

## Acclaimed author Farzana Doctor to tackle tough issues in virtual Library talk



Sharifa finds herself straddling two worlds.

On a trip to India with her husband to reconnect with her heritage, she's drawn into the politics of 'khatna,' a ritual groups identified as female genital cutting, and is ultimately forced to pick a side.

This is the real-world tapestry woven by acclaimed author Farzana Doctor in her novel 'Seven,' and one which she will unravel to readers virtually through an author talk hosted by the Aurora Public Library.

The Aurora Public Library (APL) will host An Evening with Farzana Doctor on Thursday, June 3, at 7 p.m.

Born in Zambia of Indian ancestry, Ms. Doctor's work is billed as a 'brave, richly-layered narrative about inheritance and resistance that tests the balance between kinship and the fight against customs that harm us.'

In 2015, Ms. Doctor became involved with an activist group called We Speak Out which aims to end female genital cutting in the community into which she was born. Balancing her activism with social work, she says she began waking up every morning, writing in a notebook and finding fully-formed fictional scenes spilling out of her.

'After writing about 20 of those scenes, I realized I was writing a novel and it was on the subject,' she says. 'I was also working through my own personal experience and it was a very emotionally-intense time. As I was preparing for publication, I was quite nervous because I wondered what my own community would think and I wondered if it would sell. It is a difficult premise and while I have worked very hard to write a good page-turner with plenty of lightness and humour, I worried this would be a book that people would be afraid of because it does have a heavy subject. But, actually I found it has gone very well.'

That might be something of an understatement.

Since its publication last year, 'Seven' has been found on several year-end lists of 2020's top novels, is now nominated for a Trillium Book Award, and, perhaps most importantly, it has opened up a dialogue on a subject that many consider 'taboo.'

'I have heard people tell me that they learned a lot about this very kind of insular, almost secretive community,' she says. 'They learned a lot about issues surrounding female genital mutilation and from within my own community I heard people talking about how for the first time they have been having conversations inside their own families on these issues. I recently got an email from a woman in the community who is also a khatna survivor and she told me it inspired a lot of processing for her and while that was

difficult it was also really healing for her. It was her first experience of looking at this issue in a really immersive way and being able to better understand her own family and her own experience.

?When I get that kind of feedback that it helped somebody, it is really terrific.

?Another example is a white Canadian who experienced a form of trauma when she was young and wrote to me and said, ?I haven't experienced FGM, I am not from your community, but I found reading the descriptions of this character's healing really helped me understand my own experience better. It is always the personal experiences.'?

By the same token, exploring this tough subject also helped the author with some of her own lived experience.

?When I started writing this novel, I was very, very angry and I didn't really understand the perspectives of people on the other side of the issue, the people who believe this is a normal, regular and healthy thing to do,? she says. ?I really wanted to write characters that presented the whole range of opinion on this subject, so my audience could understand the complexity and the diversity within the community. I found myself beginning to understand the point of view of somebody who had a very different point of view from my own and that came from writing characters.

?Through writing those characters, I felt myself softening. I still have the same political beliefs that I always had, but now I understand that to change the issue, to have the social norm shift in the community, it is going to happen through compassion and it has got to happen through understanding. I basically started writing the book in a very angry place and I came out of it with a much more nuanced understanding.

?Sometimes we forget how important literature is in helping us with our own lives and helping us understand the words of others. Literature can be so powerful in that way.?

Free registration for APL's An Evening with Farzana Doctor can be completed at [Eventbrite.ca/e/an-evening-with-farzana-doctor-tickets-146814184177](https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/an-evening-with-farzana-doctor-tickets-146814184177).

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter