

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long:

Hello, I'm **Karen Long** and you're listening to The Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards.

An asterisk is a reference mark, indicating an omission. Today we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with writer **Karan Mahajan**.

Born in Stamford, Connecticut, Professor Mahajan grew up in New Delhi, where as a young teenager he covered cricket for an international sports network. His second novel, *The Association of Small Bombs*, won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2017 and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Its chapter zero describes a 1996 car bomb blast in a market in New Delhi. And the book becomes, as Elizabeth McCracken calls it, "A brilliant description of aftermath." Professor Mahajan has toggled between the literary and journalistic arts and between India and the United States. He currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island, where he teaches literature at Brown University. His third novel, *The Complex*, is due out in early 2025. Welcome, Professor. Welcome.

Karan Mahajan:

Thank you so much, Karen. It's nice to be here with you. And I've always admired what you've done with the Cleveland Foundation and the Anisfield-Wolf Award, so thanks for making me part of that family.

Karen Long:

I was doing an unofficial poll in the office today as I got ready and people were struck, again, how much they remembered from your novel and how important it has been. So interesting that the back cover of the paperback yells "timely," and yet it feels timeless now that these years have passed because of its perennial currency.

Karan Mahajan:

Well, I'm very happy to hear that. That's what you want hear as a writer, and obviously something you can't predict will happen.

Karen Long:

Something you wrote currently has created a lot of interest, published in August in the *New Yorker* called *The True Margaret*, and you hinted that you'd be willing to read us a passage as we launch our conversation.

Karan Mahajan:

I'd love to. Yeah. So I'm going to read from the middle of the story essentially, and it is a story about a woman who goes from India to England in 1959 because of her marriage and discovers that her Indian doctor husband already has an English wife that he hasn't talked about to anyone in India.

And this scene that I'm going to read is when this character, Meera, decides to make a run for it when he's out of the house.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

"Yet as soon as he left the flat with its rippled floors and grimy lace curtains and unpainted window shutters, a flat she occupied in fear for much of the week, too frightened even to go out and greet the milkman.

"She started packing her suitcase. She was crying. With each object she put in it she understood that her life as she had known it was ending, that what she was doing now was even more irreversible than the vows of marriage. She was throwing herself across a line, the line of being a woman without a husband, a nobody, unprotected.

"And just as Ravi had smiled at the vision of that contented future, she wept for her future self. She knew what the future held for her. It was exactly out of a desire for a future that she had pressed for a match with this doctor living abroad. She had thought of marriage as a way to move through space at a speed India would not allow. Oh, how much she had looked forward to Goliath, Big Ben, Stratford-Upon-Avon, the Tower of London, the Peacock Throne, Heather and gorse and marsh and moors, the chance to leave her teaming family behind for a while.

And on top of that, that was Ravi's collected, reserved British style and charm. Such an antidote to her uncool siblings. Yes, it was an arranged match, but she had felt truly seen, had felt that he was picking her for their life together because she was special, not just because she was the daughter of a famous man, and they had made each other laugh for the reference to Gandhi's obsession with bodily functions. And she had loved that boyish gap in his front teeth had dreamed about it.

But of course, it was this very charm that allowed Ravi to imagine he could maintain two wives, two selves. What he had seen in her was not her intelligence she thought now, but her pliability. Why else would he have been reckless with someone from a famous family when he could have found a nobody who might've been grateful for even half or a quarter or a fifth of an Indian doctor? But perhaps, Meera thought, this was another aspect of his greed and charm and acquisitiveness. Perhaps he had forgotten when he saw her that he had an English wife. He was a divided person. He really was two people. And sometimes when he was home with her in their hot water flat, small as befitting a half marriage, Ravi would appreciate her cooking, would laugh and joke with her in Punjabi.

He was a great mimic of distant relatives of her people he knew he could mark without hurting her. The voices bursting through his gray reserve. No, he wasn't two people, he was many. The acting and balancing had destroyed his center. He could be invaded by anyone or anything. The Punjabi, that of an exile, inflected with village-y phrases that made her laugh.

