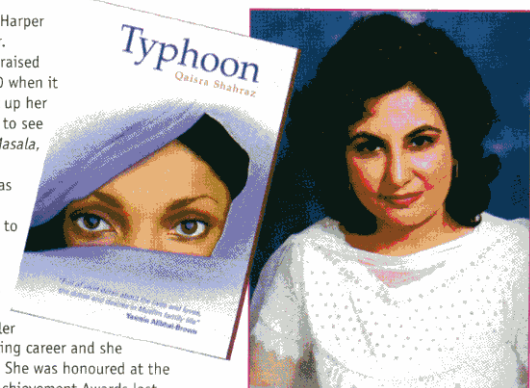
While the afore mentioned authors hail from the Indian sub-continent, a new breed of equally talented and dedicated writers have been emerging among the South Asian Diaspora based in the UK and USA.

This year sees a number of novelists publishing new and follow-up works which all seem to have a few threads in common. Firstly there is the evolution of the Asian woman in today's society, and how she has adapted her identity in relation to the changing environment around her. Then there's the issue of being caught between two cultures, namely east and west, and how that affects a female's fate. Finally, and usually most significantly, is the mysterious fact of how a woman's destiny is closely entwined to the men in her life and the consequences of the decisions they take.

One novelist who knows how difficult it is to get a novel published is the enterprising Preethi Nair, whose second novel, *One Hundred Shades of*

White, was published by Harper Collins in March this year. Kerala-born and London raised Nair hit the news in 2000 when it was revealed she had set up her own publishing company to see her debut novel, *Gypsy Masala*, into print, and that her publicist, Preu Menon, was none other than herself. Thirty-year-old Nair used to work in the City as a management consultant, but says she really didn't enjoy her work. It was a meeting with a Reiki healer which set her on her writing career and she hasn't looked back since. She was honoured at the annual Asian Women of Achievement Awards last year, winning the young achiever award and has secured a three book deal with Harper Collins. Nair's new book tells the story of a young Indian family, brought to London and then abandoned by their father to make their own way in what is initially an alien world. It tells of the life they build together, the conflicts that drive them apart, and the wide-ranging journey that brings about reconciliation. The fact it has been picked up by an international publisher such as Harper Collins is an indication of the quality and mass appeal of Nair's writing.

Another UK-based author is Qaisra Shahraz, whose second novel, *Typhoon*, hit the bookstores recently. Published by Black Amber Books, and launched at the House of Lords, *Typhoon* is a tragic tale of three young women, each one demonised by their past. One caught in the arms of another woman's husband in the middle of the night; another raped in her youth and the third whose world falls apart as she loses her husband to a total stranger.



"My novels were written for a personal need and of those of other Pakistani women growing up in England," says Manchester-based Shahraz. "*The Holy Woman*, my first novel, and *Typhoon* are aimed at a wide mainstream audience. My personal aim was to write books set in Pakistan with our own hero and heroine and set in a culture that we could identify with.

"In fact there is very little literature and novel writing set in Pakistan published in the west, compared with that of India. By having three novels set in the rural world of Pakistan I have created a niche for myself."

Although Shahraz has been a freelance writer for the last 21 years, it is amazing to find out that she also has a full time job as an English lecturer and is a part-time college inspector for Ofsted and Adult Learning Inspectorate.

"Writing is a very lonely affair and one needs a lot of support and motivation from others. I could never have been a full-time writer – even if I was able to. The thought of being stuck at home all day with a pen and paper in a room, all by myself, horrifies me," admits Shahraz.

"Half a day of writing is ideal for me – it means that I can live normally and write, taking part in everyday living. Having said that, I rarely get these half days of writing. Writing has always been a

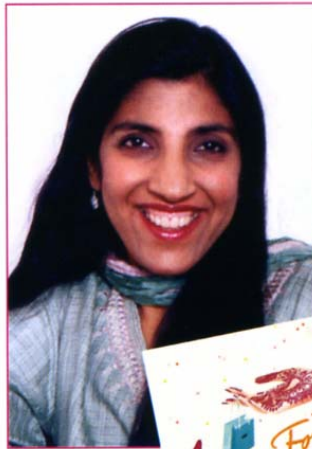


copyright photo courtesy: ANILAN, LEWIS, DATTAGOURIAR & LARSEN





part-time snatched activity sandwiched between a full-time day job and looking after my family of three sons.” Tanuja Desai Hidier is an American-born and UK-based writer who previously lived in New York, where she worked as a writer/editor for magazines and web projects. Her first novel, *Born Confused*, published by Scholastic Press in 2002, received great publicity when it was featured on CNN’s program *Your World Today*, as well as being picked by renowned US TV host and interviewer Larry King as the book of the week last year.



“ Writing is a very lonely affair and one needs a lot of support and motivation from others ”

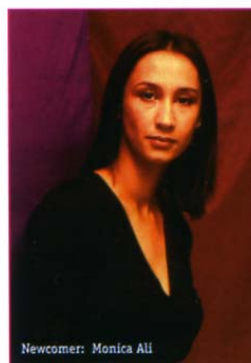
Set largely in the context of New York City’s explosive bhangra/Asian underground club scene, the novel is a multicultural coming-of-age story that follows Indian-American heroine Dimple Lala through a summer that turns her world on its head. The book’s title is the BC from ABCD, or American Born Confused Desi, a term first generation South Asians in America have for these second generation Americans who are purportedly ‘confused’ about their South Asian background. “The heart of *Born Confused* is about learning how to bring two cultures together without falling apart yourself in the process, in short, learning how to become yourself,” says twenty something Hidier who now lives in London, where she is lead vocalist/lyricist in a melodic rock band. And creative is something Hidier surely is. Apart from affectionately calling herself an American Born Creative Desi, Hidier has a significant body of

written and film work to her credit, most of which deals with cultural assimilation themes.

Another American author who is due to make her literary debut is Kavita Daswani, whose novel *For Matrimonial Purposes*, is published by Harper Collins this month. No stranger to writing, Kavita Daswani works as a fashion journalist living in

California, having spent five years as the fashion editor for the South China Morning Post and fashion correspondent for CNN and CNBC in Asia. Billed as *Sex In The City* versus *Betrothal in Bombay*, *For Matrimonial Purposes* focuses on a world where arranged marriages are still the norm, and at 33, New York-based Anju is definitely past her prime as a blushing bride. Do arranged marriages still have a place in today’s society and are they a possible solution for young, overworked professionals who haunt the Soulmates pages, are just two questions posed by Daswani’s funny and poignant story of an age-old dilemma. The subject of fierce international auction, Daswani’s first novel is set to be a leader in contemporary women’s fiction.

Last but by no means least, is London-based mother of two Monica Ali. Until only a few months ago, her name was unknown, but with her debut book *Brick Lane* being published by Doubleday in



Newcomer: Monica Ali



June this year, the 35-year-old, Half English and half Bangladeshi writer is touted to be one of the most significant British novelists of her generation.

Even before its publication, Ali has already won praise for her book *Brick Lane*, which is essentially a lengthy saga told from the point of view of a young woman brought from Bangladesh to east London to marry. The Oxford-educated author was recently selected to take her place among the 20 best novelists in this country under the age of 40, in the prominent *Granta List 2003*. With so many talented young women being acknowledged for their superior literary skills, it comes as no surprise that scores of budding female authors are also trying to break through in the domain of fiction. However, as Qaisra Shahraz points out success does not come overnight. “The aspiring writer needs to be prepared for rejections and there are many – sadly that is the norm! “To get a first book published is not a straight forward easy task, as most of us naively believe. But if the product is good and the writer persists, eventually he or she will find themselves in print. “The first book is always the important one as it lays the foundation for the writer’s subsequent career. The harder the writer works initially, the more success is gained and more doors are opened and keep on opening.”

Jaspreet Pandohar





books



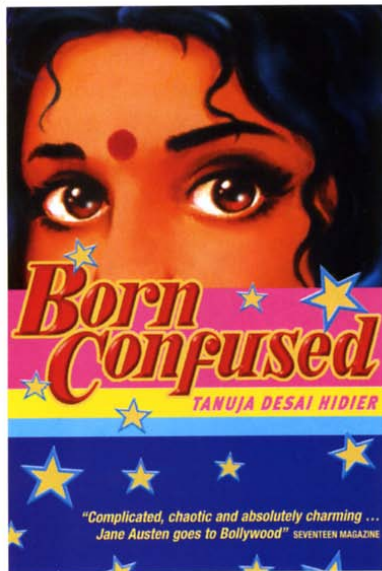
Born Creative

Tanuja Desai Hidier's celebrated debut novel 'Born Confused' pulsates to the rhythm of a 'desi' groove. She spoke to Nishita Sharma about forging grooves, carving niches and streaking the sky.

An exhilarated Nehru Centre packed to the gills listened with rapt attention to Tanuja Desai Hidier's debut novel 'Born Confused' at its recent launch. Incandescent and mesmerising, the Indian-American writer held court over a spellbound audience, undulating in soft twangy tones pages of prose, which told the story of her spunky protagonist: 17-year old American born Dimple Lala.

Away from the heaving multitude and bereft of a platform, Tanuja shrinks slightly, sitting opposite me at the very apt (for a couple of Indian chicks!) Twelfth House 'astrology cafe', in London's trendy Notting Hill Gate. The

The book's angsty and lovably precocious heroine Dimple is the voice of a thousand East-West South Asians growing up in dual identities



book's angsty and lovably precocious heroine Dimple is the voice of a thousand East-West South Asians growing up in dual identities.

An inspired observation of and homage to the American New York "Desi Scene", the book draws together the vitality of the burgeoning Asian club scene, high school teenage anguish and hybrid culture, vividly employing personality, humour and an energetic rhythm as vigorous as Tanuja's own speech patterns. She writes like she speaks, gushing and spurting. Like the book which, intertwining colour into each sentence, weaves fresh enlivened idiomatic prose into a rite of passage snapshot of a summer of love.

As a writer fuelled by New York's fervour, Tanuja's soul-food was the myriad Asian artists in the 'desi Scene'. "I had grown up in a mostly white neighbourhood in Western Massachusetts and I didn't really have any peers from Asian culture and then suddenly to meet all these Asian actors, directors, film-makers etc from the second generation *Desi* culture was really exciting and inspiring." The momentum of nineties interest in her culture by the mainstream media and the recognition accorded to South Asian Studies departments and organisations like the South Asian Women's Collective, made her feel that her culture was "gaining a voice" at all levels. "Blonde rock stars were wearing *bindis* on TV and *chai* was sold at Starbucks. It was a complex and interesting dynamic and I wanted to explore that and really write a story that would be a love song to New York City," she says of the time.

By turns insulted and intrigued by the part aphoristic abbreviation A.B.C.D. (American Born Confused Desi) a term invented by South Asians from the subcontinent to describe the Diaspora, she set out to change the C for 'Confused' into C for 'Creative'

Central to the book is the friendship between Dimple and supermodel-esque blonde Gwyn, in which she explores the complexes, comparisons and insecurities of teenage and racial identity. In a seminal chapter, visiting a *bhangra* nightclub where she is shocked to see so many Asians, Gwyn remarks "We're nearly the only white people in here!" This dichotomous observation echoes Tanuja's own experience of her home town. "I wanted to get across the extent to which the white character identified with her best friend and the way they think of themselves as the same as everybody else in their town. I didn't really think consciously about my heritage (when growing up) because unconsciously I thought there wasn't much difference amongst us." She sees the essence of Dimple's and Gwyn's identity crisis as largely 'issues of being human and finding your place in the world and carving out your space'.

Tanuja admits a certain overlap between her character's journey and her own, with the sequence of events being part amalgam and part imagina-

tion. But she stands by the issues as being very real. "Although my own 'not being Indian or not American enough' crisis didn't come about in the same way as Dimple's because I never really had to live one sort of life with my family and another outside my home." She attributes her own scrutinization of identity more to her writing. When she explored writing South Asian stories, she found herself bereft of authenticity from either side to tell the South Asian or American story completely and then realised that "that very lack of the story could actually be the story."

Busy producing her CD of songs to accompany the book, she sees music as not only an inspiration and integral to the story, but a key liberating element breaking down racial and personal barriers of "preconceptions and inhibitions" in all spheres

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By turns insulted and intrigued by the part aphoristic abbreviation ABCD (American Born Confused *Desi*) a

term invented by South Asians from the subcontinent to describe the Diaspora, she set out to change the C for Confused into C for Creative. "I wanted to use it to express the amazing vitality, energy and creativity that I saw happening all around me in New York." She sees the expression in its entirety: 'American Born Confused Desi Emigrated From Gujarat, House In Jersey, Kids Learning Medicine, Now Owning Property, Quite Reasonable Salary, Two Uncles Visiting, White Xenophobia, Yet Zestful', and other even less flattering versions as stereotypical anachronisms. "It's about learning to view these multicultural nomadic cultures as being viable identities in their own right. Culture is not carved in stone and is not this immobile fixed thing, it's always evolving and in a state of flux and its difficult to see that when you're in flux," she explains passionately.

Busy producing her CD of songs to accompany the book, she sees music as not only an inspiration and integral to the story, but a key liberating element breaking down racial and personal barriers of "preconceptions and inhibitions" in all spheres. In a world where racial and religious divide has never veered more toward the apocalyptic and identity been at the root of division, what are her hopes for the future? "I hope people can stop stopping at the skin and realise that underneath the skin - whether it's brown, black, green, purple or blue - our hearts and lungs are the same colour and essentially we're the same: human. We really have to find a way to work together if we're gonna get out of this mess." And with that, off she goes to rummage amongst the flotsam and jetsam of Portobello Market without an ounce of *desi* confusion about her. ●

BORN CONFUSED

Falguni J. Patel reviews Tanuja Desai Hidier's acclaimed debut novel, *Born Confused*

SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD Dimple Lala has a classic case of the ABCDs: American Born Confused Desi-itis. She is not as Indian as her parents, nor is she as American as her best friend Gwyn. What she is is Confused. Dimple has spent most of her life resisting her parents' Indian traditions, but now suddenly finds that Indian-ness is hip. It is as if everything is being turned on its head and everyone wants a piece of the Indian action: from Starbucks serving chai to blonde-haired, blue-eyed Gwyn raiding Dimple's stash of bangles and bindis to accessorize her latest clubbing outfit. The trouble is that Dimple herself is still struggling to figure out how she can live with and within both Indian and American cultures without falling apart in the process.

Born Confused is a charming and vibrant coming-of-age tale, which charts Dimple's adventures through the course of a particularly colourful and chaotic summer, featuring encounters with identity politics, a thriving underground South Asian club scene, the Indian Marriage Mafia, cool college boys, drag queens and fusion fashion. The exuberant language and loveable characters make the book an un-put-down-able read, and Desai Hidier captures perfectly the multi-layered, kaleidoscopic world of an Indian-American teenager in the process of finding herself and her culture.

What is wonderful about this novel is that its story of growing pains, friendship, family and love holds universal appeal, while its distinctly youthful Indian-American voice will resonate deeply with thousands of real-life Dimples. Just as for Dimple, for many of us of Indian origin born outside India (and increasingly for those within too) identity and culture are critical issues that sometimes seem

overwhelming as we strive to create our own place in the world without giving in to others' attempts to put us into convenient but ill-fitting boxes. It is thrilling that finally there is a realistic, daring and insightful work of young adult fiction that celebrates the hybrid nature of identity in general and of Indian-American identity in particular.

Dimple's story of self-actualisation emphasises that identity and culture are not static but fluid and constantly changing. Culture and identity shape and reinforce each other. Neither is simply something that is given to us or something that we are born with – we are not passive receivers of our culture or our identity. In fact, as Dimple discovers, we are not only active participants in creating our own identity but can also help to create cultures and sub-cultures, as she learns from the students involved in the South Asian college and club scene. Culture is not just about heritage, history and tradition, it is also about how those things that are passed down are relevant to us now; it is also about innovation and lifestyle in the present day. It is about what we fuse and create, not just about the customs that we uphold.

Dimple, an aspiring photographer, has always loved taking black and white photographs, but finally decides to experiment with taking colour images. As she does so, it is as if her perspective changes and she begins to notice and appreciate the infinite variety of nuance and shade in real life as in her photographs; even her black and white photographs seem to have more shades of grey in them than before. With this new multi-coloured lens on life, Dimple finds herself and her world enriched. She finds that much of what she had dismissed is,

upon further examination, actually more complex and more interesting than she had imagined possible, with more connection and continuity between what she had previously regarded as disparate fragments of her world. Crucially, the new multi-coloured lens also enables Dimple to be more aware of other people's points of view, and in fact she finds that she cannot resolve the tensions in her personal relationships with her parents and her best friend without first understanding more about their perspectives. As she works through the difficulties in these relationships, both Dimple and the reader realise that, even when you feel you have been wronged, there is always someone else's side to the story.

As Dimple opens up her black and white world to the glory of colourful possibilities, she develops a much-needed sense of self. She becomes a skilled cultural navigator, more confident and less confused, learning a valuable lesson in cultural identity: "You were the dancer and the dance, and you could shape yourself through a riff, or a shrug, or on an on-the-back spin, adapt to new rhythms without losing a sense of harmony with yourself. And that harmony, that was no static thing either, but many different parts coming together to sing the same song." 🎶





Born Confused
 by Tanuja Desai Hidier
 Published by Scholastic
 (USA: 2002; UK: 2003)
 ISBN 0439 978 629

For more information, visit
www.thisistanuja.com

Falguni Patel is News and Youth Editor and Director of Jain Spirit.


THE MAKING ANUJA DESAI HIDIER

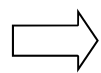
'Home is where you are'

If one word could personify Tanuja Desai Hidier, 'funky' it would be. This writer-singer-lyricist-filmmaker's first book, Born Confused, was picked up as the 'Larry King/CNN Pick of the Week'. The blue-eyed girl of Indian origin is dazzling London and New York. Oh! And that body glitter is just for effect!

FACT FILE
 Parents: Her greatest support in following her dreams...
 Unique characteristic: Brilliant blue eyes
 Education: Brown University; studied film at the New York Film Academy
 'Growing up, I never really thought of my Indianness...'
 First book: *Born Confused*, inspired by her dilemma of being 'not Indian enough...'
 First short film: *The Test*
 Favourite quote: 'It's a beautiful day'
 Favourite books: *The Catcher in the Rye*, Enid Blyton
 Favourite filmmakers: Alfred Hitchcock, Mira Nair, Satyajit Ray and Gurinder Chadha among others...



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KASHI LEVINS



HER EYES ARE BLUE. NO, they are not borrowed from the optometrist! They are real blue, as blue as the cerulean waters of Mauritius and Seychelles. You get the hue? Oh, and she does wear contact lenses, but those are just for the myopia she got from all that reading. She knows the men and women who make her giddy – Pablo Neruda, Charles Dickens, Michael Ondaatje, Zadie Smith, Mira Nair, Pedro Almodovar... And, of course, Madonna! Her favourite quote is ‘It’s a beautiful day’ (courtesy U2). The diktat she lives by can be traced to an ordinary kitchen: never turn your back on a pot of milk on the stove. It’s her way of saying things... like “You need to find solemnity for yourself.”

That, in a jiffy, is the writer, filmmaker, lyricist and singer Tanuja Desai Hidier. Sit with her and she spouts interesting anecdotes and some off-the-shelf philosophy that can really set you thinking. Her first book, *Born Confused*, definitely did that to Larry King, he of the famous talk show and the ubiquitous suspenders. No wonder then that the book was tagged the ‘Larry King/CNN Pick of the Week’. *Born Confused* went on to become the Sunday Times ‘Book of the Week’, and got Hidier the London Writers Award for fiction as well as the James Jones Fellowship.

Reared in the town of Wilbraham, Massachusetts, Hidier went to a school where there were two other Indians and two African-Americans. That kind of completed the colour spectrum in the classroom, but Hidier – then, just Tanuja Desai – wasn’t really raring to track Indianness, or to bond with a matching colour scheme and be just another pea in the pod.

“Growing up, I never really thought of my Indianness. When you live in a town this size, from the age of two to 18, with pretty much the same group of people around you, you stop seeing these things about each other. They are the whole world you know, and you are part of the only world they have ever known. Ramona is Ramona and Jennifer is Jennifer and Brian is Brian – not black or brown or white or purple,” she says wisely. Though she says she did not think much of her Indianness, and never

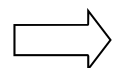


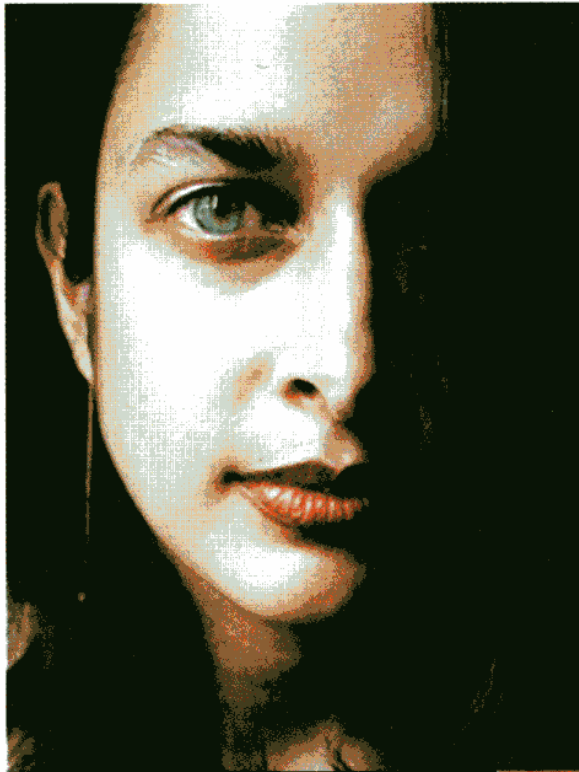
Members of the San Transisto band (from left): Anne-Marie Tueje, Ben Caplan, Tanuja Desai Hidier, Jon Fiber and Robin Price.

possessed that clichéd ‘rebellious’ streak against her parents, Hidier’s *Born Confused* does have an Indian connection. It is a coming-of-age story of Dimple Lala – a confused *desi*, if you please – an aspiring photographer who walks the tightrope between two cultures, without falling apart in the process, instead learning to be herself.

Born Confused is not autobiographical. “But the key ideas that I explore in it are those that I discovered and developed from my years in New York City. It was there that I came into contact with the very rich and very intertwined, and sometimes very incestuous *desi* scene, complete with *bhangra* parties and breakbeat club nights and all sorts of university panels on the subject of culture, and to whom it belongs,” says she. And only much later, when her first short film did the film festival circuit, did Hidier discover that she wasn’t “so much of an aberration” in terms of things she was interested in. “Till that point, what I felt was simply isolation. Dimple’s amazement at the sheer number of people out there and thinking about it all is just like mine was. In the heart of it, you could really feel a tangible sense of history in the making.”

Hidier – the surname comes from her French other half – is now adapting her book for the big screen. Earlier, combining her vocal and songwriting skills, Hidier worked with San Transisto and T&A, London and New York





On living multiculturally: "Stop seeing things in terms of dualities and dichotomies. Start coming to a global, all-encompassing view of the world and of identity. After all, home is where you are."

based bands that she sings and writes for, and released *When We Were Twins*, a CD of original rock/pop songs based on *Born Confused*. The CD, which was recently picked up by Creative Artists Agency as a cutting-edge, first-of-its-kind 'booktrack', ships worldwide and is available through www.ABCreativeD.com

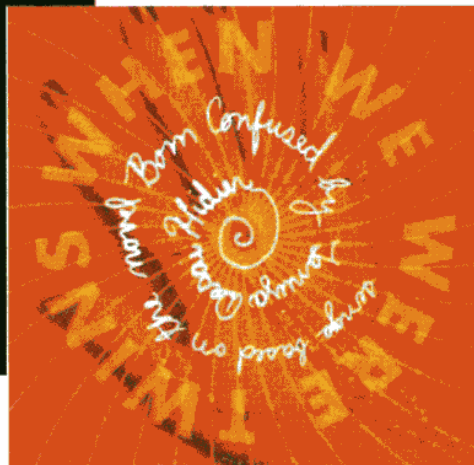
Wearing too many hats and a little glitter, Hidier divides her time between London and New York, though she calls London her 'base camp'. Her immediate family is in Massachusetts, where she grew up, and in Maine, while her French family is in the west of France. "We still

have relatives in India, primarily in Maharashtra and Gujarat, where my parents are from," she adds.

Isn't it just a little difficult straddling two worlds and cultures, having been born into a third? "It's an issue I'm still thinking about a lot. I do know the core of resolving it could be to stop seeing things in terms of dualities and dichotomies, as so tidily bifurcated, and to start to come to some sort of a global and encompassing view of the world and of identity. In the end, after all, home is where you are," she theorises.

What is her favourite tag? Singer? Lyricist? Writer? "I love them all! All three really feel like part of the same creative process to me, and the common love with all of them is writing, whether it is fiction, lyrics or scriptwriting. These different art forms cross-feed wonderfully. Songwriting can help bring a sense of rhythm to your prose, scriptwriting can hone your dialogue skills, and fiction aids all these areas, at least for me, by leading you to the heart of the story," she explains.

What's next? She comes up with the most unexpected one: "A bigger screen for my computer. Looser shoulders on *Surya Namaskar*. Driving on the other side of the road. And a toast to the people who kept my energy up and my wrists straight for the writing of this book."



When We Were Twins, a CD based on Hidier's *Born Confused*

That was Hidier a little while ago. At this moment, she is thoroughly enjoying herself. "It feels like such a gift to be in a place where I am able to finally do what I love and love what I do unreservedly. I am blessed to have some amazing people in my life, through my family and friends. My *jeevansaathi* and I are now hoping to build a family of our own."

