



## 2007 BYRON BAY WRITERS FESTIVAL

### Festival Writer: **Shalini Akhil**

The Shalini Akhil story: I was born in Fiji in 1973, and spent the first six months of my life there. My father was studying in Australia at the time, so I spent the years between six months and eight years of age in Sydney. Dad graduated from law school at UNSW in the early eighties, and then we moved back to Fiji. We lived in Fiji for the next ten years, then I moved to Melbourne in 1990, and have lived here ever since.



A loose idea for what became *The Bollywood Beauty* came to me under duress when trying to come up with an entry for the 'Next Great Australian Novel' pitching competition at the 2001 Melbourne Writers' Festival. I had been labouring on another story for around a couple of years at that point, and decided in the last minute to sketch instead the outline for a story based on aspects of my own life. I got the entry in via express mail just before deadline, and ended up winning. My prize was a place on John Marsden's writer's workshop weekend at Romsey Estate. I came away from that weekend knowing that one day, this story I had in my head would be a novel.

The two central characters in *The Bollywood Beauty* are loosely based on me at different times of my life. I had a very sheltered upbringing in Fiji, so when I moved here in 1990, I was painfully introverted. It took me years to break that shell, and I went through a few 'personality changes' in my early twenties. While these years were quite hard for me, I'm thankful in retrospect because I learned a lot about myself.

After thinking about it for ages, I registered for Raw Comedy in 2003. I nearly didn't go to my first heat because I was so nervous, but my husband Mark talked me into staying. I ended up progressing to the National Finals, and performed what has got to be my worst five-minute routine in front of thousands of people and numerous television cameras. I had not tried stand-up comedy before Raw. My middle brother still says that if someone told him then that I'd end up performing stand-up comedy on stage one day, he'd have told them they were crazy!

I'm addicted to teen-queen flicks like *Mean Girls* and *Bring It On*, am a sucker for BBC's *Pride and Prejudice*, and loved *Sex and the City*. I'm hanging for the day they release the complete series of *Beverly Hills, 90210* on DVD. I blame the ten TV-free years I spent in Fiji - they didn't get free to air television till the year I left.

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I enjoy reading Indian diaspora fiction because I find I identify with the dual nature of the character's lives. While most of these stories are written from a second generation Indian's perspective, I had never read any popular fiction from an Indo-Fijian viewpoint. Indo-Fijian literature has a strong history of poetry, non-fiction, and political writing. I'm hoping that other Indo-Fijians around the world are able to identify with the characters and situations in *The Bollywood Beauty*.

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<http://iwriter.blogspot.com>

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