"What's so bloody funny?" He would say with affectionate cocked eyebrows before launching, almost as a response, into the squawking Punjabi voice of a family friend, it was as if a switch were being thrown, the serious doting doctor and the crazed mimic.

And it was the same at the midpoint of the week when, the night before heading to Margaret's, he was seized by coldness. His body flung about by chills as he lay next to her. It was as if he were remembering Margaret and the kids and his awesome pileup of responsibilities, aspects of life he had forgotten with Meera. 'Perhaps this is why he married me,' Meera thought, still packing, 'because he wanted to start anew. He saw me as a chance to be young again, to continue the life he had always wanted one that got sidetracked by this English virago.'"

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Wow, thank you. So a virago is a loud, overbearing woman, and yet we don't see or hear Margaret in Meera's recollection. I feel like there's something in your title, the true Margaret that I need to understand. How did you come to call it that?

Karan Mahajan:

Yeah, so the thing with the story is that Meera does not actually know who Margaret is. She never meets Margaret. She only hears a few snippets about her from her husband who's put her in this very, very difficult situation.

And so to me, what was fascinating about writing the story was to figure out how an Indian woman in 1959 would build a series of projections of an English woman, which of course is fraught with all this other baggage of colonial history and immigration, and also just the different sort of states they might occupy in the spectrum of British society, which is that someone like Margaret might be someone who is participating in the beginning of the swinging sixties, whereas Meera is coming from a conservative family in India. And so you have these two women meeting through the figure of this very divided man who can't reconcile the two sides of him. So for me, that was really the interesting stuff was how do you get inside Meera's mind as much as possible? And the true Margaret is really whatever Meera decides is the true Margaret at that time in a way.

Karen Long:

And yet in your section, Meera feels that even though this is an arranged match, she felt truly seen, which for me is a perfect phrase for what falling in love is you feel seen by the beloved.

Karan Mahajan:

Yes. I'm sorry. Go on.

Karen Long:

And the pain of the cloaking of his own crucial information annihilates that.

Karan Mahajan:

Yes, exactly that she is someone who, like many immigrants on a smaller or larger degree immigrates on what turn out to be false pretexts, that she is headed into a kind of expansion of her world or a kind of adventure, when in fact what she's headed into is kind of the jail cell that has been produced by this one man's divided mind, that she is going to be the second wife who doesn't really get introduced to a social circle either.

And so yeah, in a way, the person she thought she had seen herself is not the person who ends up being there in England. And so the story is very concerned with this question of sight and how we look at others and how that keeps changing on a minute by minute basis when you're in a moment of crisis, when you really can't figure someone out.

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

And in her mind, Ravi is not entirely unsympathetic. She doesn't make him a monster. She makes him a divided person who wanted contradictory things, which is such a testament to your writing because my molecular self wants to hate him, but the story doesn't allow that.

Karan Mahajan:

Yeah, that's very important to me as a writer, is to take people who are doing things that are outwardly villainous and at least try to understand them from their perspective, not necessarily not empathize, not sympathize, but just see the world as they're seeing it. So we can get a little closer to that as well.

And here it is complicated because the fact of the matter is this is a very young woman who's been married for the first time. She's deeply in love with the idea of this man, and it's not an idea that can be shed overnight. So she's going through a very circular process of thinking about what Ravi's intentions are, who Margaret might be, who she is, and then slowly working herself out of love with Ravi. But it never quite ends up happening in some ways. Ravi is the person she first got married to.

Karen Long:

And you give the reader the gift at the outset of knowing she's looking back, so we know somehow she's going to find a berth for herself.

Karan Mahajan:

So for me, that first line is very important. Meera was recalling the tragedy of her first marriage because some of the most interesting fiction I read uses memory as an organizing device. And what that does is it allows you to operate with several lenses at once. You have the distant lens, which at first you're like, okay, this woman is looking back. And then suddenly you can get heard right into what was happening at the time.

Karen Long:

And you forget that.