Didn't I begin by saying this is Hidier's way of saying things: "You need to find solemnity for yourself." If you can't seem to find that solemnity, sit a while longer with her. She might articulate some philosophy. If that escapes you too, sit still longer... At least you would know the real blue of her eyes!

PREETI VERMA LAL 



Lancashire Children's Book Award Reviews for Tanuja Desai Hidier

Born Confused

"I thought this book was really good because it was like a true story about teenage life. It was a really good storyline and it expressed what teenagers feel and what they are like at that age of their life."

Laura Pritchard

"Complicated and quite dramatic in issues of religious traditions"

Jessica Steed

"I thought this was a brilliant book! It was funny, in a laugh-out-loud way and had a few great bits in, such as Dimple's disastrous date with Julian. It's light-hearted way of dealing with things make this a perfect book for light reading. Definitely eleven out of ten!"

Amy Loddington

"This book was a bit confusing to begin with but once got further through I really got into it. I really felt like I knew the characters and it was interesting to see how different cultures work. I hope the sequel is on its way!"

Rachel Cooke

"It was a girls book - I would have preferred it if it was for boys too. It was a good book, but it could have been shorter."

Shaun Rooney

"A lot of Indian words were used which I didn't know the meaning of."

Elizabeth Eve

INDIA TODAY
NEW DELHI

E-3 MAY 2004



ON THE SHELF

BORN CONFUSED

By *Tanuja Desai Hidier*

Published by Penguin

Price: Rs 295

PS



YET another coming-of-age novel from an Indo-American author, this

first novel traces the unravelling of the confusion that is seventeen-year-old Dimple Lala's life. There's the Indian family settled in the US, the all-American best friend and, inevitably, the suitable boy lined up at a suitable age. Dealing with the regular adolescent questions, all viewed through the distorting mirror of 'South Asian identity', the American born confused desi gradually comes to terms with her heritage and her environment in a pleasing if predictable finale. Chirpy, pacy and good-humoured, it's a good way to spend an adolescent afternoon.

BC in 2004 AD

BY SAMIT BASU

NOT another ABCD novel, I sighed as I opened American desi writer-filmmaker-musician Tanuja Desai Hidier's first novel, *Born Confused*.

Reading *BC* is like watching an ABCD movie (pleasant but predictable saga of cultural conflict)—the author is currently writing the screenplay. But this coming-of-age tale's warmth, clarity and humour more than compensate for the very overdone theme.

Dimple Lala, 17, is insecure, intelligent and initially unimpressed with the suitable boy her parents invite home. Later she finds out that he's a celebrated DJ

and thinks she's 'self-actualised', which makes her want to sing 'Itchy-itchy Ho!' But there's a beautiful blonde fly in the ointment—her friend Gwyn, whose amorous intent towards Mr Actually Suitable she has to subtly foil. In the process she discovers herself, her community and that It's All About Loving Your Parents.

Hidier writes with colour, wit and genuine passion for photography and music, which make *BC* entertaining fare for a lazy afternoon. A word of warning, though—it's unabashed chick-lit. So if you can't handle liberal doses of clothes, relationships and weepy women, grunt and scratch yourself occasionally to stay sane. ■



BORN CONFUSED

by Tanuja Desai
Hidier
Penguin
Price: Rs 295
Pages: 424

Name of the Paper : THE TRIBUNE

Place of Publication : NEW DELHI - 8 AUG 2004

Dated

Out of sync with self

Born Confused

by Tanuja Desai Hidier.

Penguin Books.

Pages 413. Rs 295.

“I guess I’m just not Indian enough for the Indians or American enough for the Americans, depending on who’s looking,” sadly declares Dimple Lala, who is labouring under the confusion of growing up in different cultures.

“Oh no!” The reader might think, “Not yet another book on The American-Born Confused Desi, who doesn’t know how to act, relate, fit in or face the typical South Asian cultural conflict.” For unfortunately, the truth is that the Indian reader has been exposed to far too much of the trials and dilemmas of this breed through films and books for the subject to really excite him anymore. And so, maybe the reader just passes the book over.

This would be a mistake. *Born Confused* is a highly readable, amusing and charming account of the growing up of Dimple Lala and her interactions with a varied group of people who influence her. In the process, she has to deal with the issues of teenage, of maturity, of getting comfortable with herself and her roots, of accepting her parents and coming to terms with her heritage—all of this in the milieu of the New Jersey society.

When we meet her, she is absolutely out of sync with herself and her surroundings. Her body has too many curves to fit the bill of the typical American teenage body. Her parents, wonderful and caring, though they make her feel “that maybe I hadn’t been traumatised enough by them to make me a regular teenager.” Dim-



ple’s passion is photography, which more often than not sees her behind the lens and out of the picture.

“The less evidence of my ungraceful plummet into adolescence the better for posterity, if I ever had one” was now turning into a serious occupation with her, and had come under parental scrutiny and disapproval. In addition, Dimple comes face to face with issues of alternative sexuality, which includes an Indian drag queen and her own cousin making an unorthodox sexual choice.

The cherry on the cake is when her parents arrange for her to meet a “suitable boy,” whom she decides to reject even before she meets him. “They could dress me up, but they were definitely not making us go out.” Her opinion of him gets confirmed when he declares his love for the songs of Asha Bhonsle and Lata, who, in her opinion, was “this really annoying Indian singer with a voice so shrill it could double-pierce your ears and leave hoops hanging.”

However, when she goes to New York from New Jersey, she sees the “unsuitable” Krish the way he really is—the cool DJ who can set the

dance floor on fire, a sensitive guy who could be the one to sort out her confusions. But by then, her beautiful friend, Gwen, has staked her claim on him. “In our twosome (Dimple’s and Gwen’s), I was “the other one”—you know the one the boy didn’t remember two seconds after delivering the pizza. The too curvy, clumsy, camera-clacking wallflower with nothing but questions lately.”

Born Confused is written in a fun, racy style. Dimple is a self-effacing, sweet girl who can look at her own self as well as the situations and people who surround her with a wry humour. The book is full of funny one-liners and tongue-in-cheek comments that elicit chuckles from the reader. Dimple’s confused search for her identity, compounded by her love for Krish sets her on a voyage of discovery that makes her re-establish a loving relationship with her parents, re-examine her culture, mythology and her place in America as an Indian. The author looks at the universal issues an adolescent girl is faced with. *Born Confused* is “seriously cool”. — A.S.



UK—Spring 2005

HIDIER, TANUJA DESAI *When we were twins*.
(Music audio CD) Purple Bat Productions Ltd,
2004, £11.45 inc p&p (payable to Purple Bat
Productions Ltd at PO Box 31602, London
W11 1UB) 60'51" (no ISBN)

The novel *Born Confused* was published in 2003 and the story is set around the complexities of life for an American girl of Indian sub-continent family origins. This is a CD of songs based on the novel with one for each chapter and the epilogue. It is not a 'musical-show' interpretation of the plot but rather it is a series of observations with expansions, commentaries and insights.

The musicians are three different bands and a duo with the author, Tanuja Desai Hidier, as vocalist in each case. The majority of the tracks come from the London-based and recorded San Transisto and the duo T&A recorded in New York. As well as being the singer throughout Tanuja is the common factor in the song-writing collaborations for all of the material except for one song. The music is pop with rock leanings, with only minor hints of any 'world music' influences, and this is absolutely right for the contemporary backdrop to the novel.

ANOKHIVIBE

UK — 2004

BORDERS

With so much manufactured pop, there's always room for a more unique sound, and that's exactly what London band San Transisto wants to provide its audience. Music365 describes the band's music as "a guitar electronic crossover with an interesting blend of guitar music and keyboards...very refreshing in a world that is diverging into the pure electronic or thrashy guitar."

It all began when Jon Fiber and Robin Price met at college in Liverpool in 1989. By chance, they met again in 1997 and formed UNIT, with Jon on keys and guitar and Robin on bass and vocals. Two years later, they found drummer Ben Caplan and lead guitarist Anne Marie Tueje. But with various other musicians coming and going, the band decided to change its sound and try out a new singer in 2000. In comes Tanuja Desai Hidier, the New Yorker, whose novel, a coming-of-age story titled *Born Confused*, received critical acclaim as a *Lary King* and *Sunday Times* pick of the week. (It also features on a Brown University literature course and is being adapted for the screen by Tanuja.)

The multi-talented Tanuja has also worked as a filmmaker as well as lead singer/songwriter in the New York band T&A with Atom Fellows, her former bandmate in punk-pop band io (who regularly played in NYC's music venues and an MTV charity collaboration). Tanuja recalls how she hooked up with San Transisto after moving to London: "The hardest thing to leave behind was io and working with Atom. I needed to fill the musical hole in my heart, so I answered ads in *NME* and *Melody Maker*. When I met the members of San Transisto, I knew they were the ones I wanted to work with - our personalities just clicked."

In an elaborate attempt to produce a trans-Atlantic collaboration between T&A and San Transisto, the bands focused their energies into the making of *When We Were Twins*, a collection of rock/pop/electro-folk songs based on themes, scenes, and characters in *Born Confused*. The story focuses on one Dimple Lala against the backdrop of New York City's *bhangra*/Asian Underground club scene. *Born Confused* takes its inspiration from the "ABCD" concept (American Born Confused Desi), referring to second-generation South Asians coming to terms with their dual identity. The CD was originally a San Transisto project, but former bandmate Atom Fellows got involved as part of T&A.

"On a personal level, it was fitting to include U.S. and U.K. tunes," Tanuja says. "Both places are home, and a strong theme in the story is learning to make your home in the people around you and in yourself." And so the album was made. The successful end product was achieved, thanks to "email, wavy files, subway tokens, coffee, red wine and redial!" The collaboration extended to include *The Retail* and *Unsuitable Girl*, featuring tracks which were written and produced with Jeff Cohen of Pancho's Lament and Mike Shimshack, as well as a T&A remix by London producer Mukul, featuring New York's top DJ of South Asian dance music, DJ Rekha. And, if the album needed further confirmation of its innovative quality, it was picked up by Creative Artists Agency/Youth Intelligence and

SAN TRANSISTO AND T&A

Trendcentral.com, who described it as a first-of-its-kind, cutting-edge trend, 'booktrack'.

San Transisto's single, *Heart of Brass*, made it on to the BBC radio playlist, and Zee TV recently covered the band and the making of the CD. London gigs include some interesting 'literary rock' shows (intertwining readings from *Born Confused* with the relevant songs) and a joint reading with *Brick Lane* author Monica Ali. San Transisto has played at Cherry Jam in Notting Hill and at the Hammersmith Palais, where it opened for Junoon in a concert to promote peace between India and Pakistan. *Tabla* player Surjit Bharj often joins the band as a special guest.

San Transisto's music is refreshingly different and that's what makes it stick. "The songs are essentially rock and folk-rock at heart - you could play most of them with a



guitar and vox," describes Tanuja. "But there's often a bit of layering, including elements of electronica that lend some of the songs

a trip-hoppy vibe, as well as different types of percussive instruments."

The *When We Were Twins* launch party earlier this year at Joe's Pub in New York City was a landmark event for the bands and Tanuja, as both San Transisto and T&A were in the same room and country for the first time. The event was a *New York Magazine*, *Time Out New York* and *Flavorpill* pick of the week. Tanuja's book reading was accompanied by a live custom-made soundtrack from DJ Rekha, and was followed by a live performance from San Transisto and T&A, adding to this modern musical melting pot.

And the show will definitely go on: "Beyond being an exciting medium in and of itself, songwriting has been a beautiful way to develop a deep friendship between bandmates and is a wonderful way of exploring ideas and communicating them, even across the ocean between, says" Tanuja. "And as a very wise and wiggly philosopher once sang, 'Music makes the people come together.' Word up!" AV

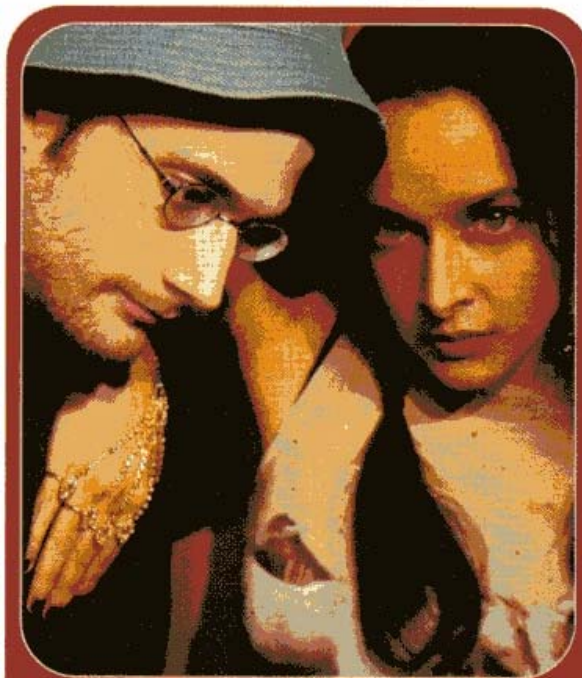
WORDS MEERA DATTANI
ILLUSTRATION/LAYOUT KAMMY SINGH
For more information, visit www.ABCreativeD.com.

