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Turning the page

Roseville author Shankari
Chandran looks set to
become a bestseller

Picture: Tony Smoak

UP CLOSE

The write stuff

Novelist Shankari Chandran takes inspiration from her Sri Lankan heritage and her work as a human rights lawyer, writes Caroline Jumpertz.

Picture: Troy Snook

When Shankari Chandran found out last month that she'd won the Create NSW Artform Fellowship worth \$30,000, her immediate reaction was disbelief.

"When I read the email, I was overwhelmed," Chandran, 44, says. "I had to read it a few times to make sure I wasn't imagining it."

The human rights lawyer turned author was in Sri Lanka at the time, on a trip that was part family odyssey and part research for her next novel, *Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens*.

"It's a really solitary profession that we've chosen and so much of our interaction with the outside world is polite rejection," she says of herself and other writers.

"It is people scrutinising work that we have poured our heart and soul into and saying 'Sorry, it doesn't fit with our slate'."

"To have a positive email in your inbox is absolutely wonderful. It's overwhelming and hugely gratifying and occasionally leads to brief tears."

The fellowship, announced by state Liberal member for Davidson Jonathan O'Dea, is intended to support Chandran's personal, creative and career advancement.

"The grant will make a huge difference to my career," Chandran says.

"In Sri Lanka, I will interview human rights lawyers, journalists and victims of that country's brutal and often ignored civil war. Their stories of trauma and survival form a central part of my work and give it an authenticity I hope will not be ignored."

Chandran is researching and writing her current book and working at a law firm part-time, looking at how laws are failing vulnerable people. That's when she's not running her four kids (Siddharth aged 8, Hari 10, Kailash 13 and Ellora 15) to and from school at Lindfield Public, Roseville College and Chatswood High respectively. Her husband Haran Siva works in green finance for the sustainable energy sector.

"I hold on to my creative life hard and squeeze it into the spaces left by the rest of my life," Chandran says.

"Between raising children and working to feed the aforementioned children,

Shankari Chandran at her Roseville home. Picture: Virginia Young



Moment of inspiration

THE turning point in Shankari Chandran's quest to become a writer was taking a creative writing class in 2013 at Ku-ring-gai Arts Centre, Roseville, taught by author Susan Temby.

"I was the youngest person in the room, and it was all women," Chandran recalls.

"I was among these women who had lived rich, full lives.

"I'm talking classical musicians who had toured the world, Holocaust survivors, visual artists that were — in their spare time — writing a novel. They were brilliant, experienced people.

"It was humbling and empowering. I was so awed by their experiences and their talents."

Chandran says she was initially nervous about moving to the north shore, having previously lived near family in the heartland of Sydney's Sri Lankan Tamil community in

Homebush and Strathfield.

But after nearly a decade in the area Chandran says she loves the north shore's "collegiate" and "intellectually vibrant" artistic community.

"You've actually got to put yourself out there, and you find each other," she says of meeting other writers and artists.

Chandran is a regular at her beloved Lindfield Bookshop as well as the north shore's public libraries.

"Our public libraries are tremendous places, long may they last," Chandran says. "They are a social space for people that don't have a ready-made social network.

"And why shouldn't literature be free? I mean obviously I want you to buy my book, but people should be able to access it for free.

"You should be able to take your children there and feast your eyes on humanity's attempts to record our existence."

"I didn't understand the hatred towards asylum seekers, the public fear mongering about boat people and the attribution of many of our societal problems to migrants"

there is not much space."

Chandran was born in London, raised in Canberra, then lived in Strathfield and studied at the University of NSW. She then spent a decade from 2000 in Britain working as a human rights lawyer.

In the UK Chandran was head of pro bono at Allen & Overy law firm getting representation for Guantanamo Bay detainees and advising then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown, among other activities. A decade later, she left her career in social justice to have her fourth child back home.

"When we returned to

Australia in 2010, it was a shock for me. I didn't understand the country I was raised in; the country that had given my parents refuge and valued their contributions," Chandran says.

"I didn't understand the hatred towards asylum seekers, the public fear mongering about boat people and the attribution of many of our societal problems to migrants. There was this xenophobic undercurrent hidden in the rhetoric of border security, Australian-ness and patriotism."

These concerns fuel her ongoing interest in the law as well as her desire to write.

"As lawyers we see the cruellest kind of human behaviour, our selfish and savage side. We also see the best kind of behaviour, our brave and just side. We watch the compromises people make, those shades of grey that exist between the binaries of good and evil, legal and illegal, moral and immoral. My favourite characters live in this space."

Chandran's debut novel *Song of the Sun God* is a saga spanning three continents and three generations, and has been optioned by an Australian television production company.

Her second novel, *The Barrier*, is a thriller set in a world destroyed by the Ebola virus and religious war and has also been optioned. She is currently putting the final touches to a political thriller entitled *The Phantom Limb* featuring protagonist Ellie Ryder (a human rights lawyer for the US State Department).

Chandran hopes this novel will be the start of an Ellie Ryder series.

Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens, is in the research phase and is a love story, according to the author.

It sounds non-stop, but Chandran says her attitude to writing helps her energy levels. "When you think of writing as a process and not an outcome, the writing is so much better, it's so much more enjoyable and it's freeing. It really takes you to places that you would otherwise not have gone to, creatively."

So the work-life-creative balance continues, with the help of some key props.

"When I go to [legal] meetings I take two notepads. One is for the meeting itself, but the other is because ideas are exploding around me. When you're working in the social justice sector there is so much that's wrong in the world, that's what I want to write about."



Shankari Chandran has juggled working as a human rights lawyer, raising three children and now a writing career. Picture: Troy Snook