Karan Mahajan:

And you forget that. And then you can see the analysis of the current Meera looking back at the previous Meera. So there's a real flexibility, but also it allows you to bypass some of the more cagey parts of fiction. You don't have to say, "Meera picked up a glass of water and walked out the door and there was a mailman." You can go straight to the heart of the matter, which is what people remember.

Karen Long:

Yes. Oh, I love that. I think some of the richness of the content is evoking in me a family memory of my grandmother and her sisters in the Great Depression in the Dakotas with that terrible dust, being told by a relative in Seattle that the streets were paved with gold. It was actually in the letter. And like a migrant, even though it's an internal migration, there was that hope that that would be the case in Seattle. And of course, Seattle's economics weren't fabulous, but they made their way. And the fact that Meera makes this leap even makes sense in the story of my own family women.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karan Mahajan:

I think that the story you just told is so emblematic of how immigration worked and still works despite the internet - that I'm really interested in these stories and seem to be working on more and more of them, which is this idea of that once you've committed to a journey that's part of the problem is that it's very difficult to say it was a mistake or it's people try to save face in different ways. Which is why in this story one might ask a question, well, Meera discovers that her husband's done this horrible thing. Why doesn't she just immediately tell all and sundry? That is an option, but the desire to save face, the shame that one feels as a victim is so vast that it actually prevents you from taking action that would save you.

And so a lot of the story in this case is someone like Meera coming to terms with the fact that she's going to have to take a drastic action and there's no other way out of it. But I think with immigrants often there's a kind of disappointment, accretion of experience, slight acceptance, but a perpetual longing to go back that is not fulfilled.

Karen Long:

I can see that in the opening of the Association of Small Bombs with your intentional planting of the small but profound lie of the parents of the two boys who are killed, that they were actually going to pick up a watch rather than a repaired TV, which says things about class, but it also says things about the trauma of the facts that get written right away out of the truth.

Karan Mahajan:

It's so nice that you connected it to that line. I hadn't thought of that personally. But yeah, that's a line that even though I wrote it and moved me to tears sometimes thinking about it, because that to me contained, when I wrote that line, that's what the rest of the novel seemed to come out of, is this idea that even in our moments of grief sometimes, particularly in our biggest moments of grief, we continue to be petty and self-protective because that's just how human beings are designed and all these defense mechanisms go up.

So yeah, I think that's something that has always been a kind of productive tension in my work is that balancing sort of big subjects with really petty or minor psychological responses.

Karen Long:

You told Willing Davidson of The New Yorker that, "The act of immigration can be the act of losing one's center," and that feels like an important Mahajan insight. When you were with Thrity Umrigar here in Cleveland beginning of October, you asked her what she kept of her origins and what she'd let fray. Can you answer that question yourself?

Karan Mahajan:

I think I have let a lot of things fray, and that is perhaps why fiction has been such an important space for me, that that is my center. It is in fact that I feel like I'm often kind of centerless without this world I can go into, which allows me to combine some of the emotional experiences of my life in India and my life in the US on the landscape often of my childhood, the mental landscape of my childhood in a way

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

that sort of suggests a continuity from that period. Whereas if I didn't have that, I think I would have a difficult time.

I think perhaps there's many ways people deal with it. Perhaps I would be part of a much bigger Indian community here, and I've noticed that I'm not, but maybe that world of Indian writing or of Indian American writing or of literature has provided me with that home. But I do think that many immigrants develop different kinds of coping devices for that. And I've always loved, I forget now which writer said this, but this idea that you have to develop a system of meaning in the new place that you are, that is somehow on par with the system of meaning that you left behind. And that's just a very slow process.

Now, I've been here off and on now for 22 years, and I just now am beginning to feel like I have that system of meaning that India is not like a wound that I'm carrying. So I'm interested in that too, that maybe one does leave it behind. Maybe fraying is a good thing. Maybe one doesn't need to return always to the landscape of one's childhood. And I'm hoping that as the books go on, they'll sort of eke out a path in that direction.