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WRITING MUSIC

Many authors like to sing their own praises but none make a rock soundtrack in its honour. Unless you're Tanuja Desai Hidier, the frontwoman of not one but two bands (San Transisto and T&A), in which case it's only natural. Explaining why she turned her acclaimed novel **Born Confused** into song, she told Crush: 'I don't see it as strange to have a soundtrack to go along with a book. It's just a different way of expressing my idea. Instead of locked up in my bedroom, I was locked up in my studio...' To get a copy, entitled **When We Were Twins**, log on to www.ABCreativeD.com



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BORN CONFUSED?

By Alpa Shah

I guess the whole mess started around my birthday. Amendment: my first birthday. I was born turned around, and apparently was holding my head in my hand in such a way that resulted in twelve treacherous hours of painful labor for my mother to eject me.

My Mom said she imagined I was trying to sort out some great philosophical quandary, like Rodin's Thinker sculpture that she had seen on a trip to Paris in another lifetime. But I think that was just a polite way of saying I looked like I didn't get it. Born backwards and clueless. In other words, born confused.

So I came out the wrong way. And have been getting it all wrong ever since. I wished there was a way to go back and start over. But as my mother says, you can't step in the same river twice.

All those of you that attended the reading by Tanuja Desai Hidier of her new book, *Born Confused*, will agree that Tanuja seemed anything but confused. The discussion really made clear the complexity and ambiguity of the issue of cultural identity, the theme of her book, so relevant to people like ourselves, Indians living in the western world.

After an energizing Mango Dance by the Young Jains crew, she began her book reading by explaining the title of her book. *Born Confused* is the BC from the abbreviation ABCD, or American Born Confused Desi, a chic term first generation South Asians have for these second generation Americans who are supposedly 'confused' about their South Asian background. It is used throughout North America to categorize this widely known 'confused desi'. She explained that this alphabet extended all the way to Z and gave us two humorous examples of the expanded version. This introduced the theme of her book, the challenging issue of cultural identity, and discovering who you are.

Born Confused is the coming-of-age story of Dimple Lala, an ABCD 17 year old teenager, growing up in America. It is set largely in the context of New York City's explosive bhangra and Asian Underground club scene, decades after the Indian diaspora to the western world. It tells of her experiences and how she explores the issue of cultural identity on her journey to self-realisation, learning the importance of being what you want to be. The heart of the story is learning how to bring two cultures together without losing yourself in the process.

Her first excerpt introduced the character's confusion and perfectly set the scene for the following hour. This was just a small part of it:

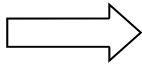
"She'd told him I was the Indian girl. The Indian girl. Somehow neither description rang completely true to me in terms of how I felt inside, but the thing was I'd never really consciously thought of myself as

American, either. Of course I did the Pledge, too, along with everybody else for years of mornings, but like everyone else I wasn't really thinking about the words. I mean, I definitely wanted liberty, like Gwyn had with the car keys and no curfew, and justice for all would be great, especially in high school where people were definitely not created equal (proof: cheerleaders). But I didn't know if that had so much to do with the stars and stripes; it seemed to be more about the jeans and teams. So not quite Indian, and not quite American. Usually I felt more Alien (however legal, as my Jersey birth certificate will attest to). The only times I retreated to one or the other description were when my peers didn't understand me (then I figured it was because I was too Indian) or when my family didn't get it (clearly because I was too American). And in India. Sometimes I was too Indian in America, yes, but in India, I was definitely not Indian enough."

In the rest of this passage, we were introduced to the different members of Dimple's family in India, and their Indian culture, and then to her blonde American best friend Gwyn, the two extremes which cause Dimple to feel like she is 'stuck in the middle' and lost between two cultures, neither feeling Indian enough in India, nor American enough in America. The cultural confusion felt by Dimple is completely contemporary; and although Tanuja did mention that there are significant differences and parallels between the South Asian culture in America and that in Britain, the Young Jains Desi debate held recently, brought to light that many of us share these same confusions and contradictions.

The extract that followed told of the heart-warming non-verbal relationship between her and her grandfather in India, due to the language barrier, how she uses her beloved camera, Chica Tikka, to observe the world, and spy on worlds she feels she can't access, and how her confusion acts as a catalyst for her creativity. Tanuja explained that later the camera allows her to enter those previously





inaccessible worlds and come to terms with her identity.

Further extracts were read from the book, one particularly memorable scene was that when Dimple and her best friend Gwyn went to the Indian parts of New York City, Queens. The humorous episode with her mother was something we could all relate to and the rich description of Indian food stalls in the market, left all our mouths watering, and ready for the trip to Yogiji's that followed. This passage was full of humour and description and definitely made an impact on the deeply captivated audience. The reason they had gone there, however, was because Gwyn, Dimple's best friend had wanted to purchase the whole Indian attire, which had recently become fashionable.

The discussion that followed raised questions about the Western celebration of the Indian boom. Looking back a few years, we've seen Madonna and her South Asian phase, Gwen Stefani and the bindi period, Chai in Starbucks, temporary tattoos, Indian instruments in hit songs such as Truth Hurts, the Bollywood summer in Selfridges and on Channel 4 – how is this all to be received by Indians living in the western world? "What do you do when popular culture starts to make mad use of your own before you've even got a grip on it yourself?" How should we react when mainstream culture begins to intersect with minority culture?

She asked us a question she came across when she was writing the book – "why does a bindi an element of ancient culture and later a symbol of immigrant shame look trendy on a non-Indian girl but often outdated and traditional on a Indian one?"

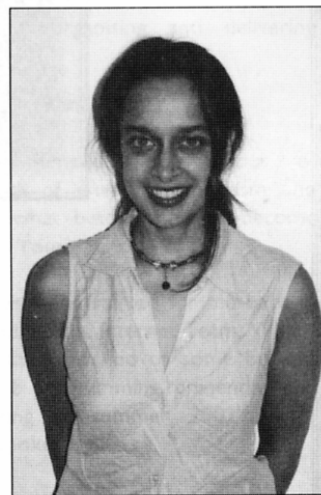
Overall, the reading was one which everyone had found very enjoyable. Her voice lyrical and expressive, Tanuja's reading captured the minds of her audience, all deeply absorbed in the story of Dimple Lala. Rather like her own persona, the passages read, interspersed with humour, gave colourful and vivid portrayals of Dimple's experiences. With fresh and detailed descriptions, she painted pictures with her words and really brought the characters and settings to life, bringing out the beauty of Indian culture in many of the scenes.

Although Born Confused is not an autobiography, Tanuja explained that many of the key ideas explored in it are those she discovered in and developed from her experiences in New York City.

Tanuja described what she had discovered by writing the book and the message she felt her book conveyed to other 'confused desi's' – the message that multi-culturality is a culture in itself. The story describes the personal dilemma between being American, and being Indian, before Dimple realizes that she can create her own place in society. ABCD is not a negative identity, but a positive, viable culture with its own space. She realizes she's not 'stuck in the middle', but has her own space and she can then open herself up to the best of both worlds; no longer does she feel displaced and alone. It is important not to think of it all as a dichotomy, cleanly divided between the Indian and western cultures – a bi-cultural identity is perfectly feasible in the world of today. We shouldn't lose our own culture as a result of this cultural exchange. It should be seen as integration, not separation – two cultures *can* be reconciled without losing one over the other.

Tanuja described what she has discovered by writing the book: that multiculturality is a culture in itself. Tanuja really seems to have turned this 'C', confusion, into clarity, and filled a void in her mind as well other people's. What's more, she has raised questions we can really ask ourselves – what does it mean to be Indian-American, or British-Asian, and most importantly, to be ourselves? ■

Tanuja Desai Hidier is an American born writer/musician, now based in the UK. Prior to moving to London, she lived in New York City where she worked as a writer/editor to magazines. She is also a lead singer/songwriter in a melodic rock band, San Transisto which plays regularly in



London, and is working on a screen adaptation of and CD of original songs inspired by the book. Copies of her book Born Confused, a Sunday Times book of the week are available from Young Jains (signed copies are in limited supply).

To find out more about her inspirational book, visit her website at www.ThisIsTanuja.com ■

Vida!

May 2004 - Malaysia

Vida! RECOMMENDS:

— *When We Were Twins*

An album that amalgamates rock, pop and electro-folk, based on Tanuja's novel *Born Confused*. With special guest spinning by the acclaimed DJ Rekha, this CD was written and recorded in both London and New York. It features tracks by



San Transisto, T&A, The Retails and Unsuitable Girl – bands that Tanuja writes songs for and sings with.

cause celeb

the colour purple

Tanuja Desai Hidier

TEXT SUSAN ABRAHAM

PHOTOGRAPHY KAROKI LEWIS

It is twilight on this cold, autumn day in London. The rain falls softly. Already I am late for author/singer/lyricist **Tanuja Desai Hidier's** reading of her debut novel, *Born Confused*. It describes in severe detail an emigrant Indian teen's successful search for individual identity in her New York world. The book, seen through the eyes of 17-year-old photography enthusiast Dimple Lala, speaks nostalgically of childhood friendships and an insightful *Walton*-type romance.

Tanuja told me once how she likes sharp drizzle. Its wetness, its scent, even more invigorating than her favourite YSL *Baby Doll* perfume or a treasured beaded necklace from a niece. How it reminds her of India. And so, by the way, do the azure autumn skies. This American-born Hindustani writer remembers the skies in New England, where she was raised, with their ethereal mix of lilacs, mauves, indigos and violets. Plus, she loves her purple leather rain jacket, bought for a tenner on Portobello Road. And cowboy boots to match.



Quietness engulfs an intent first-floor crowd in a hushed library silence. All listen as Tanuja speaks bravely of her nine-month venture into *Born Confused*. She talks loudly, quickly and with ease about her painful, solitary writing: most days between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m., some days from 7 in the morning till 4 p.m. the next. She describes the exuberance, exhilaration and energy that accompanied her restless ambition.

"After all this time avoiding what I had wanted to do since I was a child, it was sheer relief finally writing my book, and far less exhausting than the procrastination that came from putting it off," she grins. "While writing I looked at the world through Dimple's photography. What face would Dimple choose? How would she shoot a street, pay attention to things, behave on the Tube?" Later, her fictitious

characters became an obsession. Tanuja imagined them riding on the train with her, following her everywhere, masquerading as silent spies in her house.

Once, Tanuja even hired a *Bharata Natyam* dancer to pose for hours, standing on one leg, just so she could catch the dance's finer nuances. Quick to explain herself, she reflects, "I think it's from the *Ramayana*."

Tanuja wrote *Born Confused* to honour her parents ("My father told me to always let my work be my worship.") and to pay homage to New York. "One great thing about NY is its way of undoing conceptions, stripping away stereotypes. In fact, I love the vocabulary for any sexuality, race, gender... Everything good can find its float to parade on... Everything can be celebrated openly."

London is not to be left out. "London helps me to process

what the nightclubbing fever of NY robs from me," she says. So it's very much a case of *yin* and *yang*.

Once, Tanuja was so busy writing she didn't leave her London apartment for three days. Result? Sore knees from an 'incorrect' typing chair, "over-caffeination" and sleep deprivation. Finally, "just to do something different and relieve the stress" she walked around London parks, learnt yoga, and even waitressed at a café.

Admittedly, now she looks less like a waitress and more like Joan Baez: large hoopla earrings; tight, creased jeans; long straight hair; rich, dark lipstick. Very gypsy-like.

Two watching blondes share my thoughts. "She looks exceptionally young," one sighs enviously. Tanuja is conscious of the roomful of eyes. Does this make her nervous? Uncomfortable, perhaps? She shifts her feet awkwardly.

She wants to please, not ruffle feathers, though she can't resist the odd bite. "One problem I have with identity is that people think my light green eyes are contacts." She finishes deliberately, flashes the greens dangerously, looking straight at the blondes. Not taking the hint, her audience applauds approvingly.

Who has come to hear her speak? Young emigrant Indian couples hover discreetly at the back, holding hands and stealing kisses. Several old men, one toothless, smile appreciatively. Studious university types...

Of course, Tanuja now commands attention. With homes in London and Paris, and Frenchman Bernard Hidier as husband, she is already part of the fashionable literary crowd.

She recounts how Bernard helps her keep things in perspective. "He makes me laugh every day and he's a great French cook." She adds, "We feast all the time on French family recipes. My *jeevansaathi* (soul mate) Bernard," she gushes.

Like an over-indulged child, Tanuja's satisfaction is clear. No deep waters or high fives. Just lots of head patting. She celebrates her love for life through her hedonistic pleasures: dancing in her favourite New York clubs till dawn; a penchant for shoes, coffee and sleep; writing songs for the bands she fronts – *Atom* (NY) and *San Transisto* (London); girl lunches and dinners in the sunshine with wine, music and "insane desserts"; morning coffee and tea with parents and in-laws; lots of guitar music. Plus building fairy houses with her niece and nephew, running around

the reservoir in New York City with her brother.

