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## A magical debut

Kunal Mukherjee's touching coming-of-age story about a young gay boy in 1970s Hyderabad, *My Magical Palace*, is captivating. He talks to Gay Star News about the writing process and who has helped along the way

03 AUGUST 2012 | BY ANNA LEACH

The *Magical Palace*, a debut novel by Indian-born author Kunal Mukherjee recreates in sensuous detail the world of 13-year-old Rahul Chatterjee in Hyderabad in 1973.

Rahul grows up amongst the decrepit building and expansive grounds of a wealthy family's former home. The novel follows the year when he becomes aware of his forbidden sexuality, in a society where his classmate is zapped brain-dead by electro-shock-therapy for sending a love letter to another boy.

Despite their similar ages and backgrounds, Mukherjee says the story is not autobiographical. He says on the phone from his home in San Francisco that the only similarity is that he did grow up in a 'palace' that ended up being demolished. 'I wanted to bring up the theme of the loss of habitat,' he says.



However the loss of home is just one element of the book, the main theme is the loss of innocence as children grow-up and start to understand the adult world and what is expected of them.

'I wanted to write about the process that all children go through when they start shutting down to conform so they don't get ostracized and bullied,' says Mukherjee. 'That whole loss of innocence that happens when everyone around the child is driven by fear of disgrace.'

The teenage characters in *The Magical Palace* grow-up in traditional Indian society where natural desires are hidden for fear of severe punishment. Rahul's close friend Mallika falls in love with a boy from a different religion and Rahul does everything he can to hide his attraction for boys.

But Mukherjee says that he wants his novel to have wider appeal than just to give some insight into what it is like growing up gay in India in the 1970s. 'Ultimately my greatest satisfaction will be if anyone can read this book and say, "I can relate to that experience",' he says. 'We are all really the same. It doesn't matter how we divide ourselves into categories.'

To give the novel some grounding in the present day, it is framed by Rahul aged 30 in San Francisco, relating the story of his youth to his boyfriend Andrew to save their relationship. This structure came pretty late in the development of the novel after brainstorming with his publishers, Harper Collins India.

'We talked about rather than being totally set in the past we could have a contemporary root to the story,' Mukherjee says. 'When I started writing it it turned out to be a very natural extension to the character.'

Despite the deeply entrenched homophobia that the book describes in Indian society in the 1970s, the India of today has been very receptive to *My Magical Palace*.

'There have been reviews or mentions in some of the most widely-read newspapers,' Mukherjee says. 'I had some really beautiful reviews in the [Indian Express](#), The Asian Age and the [Deccan Chronicle](#). They've been incredible supportive for the most part and they actually got the story. That's the part that delighted me so much, that the mainstream media picked up this book and read it and they got it.'

Mukherjee is already working on his second novel which is set in Bollywood. 'It's set in Bombay,' he says. 'It's got Bollywood, it's got the mafia. It's a Bollywood style plot. It's a little different from this book. The story is planned out and I've written about one-fifth of it.'

The second novel is a little slow going as Muckerjee is focusing on promoting his first, and he still has a day job as a technology and business consultant for corporates. 'I'm definitely looking forward to the day when I can spend more time writing and write as much as possible,' he says.

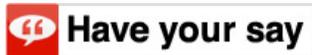
Mukherjee has found the support of his writing group in San Francisco, who have met every two weeks for ten years, essential in getting his novel to become a reality. He says he's learnt 'to be vulnerable, to take critiquing without taking it personally, because people who I show my writing too in writing groups, they represent the world out there.'

The author has also been supported by his mentor and creative writing teacher Linda Watanabe McFerrin, who spotted the potential of this story years ago. 'I wrote something in one of her classes,' says Mukherjee. 'And she said "this is going to be your first novel". I said "I'm not going to write this is way too intense!". But over the years I ended up having some time and I did actually go back to what she told me.'

**[My Magical Palace by Kunal Mukherjee is available to order here.](#) Find out more about the author on his [website](#).**

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