Karen Long:

I was thinking of your idea alongside W. E. B. Du Bois's Double Consciousness, which is a survival mechanism that he describes for people who have to understand their white supremacist oppressors in order to survive at all. Even if something as trivial as switching schools as a teenager taught me that my oppressors in the high school didn't command the whole world. It was a liberating experience to see there was another system out there that I could enter. And I wonder if there is something powerful about knowing two ways of being.

Karan Mahajan:

I think that's very true. I think the funny thing is the emotional experience of that is for a long time not positive. I'm sure even when you switch schools, you are thrown to a different set of wolves essentially, and with the process of immigration, you have left behind an entire community, culture, political interests.

And so I wish that it had been the case for me that recognizing that I had this enormous gift of being here and learning this stuff had immediately started to feel that way. But I think it does now. I feel like there is a kind of way I can exist between both places and accept also that there is a kind of power to being an outsider to both places. I think that's one reason maybe it sometimes felt like a wound, is that there was a desire for some years to remain an insider to India.

Karen Long:

Yes.

Karan Mahajan:

And here, of course, naturally I was an outsider. I was a new immigrant. But that if I had been able to let that go a little bit more and say, "Well, actually I accept that I'm just here. I'm not going to be going back to India permanently," then I would've had a different process. But the thing that had happened by my generation of immigrants coming from India, is that India was economically booming, so it was a real

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

possibility that one would return. I think when people came in the seventies, sixties here or to England, they didn't necessarily think they would go back. And that engenders a very different mindset.

Karen Long:

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English, in this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

We will now return to the conversation.

So I'm interested about the family you've started stateside and that you have a two year old. And now that you are a parent, do you think you could have written *The Association*?

Karan Mahajan:

It's a great question. I have thought about it because of course, it's a book that includes the death of children. I still worry about having written it at all because it was such a violent subject to look into. I don't know if I would have written it now, but I also am the sort of person who seems to take on that kind of challenge. So it's really hard to say. But yeah, I think that it's entirely possible that I would've written a novel about a bomb blast, but maybe it would've been a different set of people who would've died.

Karen Long:

That makes sense to me parentally.

Karan Mahajan:

Yeah.

Karen Long:

And do you see your world being made more complex or frustratingly reduced by having a two year old in the house?

Karan Mahajan:

Oh, no. More complex and certainly is not... I don't think it's going to have any kind of negative effect on the writing. I think I completely understand why it does, and it has slowed me down for a couple of years and I'm much more tired. But I also find what other parents have said to me over the years, which is that you make better use of the time that you have, and we're blessed to have some childcare. That has obviously been... the recognition that that system is so broken in the US has been helpful just to see what people deal with on a daily basis and why it forces people, especially women, to drop out of the workforce because childcare is so expensive. So I mean, I feel blessed that I'm able to continue writing and I'm not really in a position to complain.

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

I remember watching a physicist say that the most complex and beautiful intellectual act of any human is the acquisition of language, and you have a front row seat.

Karan Mahajan:

Yeah, no, that's undeniably very exciting. I haven't really interacted with that many children before except for when I was a child. So it's all a surprise.

Yeah, I think just the kind of curiosity, joy, instinctive response to things, those qualities that all children have are so invigorating for anyone. And of course, it just gives you a little more humility too, that there's so little you can control.

Karen Long:

That's true.

Karan Mahajan:

Also that's what millions of people are dealing with every day. I think that's always the case with being a writer and having more experiences. Just that the more you grow, the more things you immerse yourself in, the closer you get to a larger group of people and what their daily struggles are.

Karen Long:

I remember thinking after childbirth that I was connected to this unbroken line of women who had changed diapers forever and that it was actually kind of a spiritual thing.

Karan Mahajan:

That's too funny.

Karen Long:

Oh, yes. Probably a sleep deprived thing more than a spiritual insight. One of the things you said in 2017, Karan, that I have thought about ever since is this notion of the anger that pulsates through society, the rise of authoritarianism. And what you said from the stage in Cleveland was that novels and poetry can be a way to pause the different species of our anger, the rage we are experiencing in the country right now. It was beautiful and people interrupted to applaud, and I'm wondering if you would say it differently or say it all, say that now.