Her newfound success, as any shoestring-budget author-to-be will know, is startling, shocking. Even the book came easy...

For starters, no literary agent was involved. "I sold the book myself." She appears surprised at the thought. "I met an editor at Scholastic Press who I'd met through a violinist in my punk rock band in NY. I went to see him for editing work. He thought I was there to pitch a book idea," she laughs. "I really wanted to write the *desi* (Indian) American story... You know, the coming of age of the second generation."

"He was immediately excited, said there was nothing yet on the bookshelves. He really wanted to help me get there. So, after I moved to London, I sent him a very detailed proposal which they then bought."

When writing her book, she imagined the computer keyboard was her guitar. She intertwines book songs into her reading events, with acoustic sessions in bookstores, and semi-plugged gigs.

Born Confused, will eventually be turned into a film. Right now, Tanuja is busy completing the screenplay. "All the while I wrote my book, I also kept a file running in which I'd toss ideas for a film, from scenes to casting wish-lists to preview outlines and soundtrack. Do you know that all this is better than coffee at keeping you revved as you write?"

A sequel to her first novel is also in the wings. And in February 2004 Tanuja's bands will launch a CD (available at record stores or by direct order from DJTamasha@aol.com or Desicreate@aol.com) of 17 songs taken from her novel.

Tanuja likes the combination of her twin passions. When writing her book, she imagined the computer keyboard was her guitar. She intertwines book songs into her reading events, with acoustic sessions in bookstores, and semi-plugged gigs. "I think these art forms really feed each other well," she enthuses. Visual or aural, you're still exploring the story of your life with all your senses."

cause celeb

"Sometimes, lyric writing has clarified an image for my fiction, and vice versa. And music can bring a sense of rhythm, cadence, joy to a writing style. Fiction can bring narration to lyrics, and film simply gives you a palette with which to paint rooms, people or moods."

Reading over, questions answered. She sings. Her voice – fluid, folksy and deep – fills the room. It makes you think of rivers, mountains, oceans. Reminiscent of Enya. Next to the singer is Anne-Marie Tveje, *San Transisto's* lead guitarist, a Tracy Chapman look-alike teasing us with her gentle guitar strumming. Everyone stands to clap.


Session over. A long queue quickly snakes its way to the front. People seem impressed. A young Borders salesman carefully strides past with a precarious pile of the prized novel. The toothless man grins and hurries to Tanuja, grasping his copy as if his life depended on it. Others follow.

So is Tanuja American, Indian, English or even – dare I say – French? "How can I really know?" she challenges me frankly.

"A person is so much more than the sum of their being. I mean, so much more than the car they drive, the school they go to, the love they care about... What makes each person laugh, cry or get angry. Who are we to give labels?"

"When I consider my own identity, though I am of course Indian and of course American, I tend to think of verbs and nouns that make me feel most at home. Not physically, but emotionally and psychologically. Writing does that. Music does that. More than anything, my family and friends do that."

"In fact, writing *Born Confused* has really helped me redefine 'confused' with a capital 'C'. I take confusion and turn it into clarity through creativity. My book has freed me."

As I leave the store, the rain stops. It's dark and bitterly cold. But for Tanuja Desai Hidier, the New Year looks bright "with its long white space." This Christmas, she'll curl up in Bernard's arms next to a warm Paris fireplace surrounded by family and friends. Yet through the winter the smells of India, its indigo twilights and its rains, will secretly ring in her heart. And so the music will never stop. But what of Joan Baez? In this case, let's just say diamonds without the rust. 



BOOK REVIEW

TITLE: *Born Confused*

AUTHOR: Tanuja Desai Hidier

PUBLISHED: Scholastic Press, London, UK (Hardback, 413 pages)

Born Confused is a decorative, star-spangled novel, dressed to the nines, with sensual smoky eyes, Bombay *bindi*, a scattering of illustrated rose petals topped with daring purple splash. If it could talk, it would warn of bolder New York lights, thundering *bhangra* beats and high-fusion energy that skilfully hide behind its chunky chapters, ready to stomp deafening drumbeat thoughts into the unsuspecting reader's mind. Who would think a 17-year old's summer romance could burst at the seams with such colour and sparkle?

Here is a fragile adolescent identity, as seen through the eyes of the book's fictitious heroine, 17-year-old Dimple Rohitbhai Lala, who tries to find herself through the clamour of extended family relationships, a shaky childhood friendship and a sackful of achy-breaky heart's desires. Along the way, Dimple swims to shore with sharply drawn breaths, through the tide of conflicting emotions rising and sinking with electrifying pace.

Tanuja highlights new streams of thought in achieving a triumphant individualism. A subtle and wry humour peppers clever insights into the characters' emotions. Unexpected teenage outbursts and incessant parental naggings punctuate the tale. An unexpected bounce of humour provides a final polish.

Set in the States, soaked in the atmosphere of a long school vacation, *Born Confused* traces photography enthusiast Dimple Lala's relationship with her beloved camera. Baptised '*Chikka Tikka*', the precious gadget holds memories of Dimple's late grandfather – her softest spot.

Dimple's parents faithfully follow Indian traditions and customs while living the American Dream. They match-make their only daughter with 20-year-old Karsh, son of family friend Radha. Dimple is deliberately rude, only to fall in love later when she catches Karsh in his element – as a deejay of a hot NY disco.

Karsh, the life and soul of this hip, gyrating, rock party, is also the traditional mummy's boy. How could Dimple possibly resist this lethal combination?

Then a tussle ensues as Dimple's trusty best friend, Gwyn, also sets her sights on Karsh. This new twist throws up poisonous sweepings from under a 15-year-old carpet. Dimple wants to be the American Gwyn and Gwyn wants to be the Indian Dimple. Who wins the heart of that delicious Salman Khan clone? Dimple and Gwyn must resolve differences and examine loyalties or lose each other forever. The acceptance of extraordinary identities and radical lifestyles by beautiful lesbian cousin, Kavita, and Zara the transvestite, help Dimple make important decisions.

Radha's ramblings, however, were unnecessary. Chapters carry on from the preceding chapter with dull, minute detail. Like a tractor on a highway, this process slows down the plot.

Also, words like "befuddledly," "wooziness", "rock-solid", "hitchka", "legit", "swirly-whirlies" and "plunked," among others, detract from Tanuja's otherwise smooth, sophisticated style.

And since when does a teen inherit such wisdom to tie up her life into happy, neat bundles with such amazing alacrity? The 'happy-ever-after' ending also robs selfish Gwyn of a promising redemption. Karsh comes across as that perfect Mills and Boon hero. This lack of realism produces some preachy patches.

Yet *Born Confused* does double up as a universal teenage diary, acutely measuring sharp adolescent pain. You'll definitely recall special schoolgirl friendships and that fading tender crush. A little Bombay dreaming thrown into a rose garden won't hurt. For a long while after putting the book down, I was 17 again.

(For pre-ordering details, log on to www.thisistanuja.com or www.ABCreativeD.com).

ACCOLADES FOR *BORN CONFUSED* IN 2003

1. Saluted by CNN's Larry King as his Pick of the Week.
2. New York Public Library 2003 Book for the Teenager.
3. Chicago Public Library 'Best of the Best' Book of the Year.
4. *Sunday Times* Book of the Year.
5. *Financial Times* Book of the Week.
6. *The Bookseller* magazine Choice Book.
7. One of Borders UK's 5-star picks for Book Choice and Cool Reads.
8. Among *The Observer's* Top 5 Beach Reads (Summer).

BOOKWORM

All American, all Indian Dimple...

'Born Confused' by Tanuja Desai Hidier. Published by Scholastic Children's Books (London WC1A 1NN; tel: 01926 887799) at £12.99 in hardback.

THIS BOOK, which was first published in America by Scholastic Press, tells the lively story of Dimple Rohitbhai Lala who is growing up in America and finding it — perhaps due to having been born the wrong way round — a thoroughly disconcerting process. Not least because, while she's been rebelling against her folks and all things Indian most of her life, she hits her teenage years just as (unbelievably) everything Indian is suddenly hip.

We handed Dimple's story to an 11 year-old and she read it cover to cover — all the hefty 413 closely-printed pages of it — virtually without a pause. She found it intriguing that Dimple's best friend Gwyn, a pale blonde, is greedy with desire to borrow Dimple's things — from a bindi to her sari blouse, which she wears as a tight little crop top!

Then Karsh Kapoor comes on the scene. When Dimple's parents introduce Dimple to Karsh — in their presence and that of his surprising mother, Radha, an old friend of her own mum — she finds him a terminally "Strikingly Average Computer Geek/Mama's Boy With Amazing Ability To Say Just The Right Thing". Karsh on the other hand obviously sees more in Dimple — though she doesn't herself notice this — clad as she is in her 17th-birthday present, a "Japanese-material" salwar kamees (red and gold too). She's just cross that her parents always insist that she put on traditional Indian dress at least on special occasions.

Of which this is undoubtedly one. Karsh is persuaded off the piano stool and goes boldly over to sit in that gaping space on the sofa between Dimple's mum and dad: "My parents



Born Confused is a tale of identity confusion and learning to accept your cultural roots

must have been about to pee in their pants for joy. Here I was, cozily sardined in beside my future mother-in-law, there he was with his future folks. And the two of us, face to face over a replete table".

On the other hand, Karsh becomes considerably more interesting when Dimple

and Gwyn — whose eyes glister over a jangle of sparkly rakhi bracelets — come across him DJ-ing at an Indian music club. Dimple sees him in a new — far more flattering — light, but to her intense annoyance Gwyn hasn't got a clue and blurts out all the most embarrassing things Dimple had said about him originally!

Meanwhile Dimple pursues her passion for photography — less popular with her parents than when she just took family shots. She thinks she's blown it with Karsh, however, whom she believes reciprocates Gwyn's enthusiasm for him. You'll have to read it yourself — or perhaps gift it to a younger relative — for the unexpected twist at the end. Our 11 year-old thought it was a brilliant story, not least for the irony and humour. "We were all barefoot and stagnant in the living room", for instance, is Dimple's take on the no doubt much approved of fact that Karsh and mom Radha remove their shoes without being asked... Our reader got really bound up with the lives of all the varied cast of characters too, not least Dimple's affectionate — if exasperated — portrait of her mum and dad, who only want the best in what is clearly equally a "confusing" situation for them.

All in all this is a detailed and generous picture of the US Indian community — surprisingly close to that of the British-based one in



Author Tanuja Desai Hidier

many ways — and of the way Indian culture is both enduring, adapting and influencing its new milieu, in this case the world's currently most consciously powerful country. This makes it, in its own way, a book of record.

Mind over matter?

MAREK KOHN'S *As We Know It: Coming to terms with an evolved mind* (Granta Books, £17.99 in hardback), in

imaginatively investigating how the human mind evolved, draws on controversial theories of the development of sexual relations in hominid groups to show the evolution of trust as crucial to the stabilisation of society. Which is not perhaps a million miles away (a million years perhaps) from Dimple being formally introduced to 'The Boy' (as she calls him) in her parents' jam-packed "living room", where a dancing rosewood statue jostles Krishna explaining the Gita to Arjuna in sandalwood, beneath a mirrored wall hanging.

The author, whose three other books include *The Race Gallery* ("a devastating critique of racism in science"), also makes a central theme of his fascinating meditation on the handaxe, its uses and meanings. Mr Kohn has been a freelance journalist since 1983 and his 'Second site' column appears in *The Independent* on Sunday.

This vivid volume seeks explicitly to recapture Darwinism from the political right and portray our evolutionary history as liberating rather than limiting.



Nov 22, 2002

A Writer's Journey: From Inspiration to Publication A conversation with author Tanuja Desai Hidier

By SHIVANI MAHENDROO

Author of debut novel 'Born Confused,' dealing with Indian-American cultural identities, speaks about her experiences

'Born Confused' is a novel by Tanuja Desai Hidier and is published by Scholastic Press. The 413-page book hit stores in October and costs \$16.95.

The story explores one teen girl's struggle to bring together her two rich cultural identities — Indian and American — without falling apart in the process. Dimple Lala doesn't know what to think. She's spent her whole life resisting her parents' traditions, but when she enters high school, suddenly all things Indian become trendy. Chai, henna, and Hindu-god icons flourish. In the college scene, South Asian Studies departments talk about it all like it's history in the making. To add to Dimple's confusion, her parents have arranged for her to meet a "suitable boy." Of course, the meeting is a disaster, but when she goes to a New York City nightclub a few weeks later, she finds him spinning a magical web of words and music. Suddenly the "suitable boy" is suitable because of his sheer unsuitability, and, of course, complications ensue.

Tanuja Desai Hidier was born and raised in Massachusetts. After attending Brown University, she was a writer/editor on magazine and Web site projects in New York City. She now lives in London where she is the lead singer/lyricist in a melodic rock band.

I like to consider myself a journalist and a writer. On nearly a daily basis, I grapple with taking an idea or a desire to write about something and giving it life through words. I, like so many other young Indians around me, also have fantasies of writing a novel. 'Born Confused' is Hidier's first novel, and after reading it, I was interested in knowing how she brought her book to fruition. She spoke with me from her flat in London and told me all about her journey to writing 'Born Confused'.

SOME THOUGHTS ON 'BORN CONFUSED'

'Born Confused' is about a young Indian American. After interviewing the author, I was curious to see how another young Indian American reacted to the story. My friend **Ankur Shah**, 26, is an avid reader, so I decided to ask him to read the book and write his thoughts on it. Here is what he had to say:

Eminently readable, chaotic, breezy, poignant. I need wonder no more what the Byzantine court eunuch intrigue of American high schools today must be for ABCDs. Dimple's life stunningly resembles so many teenagers even in Bombay, those not suffering from the existential angst of finding their skin color and families significantly different from those around them. The meaning of fitting in and understanding her place in the world seem to have come over a keenly detailed summer between two boyfriends, friendships, and conflicting identities. As Dimple herself glibly summarizes her epiphany, an Indian Summer.

A little too glib perhaps, with the entire gamut of coming-of-age traumas centered neatly on a small set of intertwined relationships, exploiting familiar generalizations. Her story is almost as perfect as she cannot believe herself to be. Missing is the pathos that accompanies similar protagonists such as Holden Caulfield, the incomparable Adrian Mole, or even Gopal from 'Inscrutable Americans.' But the gentle predictability belies a deeper truth.

That Dimple's story is shared by so many around her. That her sense of isolation, peculiarity of pain and problem are in truth no different from her friends, each in their inward looking, hyper-awareness.

The first-generation immigrants, their Indian roots and deliciously homosexual cousin make for a humorous series of missteps, allow for each of the characters to redeem themselves, and, of course, lead up to the happy ending..

Q: When did you first start to write? How did that lead to writing 'Born Confused?'

A: I never consciously made the decision to write. I just found I naturally gravitated towards this form of self-expression, from pretty much the time I could write. I began writing poems at age six for fun and turned to fiction at 10 or 11. I realized that I could best express myself through writing, so I kept it up. Later on, I took fiction writing workshops on and off for a few years in New York. Those workshops helped me clarify for myself that I wanted to write about second-generation America, specifically, stories about the South Asian diaspora. I got a sense of what I truly wanted to write about during my years in New York, particularly those when I got involved through my short films in the desi arts scene; the issues and themes I wanted to explore in fiction crystallized still more, but at the time I didn't realize what was actually happening, and in some ways probably wasn't ready to write about these ideas quite yet, as I was too close to it all for perspective and was just going through a phase of feeling unsure about what I wanted to do in general.

Then, literally days before moving to London, I had a meeting with an editor named David Levithan at Scholastic whom I'd met through a friend of a friend at a Fiona Apple concert months before. I thought I was coming in to discuss doing some freelance editing for Scholastic from London while he thought I was coming in to pitch ideas for a book for a new imprint he was launching. I had always wanted to write a novel, but it was not something I was actively pursuing. This misunderstanding was a wonderful stroke of luck. I knew it was one of those moments where you don't say no. So I started talking to him about the ideas I had been working on in short films and short stories over the last few years. I said I was interested in doing an Indian-American coming-of-age story. He was immediately very excited about the idea and said that was a book he'd never seen and he'd love to help get it onto the bookshelf. He asked me to write a synopsis of the idea, and then we would go from there. Maybe a month later, after I got to London, I sent him a one-page proposal. He really liked it and asked me to flesh it out further. About four or five months later, I had put together a 25-page outline of the novel, about 40 sample pages from it, and about 60 sample pages from short stories I'd written on the same theme. Scholastic bought the book based on this proposal about six months after my initial meeting with David.

Q: Can you tell us about the writing process; the challenges and the writer's block?

A: I think I had writer's block for about three years before writing this book! During the actual writing of 'Born Confused,' I didn't actually get blocked. I think the main reason for this is that I had spent a lot of time, from three to five months, on a very detailed outline. This outline laid out, like a screenplay nearly, the action and scenes, through to the end. For me, the challenge in writing is not the actual writing; the danger is that I can write fairly easily, so I can go off for pages and pages. I needed something to rein me in a little bit and keep me sticking to some sort of structure. The outline really served as a backbone throughout the writing process, and I leaned on it often during those blank page/screen moments.

The other main reason I didn't have writer's block during the writing of this book is because I didn't really have time to. I sold the book before I finished writing it, and there was actually a deadline in place. I simply didn't have the luxury of sitting back and wondering could I really do this. There was no time for negative judgment, and this very lack of time really helped me focus. The actual writing process took, funnily enough, nine months exactly — I was having chocolate craving and engaging in strange eating habits throughout! It took five months to write the first draft and then another four to revise it. David was a wonderful editor — eagle-eyed and gentle, and very energetic, as you must be, I imagine, when you've been handed an 800-plus page first draft — and it was very good to have his fresh eyes looking at the novel throughout. He also truly cared about the characters, which I deeply appreciated.

As far as organizing writing time went, I didn't have a set schedule. It was definitely not a 9 to 5 kind of thing regularly, although some days it was. Then there were other days where I would be working from 8 a.m. to 4 a.m. Then there would be stretches of two or three days where I couldn't even look at the computer because I had just been through a phase of near all-nighters. I

managed to practice yoga two or three times week when I was writing, and it really helped me clear my head. It was also great because it helped me get out some of my computer knots. My best working hours always seemed to be from about 10 p.m. to about 2 or 3 a.m. The phone rings less at that time. You don't have to run errands or go to meetings. It is a much quieter moment, and there is something about having that immense night sky out the window — it just feels like you have endless time.

I also made sure to take a 10- to 15-minute walk each morning. It was purportedly to go buy coffee, but would often end up being a meandering through the market near where I live (in London) and through the side streets to say hello to people, check out the flowers, the neighborhood harmonica player, and such. That was really good to do too, because there were times when once I actually sat down at the computer, I wouldn't leave for several hours. There was even one period when I didn't leave the apartment for a few days. I figured it was important to get that walk in to get perspective on the fact that there were other things going on as well, the universe wasn't just about you and your next paragraph. It's really good to take yourself seriously as a writer, but it's also really good to know when not to take yourself too seriously. You don't have to play or evaluate your entire life on just that one page or that one chapter. You don't have to be just that one thing. There are many facets to a human being, many things that make you who you are, and there's a whole world out there; sometimes it's just good to keep that in mind.

Q: How did you find your agent?

A: The usual way of going about it is you finish the book, submit it to an agent, possibly revise it with the agent you end up working with, and then the agent shops it around to different publishers. But because of the way this particular project happened — I didn't actually have a book completed — it never occurred to me to look for an agent. One of the main reasons to get an agent is to sell your book to a publishing company, and I had already sold it. Despite this, I don't think it's a bad idea at all to have one. For instance, when it came to my contract, I wasn't at all familiar with the legal vocabulary or what was standard and what was not, and it took me a very long time — with the invaluable help of a generous friend who'd studied law — to understand it and then negotiate changes. With an agent, the agency has a lawyer who deals with the legal aspects of the contract while the agent negotiates for you. In hindsight, it would have been nice to have someone to do this. I completely cherish the relationship I have with my editors at Scholastic, and I felt bad sometimes having to deal with contractual issues through them. Having an agent would have allowed me to focus on simply the editorial relationship. If you are trying to sell a book and can sell and negotiate on your own, that's great. You have saved your 15 percent. But from what I have heard from a lot of writers, it is a 15 percent well spent.

Q: How about the publicity process? Did your life change?

A: I naively thought the work would be done once the book was — but that's actually when the real work begins! The PR and readings, and e-mails, and promotional activities — these take up a lot of time. I just returned to London after a month in the States, doing events in New York and D.C. and Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and spent the first week back unable to quit my pillow! But it's all a thrill.

Q: Do you have advice for aspiring writers?

A: Trust me, writing is a lot less exhausting than not writing. Write a little bit every day — even putting pen to paper, or finger to key, for a page or two of anything can help ward off the 'blank-page' syndrome. Do whatever works: Take writing workshops and do open mike readings to try out pieces you are working on, read, run, listen to music, see films, pay attention to your surroundings and the people in your world. Don't wait for inspiration — create it. Everybody has a story to tell, and a story that is worth hearing.

Republic of Ireland

Sunday, January 18, 2004 : New York girlie meets basement Bhangra

Reviewed by Deirdre Mulrooney

Born Confused

By Tanuja Desai Hidier Scholastic €18.45

Allowing yourself to be enveloped in the "ever-weaving tapestry of sitar and snare and chunking key" spun by Indian-American Tanuja Desai Hidier in this award-winning debut novel is a heady experience.

Writing in New York's answer to valley-girl speak, Desai Hidier, also lead singer of the band SanTristano (there's a CD on its way to accompany the book next month), plonks the reader into an anthropologically fascinating milieu in which joyful New York girlie meets basement Bhangra.

Set in the teen world of "becoming" and embracing edgier topics such as sex, drugs, lesbianism, transvestitism and divorce, there is, you might say, eating and drinking in this book.

Second generation immigrants are known for producing wonderful new expressions of hybrid identities. Born in America to Indian parents, Desai Hidier gives voice to what has become known as ABCD culture - American Born Confused Desi ('Desi' is Hindi for 'of my country' and is a slightly pejorative term for Indian-Americans.)

The diffident protagonist of Desai Hidier's coming of age story, Dimple Lala, is - quite literally - born confused into a burgeoning South Asian second generation, and the groovy underground subculture that has become synonymous with it.

What emerges is more like Arundhati Roy's densely poetic writing style than that of fellow Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri, who charts the territory in a sparser, more sober and elliptical way. Writing her way through swathes of saris and Bharat Natyam dancing, Desai Hidier's baroque, ebullient voice is big, and ultimately, her own.

Seventeen-year-old Dimple is an aspiring photographer. She does her darnedest to merge seamlessly into the "melting pot", by keeping her sights firmly set on her best friend, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Gwyn - whose all-American, Barbie-doll perfection Dimple yearns to emulate. But for a girl who grew up amid shrines to Indian deities interspersed with pop-tarts in her New Jersey family kitchen, suppressing her ethnicity demands Herculean effort.

Accepting the ugly-duckling role with magnanimity, Dimple tags along in her prom-queen pal's willowy shadow, hiding behind the lens of 'Chica Tikka' (as she calls her camera) until an East is East-style marriage to a suitable Indian boy is arranged. He turns up, and is rejected out of hand by Dimple. However when Gwyn dons saris, bindis and Bhangra music - a bit like Madonna in her Oriental phase - in an attempt to snare the overlooked suitor (who only turns out to be the coolest DJ in New York) for herself, Dimple realises that her innards are stirring for - yes - that thereunto unsuitable fellow.

The romantic comedy takes flight, and it is hard to put the book down until the last page has been turned.

Navigating a path through the inchoate possibilities that are the birthright of Dimple Lala and her ilk, this is a delightful read for teens and for anyone interested in that cultural hybrid that involves Bombay, NYC, the groovy Bhangra scene and the pursuit of the Jeevansaathi (soulmate in Hindi).



**Community » Culture Features » 2004
DesiClub.com's Top 50 Coolest Desis of 2004**

Here it is ladies and gentlemen! Our list of the movers and shakers of 2004. This year, we took over the world of politics, movies, music and sports! We now showcase the very people who shaped the outcome of the year that was for South Asians. [...]

40. Tanuja Desai Hidier

Location: New York, USA

Who Is She: Author, Singer

Why Is She Cool: Tanuja gained fame and notoriety with her novel "Born Confused." The novel is the first ever South Asian American coming-of-age story and became a staple for young South Asians everywhere. Earning credits like a Larry King pick of the week, an American Library Association BBYA book of the year, and Times of London book of the week. She has done a lot for young South Asian females who deal with culture-clashing issues growing up in the West.

What's Next: She's currently at work adapting "Born Confused" into a screenplay. Tanuja is also progressing with her music career by producing a CD based on her book.

Cool Fun Fact: She was Guest Consulting Editor for "Time Out New York's South Asian New York Special" edition, which showcased our generation.



Tanuja Desai Hidier
Not at all Born Confused

India—2004

<http://deepblueink.com/writing/profiles/tanujadesai.htm>

www.ABCreativeD.com

That's the writer, film-maker, lyricist, singer Tanuja Desai Hidier in a jiffy. Sit with her and she spews interesting anecdotes and some off-the-shelf philosophy that really gets you thinking. She knows the men and women who make her giddy. Her favorite quote is "It's a beautiful day" by U2 and the dictat that she lives by can be traced to an ordinary kitchen: Never turn your back to a pot of milk on the stove. It is her way of saying things; you need to find solemnity for yourself

Her eyes are blue. No, they are not borrowed from the optometrist; they are real blue, like the dainty waters off Mauritius and Seychelles. You get the colour? She wears contact lenses but that is just for the myopia she got from all that reading. She knows the men and women who make her giddy - Pablo Neruda, Charles Dickens, Michael Ondaatje, Zadie Smith, Mira Nair, Pedro Almodovar. And, of course, Madonna. Her favorite quote is "It's a beautiful day" by U2 and the dictat that she lives by can be traced to an ordinary kitchen: Never turn your back to a pot of milk on the stove. It is her way of saying things; you need to find solemnity for yourself.