Karan Mahajan:

No, I would say it the same thing. And I think that's kind of the root of my writing is that everything I write comes out initially of a kind of angered or despairing response to things. And I find for myself, that's not a place I can write out of. So what happens is I end up taking on a subject or characters that actually have upset or made me feel despair and then apply a more sober dispassionate lens to it. And I think that's what allowed me to write the character of let's say, a terrorist, or allows me to write a character like Ravi who's essentially kind of an abusive husband.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

And the idea there is that fiction should not avoid these huge things that are going on in our society. The way for us to deal with Trumpism or the rise of Hindu nationalism is not to hide our heads in the sand as writers and be like, 'Well, I'm going to write this beautiful fiction about three people in a coffee shop.' And that can work too, but I'm saying for me that doesn't work because I feel like that's avoiding this big thing that's happening, but it's also not to just repeat what we're seeing in a polarized world, which is like, those people are just horrible. There's nothing else going on there. They actually might be doing horrible things, but we obviously come from the same species of humans. There's something psychological going on there, and if you can get beneath that, you can get beneath your anger and their anger and just lay it out for people, I think there's so much people can learn and so much that I learn as a writer.

For me, that's the key thing is that by the end of it, I am usually over that subject. And I feel like the anger that it started, it has been deflated and replaced with a kind of sadness or a kind of, again, a sense that this is a particular cycle or an aspect of human psychology that has always been around. There's some ways to address it if one chooses to address it.

Karen Long:

That is something the reader can join you in just by taking the time to move through the thoughts of somebody who came to set a bomb together, which wouldn't be possible without your art.

I talked to Thrity Umrigar a little bit about your character Mansoor, because he is the child who survives the bombing at the beginning of *The Association of Small Bombs* and comes to a very unhappy end. He has a father who loves him, but that isn't adequate to this sort of maybe American longing for redemption or some shards of meaning and a tragedy and ends up Mansoor is serving time in prison wrongfully, coming home and substituting that for not going out of his parents' house.

And there's a line at the beginning of the book that I just noticed where he didn't want to go outside either, and it was very hard as your reader to have that be where you left me. Another friend said, "Well, he's home and maybe that's the comfort." But it vexed me because you don't have to write *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, but you didn't leave us with much. How do you enter that thought?

Karan Mahajan:

I went where the book wanted to go, and I wasn't able to, after those particular circumstances of Mansoor's life, give him a redemption or redemptive ending because I didn't believe in it after the terrible sort of sequence of events he's endured first as a young child then in the US then back in India. He's been betrayed in a way by both countries. The betrayal by the US is smaller because he's there for a shorter time.

And I have to say the book came out of a kind of despair about the kind of anti-Muslim rhetoric that I'd seen growing up in India among Hindus. And it was beginning to rise with the rise of Modi. And if anything, sadly the kind of ending I gave a character like Mansoor is more and more plausible, more plausible than it was then because what Modi's government has done is completely reduce the kind of civic and legal space and social space that Muslims can occupy.

So this book was trying to ask what would happen to a character like this who almost escapes but can't, and what are the social forces that would start pinning a person like this down? And of course, some of it also was written from the perspective of people who commit acts of violence and terrorism, but with a

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

deeper understanding of the fact that in Kashmir, the Indian government has committed many years of human rights abuses, forced occupation. So you have these very wounded characters and also someone like this other character, Ayub, who Mansoor gets to know, who's despairing about the possibilities of being heard as a Muslim in the Indian subcontinent.

And so no, I do think it's a very sad, despairing ending. I wish I made a happier ending, but in good faith, I couldn't do it.

Karen Long:

So you're giving us this human truth, and at the same time, I'm noticing you have a bit of an appetite as a journalist for strong men. You did that incredible piece for Vanity Fair on the Guptas and the corruption of South Africa. You looked at Robert Mugabe for the New Republic. So you are a student of authoritarianism, it seems.

Karan Mahajan:

Yeah, but the funny thing about the journalism is that some of that is accidental. I was approached to go and do a piece about Mugabe and Zimbabwe, and one reason I wanted to do it is that I felt I would do a different job than people who've kind of done the normal crazy African dictator kind of piece that we see again and again. I mean, it's a very complicated story and it's very strange because people in the West forget that Mugabe used to be the equivalent of Mandela when he came out prison, so that to me, the arc, if I could capture that.

And also I was going a few days after the coup. It was like, can I talk to people on the ground? And I talked to so many, I mean to me that was such a pleasure. There was black activists, there was a white farmer, there was a number of people I spoke to in an unemployment line. I went to the biggest shanty town or slum area in Harare, the capital. So that was kind of an accident.

And actually then the Gupta story, that was more out of curiosity about these Indians, the Guptas, who had infiltrated the highest ranks of South African government. And that came from the Zimbabwe story. When I went to Zimbabwe, I noticed that everyone was still talking about the Guptas, and I'd heard about it vaguely in the US. And so then I pitched this idea of the Guptas to Vanity Fair, and they were interested. So I do think the new novel I'm writing has some stuff about authoritarianism and the rise of Hindu nationalism. So I think you're right.

But I'm not entirely sure that I would be pitching stories about these figures on my own. But if someone came to me and said, "Do it," I'm always game for anything that'll teach me something. Essentially that's my one rule. That's the reason I write, is that if I can learn something... Because when you have to go into a piece like that, you have to become an expert. I mean, you're not, you're an outsider. You have a thin layer of knowledge. But I've read so many books about Zimbabwe. I've talked to so many Zimbabweans now, and that was so nice to feel this area of the world open up and also maybe to be of some service in recording what was happening there at a particular time.

Karen Long:

I appreciated it for its vividness. I did feel like I was going through a door with both those pieces that I would not have had without your particular skills. So interesting that you can do both things, journalism and literature.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karan Mahajan:

I love both of them. Yeah, they're great.

Karen Long:

So I'm getting a sign that maybe we should segue into what your reading life looks like. How do you approach it and what's top of mind?

Karan Mahajan:

I definitely approach reading for pleasure just instinctively. That's just, I feel like this is the time now to read this particular book. I've been hearing about it or thinking about it for a while. For example, I recently read *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin. That was because I'd read *The Left Hand of Darkness* a year or two ago, and I'd had this idea that if I came across *The Dispossessed* in a bookstore, I would buy it and read it. So that's one way.

And similarly, I was staying at a friend's house the other day in Cambridge. She wasn't there, but she has a great library and I started reading *The Cat's Table* by Michael Ondaatje and was just blown away. I think every page is so vivid and so funny and so gentle, so different from the kind of stuff I write that I was really immersed in it. So that's one kind of reading. And the other kind is I'm always somehow doing writing that involves a lot of research. And then I'm reading dozens of books on a subject. And that reading is great because it has a purpose. I don't stop midway through and kind of put the book aside. I plow through it. Those are the two types of reading that dominate my life.

Karen Long:

And for *The Complex*, was there a lodestone text that helped you into its work?

Karan Mahajan:

That's a really good question. I don't think for any of my books there's been one text, but I do think that there was... Well, was there something? There was parts, maybe parts of *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing. I think that I liked that and I was certainly thinking about it a little bit.

And then, yeah, I can't think of anything else. I think I read a lot of books for research, but I will have to think more deeply about that question of was there a novel I was engaging with. I don't know. At this point, I guess I'm just trying to hear my own voice and as clearly as I can, and probably on some deeper level, I'm always engaging with the kind of prose that Saul Bellow writes and thinking about what I feel is missing in the canon of Indian literature. But when I'm sitting down and writing, it's much more instinctive and all this falls away.

Karen Long:

I love knowing that *The Golden Notebook* had some presence in *The True Margaret* in the scene setting and also your next big book. So I'm going to pick that up between now and its publication. Thank you so much.

Karan Mahajan:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Yeah, thank you, Karen. It was great.

Karen Long:

The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students, working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, wrote and performed our original score.

I'm **Karen Long**, manager of the prizes. Visit Anisfield-Wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.