That's the writer, film-maker, lyricist, singer Tanuja Desai Hidier in a jiffy. Sit with her and she spews interesting anecdotes and some off-the-shelf philosophy that really gets you thinking. Her first book, *Born Confused*, definitely did get Larry King, the famous talk-show host with his ubiquitous suspenders, thinking. No wonder the book was chosen for the Larry King/CNN pick of the week tag. The book went on to become Sunday Times 'book of the week', and got her the London Writers Award for fiction as well as the James Jones Fellowship.

Reared in the town of Wilbraham, Massachusetts, Hidier went to a school where there were two other Indians and two African-Americans. That kind of completed the color spectrum within the classroom, but Hidier - just Tanuja Desai then - wasn't really raring to track Indianness, to bond, to go with the matching color scheme and be like peas in the pod.

"Growing up I just didn't really think of my Indianness. When you live in a town this size, from the age of two to 18, with pretty much the same group of people around you, you stop seeing these things about each other. They are the whole world you know, and you are part of the only world they have ever known, and Ramona is Ramona and Jennifer is Jennifer and Brian is Brian, not black or brown or white or purple," she says.

Though Hidier says she did not think much of her Indianness, nor did she have the clichéd "rebellious" streak against her parents, but *Born Confused* somewhere has the Indian connection. It is a coming-of-age story of Dimple Lala - a confused desi, if you would please gulp that - an aspiring photographer who does the tightrope between two cultures, without falling apart in the process, instead learning to be herself.

Hidier - the surname comes from her French other half - is now adapting her book for the big screen. Earlier, combining her vocal and songwriting skills, Hidier worked with San Transisto and T & A (she sings and song-writes for these London and New York based bands) and released 'When We Were Twins', a CD of original rock/pop songs based on *Born Confused*. The CD, which was recently picked up by Creative Artists Agency as a cutting-edge first-of-its-kind 'booktrack', ships worldwide and is available through www.ABCreativeD.com.

What is her favorite tag? Singer? Lyricist? Writer? "I love them all! All three really feel like part of the same creative process to me, and the common love with all of them is writing, whether it is fiction, lyrics, or script-writing. These different art forms cross-feed wonderfully - songwriting can help bring a sense of rhythm to your prose, script-writing can hone your dialogue skills, and fiction aids all these areas, at least for me, by leading you to the heart of the story," she adds.

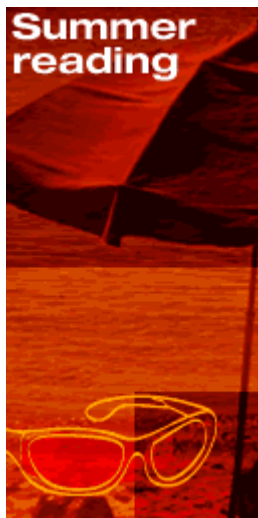
At the end of the road you ask Hidier "What's next?" And she comes up with the most unexpected one: A bigger screen for my computer. Looser shoulders on surya namaskar Driving on the other side of the road. And a toast to the people who kept my energy up and wrists straight for the writing of this book.

That was Hidier a little while ago, at the moment she is "thoroughly enjoying this process, and it feels like such a gift to be in a place where I am able to finally do what I love and love what I do unreservedly. I am blessed to have some amazing people in my life through my family and friends - and my jeevansaathi and I are now hoping to build a family of our own."

Didn't I begin by saying this is Hidier's way of saying things - you need to find solemnity for your self.

If you can't find that solemnity, sit longer with her. She might spew some philosophy. If even that escapes you, sit still longer, at least you would know the real blue of her eyes.

Published in Sun Magazine, August 2004



<http://books.guardian.co.uk/summerreading2003/0,13466,984847,00.html>

**Teen spirit
picked by Kit Spring**

Lucas by Kevin Brooks (The Chicken House, £12.99)

A strange boy arrives on her island, plunging Caitlin into a terrifying spiral of love and hate.

**Born Confused by Tanuja Desai Hidier (Scholastic,
£12.99)**

Dimple Lala has spent years rebelling against her culture. Suddenly, everything Indian is hip - and Dimple's confused.

Lady: My Life as a Bitch by Melvin Burgess (Puffin, £4.99)

Everyone thinks that fun-loving Sandra will go too far one day. And she does - when she's turned into a dog...

LBD: It's A Girl Thing by Grace Dent (Puffin, £4.99)

Les Bambinos Dangereuses are mad about boys, music and clothes, but it gets complicated when they stage a festival.

Going for Stone by Philip Gross (OUP, £6.99)

Nick finds himself on the streets with no money, no home. Tense, chilling thri



Nov 22, 2002

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By SHIVANI MAHENDROO

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Q: When did you first start to write? How did that lead to writing 'Born Confused?'

A: I never consciously made the decision to write. I just found I naturally gravitated towards this form of self-expression, from pretty much the time I could write. I began writing poems at age six for fun and turned to fiction at 10 or 11. I realized that I could best express myself through writing, so I kept it up. Later on, I took fiction writing workshops on and off for a few years in New York. Those workshops helped me clarify for myself that I wanted to write about second-generation America, specifically, stories about the South Asian diaspora. I got a sense of what I truly wanted to write about during my years in New York, particularly those when I got involved through my short films in the desi arts scene; the issues and themes I wanted to explore in fiction crystallized still more, but at the time I didn't realize what was actually happening, and in some ways probably wasn't ready to write about these ideas quite yet, as I was too close to it all for perspective and was just going through a phase of feeling unsure about what I wanted to do in general.

Then, literally days before moving to London, I had a meeting with an editor named David Levithan at Scholastic whom I'd met through a friend of a friend at a Fiona Apple concert months before. I thought I was coming in to discuss doing some freelance editing for Scholastic from London while he thought I was coming in to pitch ideas for a book for a new imprint he was launching. I had always wanted to write a novel, but it was not something I was actively pursuing. This misunderstanding was a wonderful stroke of luck. I knew it was one of those moments where you don't say no. So I started talking to him about the ideas I had been working on in short films and short stories over the last few years. I said I was interested in doing an Indian-American coming-of-age story. He was immediately very excited about the idea and said that was a book he'd never seen and he'd love to help get it onto the bookshelf. He asked me to write a synopsis of the idea, and then we would go from there. Maybe a month later, after I got to London, I sent him a one-page proposal. He really liked it and asked me to flesh it out further. About four or five months later, I had put together a 25-page outline of the novel, about 40 sample pages from it, and about 60 sample pages from short stories I'd written on the same theme. Scholastic bought the book based on this proposal about six months after my initial meeting with David.

Q: Can you tell us about the writing process; the challenges and the writer's block?

A: I think I had writer's block for about three years before writing this book! During the actual writing of 'Born Confused,' I didn't actually get blocked. I think the main reason for this is that I had spent a lot of time, from three to five months, on a very detailed outline. This outline laid out, like a screenplay nearly, the action and scenes, through to the end. For me, the challenge in writing is not the actual writing; the danger is that I can write fairly easily, so I can go off for pages and pages. I needed something to rein me in a little bit and keep me sticking to some sort of structure. The outline really served as a backbone throughout the writing process, and I leaned on it often during those blank page/screen moments.

The other main reason I didn't have writer's block during the writing of this book is because I didn't really have time to. I sold the book before I finished writing it, and there was actually a deadline in place. I simply didn't have the luxury of sitting back and wondering could I really do this. There was no time for negative judgment, and this very lack of time really helped me focus. The actual writing process took, funnily enough, nine months exactly — I was having chocolate craving and engaging in strange eating habits throughout! It took five months to write the first draft and then another four to revise it. David was a wonderful editor — eagle-eyed and gentle, and very energetic, as you must be, I imagine, when you've been handed an 800-plus page first draft — and it was very good to have his fresh eyes looking at the novel throughout. He also truly cared about the characters, which I deeply appreciated.

As far as organizing writing time went, I didn't have a set schedule. It was definitely not a 9 to 5 kind of thing regularly, although some days it was. Then there were other days where I would be working from 8 a.m. to 4 a.m. Then there would be stretches of two or three days where I couldn't even look at the computer because I had just been through a phase of near all-nighters. I

managed to practice yoga two or three times week when I was writing, and it really helped me clear my head. It was also great because it helped me get out some of my computer knots. My best working hours always seemed to be from about 10 p.m. to about 2 or 3 a.m. The phone rings less at that time. You don't have to run errands or go to meetings. It is a much quieter moment, and there is something about having that immense night sky out the window — it just feels like you have endless time.

I also made sure to take a 10- to 15-minute walk each morning. It was purportedly to go buy coffee, but would often end up being a meandering through the market near where I live (in London) and through the side streets to say hello to people, check out the flowers, the neighborhood harmonica player, and such. That was really good to do too, because there were times when once I actually sat down at the computer, I wouldn't leave for several hours. There was even one period when I didn't leave the apartment for a few days. I figured it was important to get that walk in to get perspective on the fact that there were other things going on as well, the universe wasn't just about you and your next paragraph. It's really good to take yourself seriously as a writer, but it's also really good to know when not to take yourself too seriously. You don't have to play or evaluate your entire life on just that one page or that one chapter. You don't have to be just that one thing. There are many facets to a human being, many things that make you who you are, and there's a whole world out there; sometimes it's just good to keep that in mind.

Q: How did you find your agent?

A: The usual way of going about it is you finish the book, submit it to an agent, possibly revise it with the agent you end up working with, and then the agent shops it around to different publishers. But because of the way this particular project happened — I didn't actually have a book completed — it never occurred to me to look for an agent. One of the main reasons to get an agent is to sell your book to a publishing company, and I had already sold it. Despite this, I don't think it's a bad idea at all to have one. For instance, when it came to my contract, I wasn't at all familiar with the legal vocabulary or what was standard and what was not, and it took me a very long time — with the invaluable help of a generous friend who'd studied law — to understand it and then negotiate changes. With an agent, the agency has a lawyer who deals with the legal aspects of the contract while the agent negotiates for you. In hindsight, it would have been nice to have someone to do this. I completely cherish the relationship I have with my editors at Scholastic, and I felt bad sometimes having to deal with contractual issues through them. Having an agent would have allowed me to focus on simply the editorial relationship. If you are trying to sell a book and can sell and negotiate on your own, that's great. You have saved your 15 percent. But from what I have heard from a lot of writers, it is a 15 percent well spent.

Q: How about the publicity process? Did your life change?

A: I naively thought the work would be done once the book was — but that's actually when the real work begins! The PR and readings, and e-mails, and promotional activities — these take up a lot of time. I just returned to London after a month in the States, doing events in New York and D.C. and Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and spent the first week back unable to quit my pillow! But it's all a thrill.

Q: Do you have advice for aspiring writers?

A: Trust me, writing is a lot less exhausting than not writing. Write a little bit every day — even putting pen to paper, or finger to key, for a page or two of anything can help ward off the 'blank-page' syndrome. Do whatever works: Take writing workshops and do open mike readings to try out pieces you are working on, read, run, listen to music, see films, pay attention to your surroundings and the people in your world. Don't wait for inspiration — create it. Everybody has a story to tell, and a story that is worth hearing.

Born Confused, by Tanuja Desai Hidier

Written by Qasim Virjee

Wednesday, 02 June 2004



Dimple Rohitbhai Lala is coming of age and well, a tad confused! Throughout her 17 year life she's been mostly accompanied by her chum Gwyn, an electric and gorgeous Caucasian who sets example for all girls' aspirations; easily managing to date NYU boys and such. Well, so goes the way things are until Gwyn manages to get Dimple a fake ID; then unfolds a colourful tale of self-discovery where, in questioning her identity as an American of Indian (a la 'South Asia') heritage, little Ms. Lala discovers why she might be attractive for who she is; an ABCD, ('American Born Confused Desi'), suddenly rapidly becoming less C.

When introduced to Karsh, a bhangra-spinning seemingly-unsuitable boy, Dimple finds herself entering an exciting stage in life; where relationships begin taking on new meaning and freedom is not restricted by religio-cultural history. Not only does she express to the reader her confusion in being 17-turning-18 but also in being born brown in America.

The book is a fun read and, despite the protagonist being in teenage pre-university limbo, will go down well with a variety of audiences; Tanuja Desai Hidier has done an excellent job of portraying, as well as explaining, cultural quirks NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) exhibit, which may lend insight to non-South Asian readers whilst for sure sparking nudge-nudge/wink-wink giggles amongst ABCDs and other NRIs alike.

Despite touching on issues of gender relation, sexuality, cultural identity and so on, the author manages comfortably to keep the book light using Dimple's first person thoughts and verbal interactions with other characters. Her narration flows smoothly and Dimple's heavy use of poetic similes will have you cheering her on, scolding her and wincing in anticipation quite often.

► Learn more about the book and Tanuja Desai Hidier at <http://www.ABCreativeD.com>



Tanuja Desai Hidier

ACHUKA Interview ~ July 2003



I thought I detected the cadences of Kerouac from time to time in *Born Confused*. Would I be right? (The book's got the atmosphere as well as the style: for Kerouac's bop jazz, you have the bhangra disco scene.)

Actually, I haven't yet read Kerouac, but am now even more inspired to do so! It's difficult to pinpoint where your own style comes from, but I'd be tempted to say the cadence of many of the passages in *BORN CONFUSED* comes in strong part from many a night on the dance floor, and from music—the music you put on your record player, but also just the musicality of the market, the way people speak, the way you dream. Plus one part espresso.

It's a lush and verbally playful style. Was there any pressure – not necessarily from your 'dream editor' David Levithan -- to 'normalise' it?

Fortunately not. Scholastic was very supportive of the writing style. My editor in fact 'uncorrected' the copyeditor's markup where she'd noted to change all dashes to quotes for dialogue, which was a relief, as that was a conscious style choice on my part (I'm not so into quote marks, especially end quotes as they make it look like some kind of closure has been achieved, and conversations are rarely that tidy; beginning and end quotes also break the flow for me). I'd asked that none of the words of Indian origin be italicized, as the book is so completely from Dimple's POV (and these words are as naturally a part of her vocabulary as the English ones she uses on a day to day basis) and I didn't want a glossary, and they were fine with that, too, which was great. And there are lots of made-up words, cartoon-bubble type words, and also hybrid terms/phrases that sort of mix up the Indian and American—which they let fly as well. Language is so much a part of how we define ourselves--the act of naming and being named and so on-- and it makes sense to me that a character who is coming into her own for really the first time, learning a mode of self-expression, and trying to bring together what she initially sees as disparate worlds should be allowed this: a new culture should have a new vocabulary with which to express itself.

Whose photo is at the front of the book?

That's a photograph of my mother in her early 20s. I've always loved this photo, and didn't in fact realize it was a self-portrait until I'd begun writing *BORN CONFUSED*. In many ways the book is a sort of a birthday gift to my family (who'd been asking me for years to stop getting them presents and just write something for frock's sake), a thank you for their unfaltering support and for just being who they are, and I really wanted the photo included because of this; it also ties in so well with the theme of the book, and Chica Tikka. When Scholastic agreed to include it in the book, I went back and changed a description of a photograph in one of the later chapters to match this picture of my mother. By coincidence *BORN CONFUSED* launched in the USA the same week as my mother, father, and brother's birthdays (all three born within days of each other in September). You should have seen the expression on their faces when they opened up the finished copy for the first time! It's funny, because my mother expressed a joyful sense of disorientation of place and time that's very much like what Dimple describes in the book.

Is Dimple's obsession with photography one that you share?

I do now! I'd written and directed two short films a few years before writing *BORN CONFUSED*, and am a big cinema-phile, but I'd never really gotten into photography, and still haven't in terms of taking pictures, though I love to look at them and to think about taking pictures, funnily enough. When it came time

to develop Dimple's character I knew that I wanted her to have an art form, a mode of self expression through which she'd learn to rethink her conceptions and preconceptions and come into her own, and I was attracted to the idea of photography because it seemed it would be such a joy to write long descriptive passages of beloved New York, and people and places through the eyes of a photographer. Also, the art form suited Dimple, who at the outset of the book uses the camera as a sort of tool to hide behind and spy on the worlds she feels she can never truly be a part of; by the end of the book this same hiding place turns out to be her very window into her own life, in shaping her own story.

While writing, I began to live my day to day life looking at the world through Dimple's eyes—if she took a photograph of this street, this café, this face what part would she pay attention to, what would be in the frame, what would be left out? How would she see things, and how would that change over time?

The idea of having her progress from black and white to color and then to a new understanding of even black and white as being made up of shades of grey also seemed a good visual counterpart to her own journey towards embracing her multicultural self. As far as the technical details went, I hung out in camera stores and did little experiments (would your reflection in the lens be convex or concave?), went to lots of films and photo exhibitions (the former which I do anyways), drew a little on my own filmmaking experience, read how-to books and pestered a couple generous photographer friends with fact-check questions.

It's funny, but it wasn't until I was well into the book that I realized the camera should be named—we always name objects of affection, or rename them with nicknames and such, and it seemed so strange to keep saying 'the camera' when Chica Tikka is so close to Dimple's heart and soul.

To flush or not to flush? That was the question. (p58) Would you like to comment on this scene?

To flush.

Books about two (girl)friends, in which the narrator is the more reflective, while the friend is the more brash and outgoing, is a classic narrative set-up. Think of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, or Kerouac's *Duluoz and Cody Pomeray*. Did you write the book like this because of that, or was it based on a genuine friendship?

Initially I wanted to have two of the lead characters embody the two forces at work in the cultural context I was drawing from, from my years in New York (the experience of which was one of the inspirations for this story): the South Asian American-culture-coming-into-its own force (Dimple and others) and the mainstream-culture-becoming-obsessed-with-desire one. This is where the idea of Gwyn initially came in: Gwyn as an embodiment of blonde rock stars wearing bindis on MTV, of Starbucks selling chai, of Bollywoodmania—of the sudden fascination with all things Indian. But on another level, and probably a more important one, I also wanted to have a non-South Asian heroine in the book, someone to show that though some issues a person deals with can be race-specific, there are many others that are just human issues, that are simply about growing up and finding your place in the world, coming to terms with yourself and learning to really see the people around you.

As the character of Gwyn evolved from that idea, she became a personality that is part amalgam, part imagination. There's also quite a bit of me in Gwyn, though people often think I must completely equal Dimple.

Plainly, a book like this can't be written without there being some kind of autobiographical basis. Yet, just as clearly, you are not Dimple Lala. But in the act of writing you must have felt you were, because this book reads like a real narrative confession, whereas so much first-person teenage fiction has a sense of distance or of light-weightedness which immediately reduces its impact. Did Dimple become your alter ego while you were writing the novel, and if so how did this affect your day-to-day life?

Absolutely. I'd say all the issues Dimple is wrestling with/exploring during this summer are things that I struggled with in my own way, mostly through my writing—and if I hadn't thought about them before, I certainly began to as soon as she did! It was a real joy seeing the world through Dimple Lala's eyes. Not only in terms of the eyes-of-a-photographer experience I mentioned above, but also to be privy to this sense of newness and freshness, this capacity to be shocked and stunned and have daily revelations as she does. There was a point after I'd been living in NYC for a few years when I wondered whether I'd lost some of that capacity for amazement—you don't blink twice when you see a naked cowboy strumming on a guitar in the middle of Times Square, and so on. Stepping into Dimple's shoes was like getting to see New York again for the first time, to

feel mad infatuation, confusion, envy, ecstasy, love for the first time. And it paralleled what was actually going on in my own life—the move to London, where I wrote the book and where I still live, allowed me fresh eyes to cast on New York, and certain other things going on in my life had given me a plethora of fabulous firsts all over again.

I haven't read your other fiction, the short stories 'The Border' and 'Tiger, Tiger'. I'm keen to look them out. Are they very different?

The themes—displacement, diaspora, and storytelling as a means to find your way home—are the same, but the treatment of them is rather different. “The Border” and “Tiger, Tiger” are quite a bit darker than much of BORN CONFUSED, though I would still say they are hopeful stories.

You're a filmmaker and a singer-songwriter in a band. Does that mean that writing has to take its place alongside these other creative outlets?

To me, they all feel very much like part of the same desire and deed—storytelling, self-expression, a way to walk in other people's shoes. It all feels like writing to me, whether it's visual or aural or actually written; exploring your story with all of the senses makes sense to me. With your ears, eyes, nose, tongue, hands, and intuition. I think these art forms really feed each other as well. On a very basic level, after hours sitting crunched up over a computer keyboard, talking to no one (or talking to yourself), throwing your whole body into a gig, collaborating with a group of people in noisy, strumming harmony is sheer relief. And then it's a pleasure to go back to some solitude again; and so the cycle goes. Sometimes lyrics-writing has helped me clarify an image in my fiction and vice versa. And music can really bring a sense of rhythm, cadence, joy to a writing style, fiction can bring narrative and care to lyrics, and film can give you a whole other type of palette with which to paint a room, or person, or mood, or dynamic.

Is there a big difference between being a second-generation Indian-American and a second generation Indian-Brit - would you say, now that you're living in the UK?

I have far less experience of British Asian culture than I did of South Asian American culture --in part because, well, I'm South Asian American, and in part because I haven't been here so long, and have spent much of my time here writing about the American experience. When I first came to the UK I was amazed at the extent to which Asian culture is assimilated into popular culture—Bollywood films in mainstream theaters, spices in chain supermarkets that my mother had to drive two hours to find when I was growing up in Massachusetts, and, yes, amazingly enough as a sign to which the culture has been, er, integrated: the existence of curry-flavored condoms. I thought at first that perhaps London would give me a time-machine glimpse of what might be happening in South Asian America in the future. But of course that was too tidy an assumption. There is, yes, much in common between the two big city experiences of desi arts culture, and though the origins of much of the music in the NYC desi club scene are in the UK, there now seems to be much more of a give and take between the two cities. But one striking difference I've seen is that in the US, desis who are part of this scene are usually proud to define themselves as 'desi', and as 'South Asian American.' Though 'desi' is an actual word meaning 'from my country' it has taken on the slang use of 'homegirl' or 'homeboy' and is in a way a political term. Here in the UK it seems that there isn't such a 'desi pride' movement going on, it seems that there is on the one hand much more of a desire to be viewed as part of the mainstream, and on the other, the culture is much more subdivided: universities have Jain and Hindu and Sikh student groups; in the US, they have South Asian or Asian American student groups. Even the selection of ethnic media in both countries reflects this difference: in the UK you have the Sikh Times, Garavi Gujarat and so on. In the States you are much more likely to find Little India, India Abroad, India West and so on. There is a more universal grouping of politically minded desis under umbrella/unifying terms, and here it seems to be less the case. At the same time that the culture is so much a part of the fabric of British life today, and is in this way modern, it seems to me as well, from people I've met and spoken too, that there is a stronger conservative element among many of the families here, expectations parents have of their children that are sometimes more traditional than many of their counterparts in South Asia or America may have. But perhaps this is a first impression. I look forward to exploring this question, and the story of South Asian London, much more deeply in the future.

The sense of cultural confusion is obviously important in the book, but what came across more powerfully to me was the sense of family - as you put it on your website, the family you are born into and the one you choose, and the moment when these two become one.

Absolutely—finding your home in people, and finding your home in yourself. On a personal level, I really

wanted to pay homage to my own family by writing about a deeply loving household. The relationship with Dadaji is very much like the one I had with my grandfather as well. And I wanted to give thanks to my family of friends. In the end, that's where the epiphanies come, that's how the soul-searching holds on to an undercurrent of joy and sense of adventure: from your relationships with people as well as your own sense of self. It takes two to be one.

You're a Madonna fan. Will you be reading her children's book?

Will check it out. Hope there's a soundtrack.

On the website you list artists that 'get you giddy'. Enid Blyton is about the only children's author. Who else did you read when you were child?

Enid Blyton was probably my favorite author growing up. Off the top of my head, I remember digging the Great Brain books, the Nancy Drews, Harriet the Spy, the Phantom Tollbooth, Judy Blume. I also devoured mysteries, ghost stories, fiction and nonfiction books on witchcraft and the supernatural. I had a real thing for witches.

How's the 'psychic soundtrack' to Born Confused that you and your band are working on coming along?

We're chugging along, thanks, aiming to release it hopefully sometime this fall. Have got about three tracks nearly recorded with my band in London, and we've another five or six written. I've been songwriting for the soundtrack with my old bandmate from the punk pop group I was in in New York via email as well, and we'll be spending an intensive few days in the studio in New York when I'm there later this month on another leg of the book tour. Am also working out a track with a cowriter in Los Angeles. The band here in London, San Transisto, will be performing at several of the Born Confused events in the London area, where readings will be intertwined with the book-based songs. We already incorporated one, "Visionary," the Chica Tikka theme song, in an acoustic performance with tablas and guitar at the UK book launch this month; coming up next, on July 30, will be a Bollywood Nights/Born Confused event at the Cobden Club with Raj and Pablo: a salon-style discussion of the book, an acoustic set of songs based on the book with guest tabla and dhol players—and then it will go all out Bollywood disco with the house DJ spinning much of the music described in the book! Should be good and sweaty. More info at www.ThisIsTanuja.com.

Hyderabad—25 April 2004

FRESH PRINT



■ **BORN
CONFUSED**
By *Tanuja Desai
Hidier*
Penguin, Rs 295

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"Born Confused", the title of Tanuja Desai Hidier's debut novel, is taken from ABCD (American Born Confused Desi), a term first generation South Asians use to describe children who are born and brought up in America and are confused about their Asian background. Dimple Lala, the protagonist, doesn't know what to think. She spends her life resisting her parents' traditions. As she turns seventeen, life becomes more complicated. Set in the context of the burgeoning South Asian club scene in New Jersey and New York, the book looks at the attempts to bring the two cultures together without oneself falling apart in the process.