

# Tearing Down the Wall

## Austin Author Shaila Abdullah Captures the Complex Lives of Pakistani Women in Her Book *Beyond the Cayenne Wall*

By Debbie Ritenour

“With all the richness of life and wealth that Shiwali’s father possessed, there was an abundance of freedom for Shiwali, but the fence closed around her once her ultimate destiny was at stake. In that she had absolutely no say,” writes Austin author Shaila Abdullah in “Moment of Reckoning,” a short story from her book *Beyond the Cayenne Wall: Collection of Short Stories*. “For generations, women in her family had succumbed to the wills of their elders; Shiwali was to be no exception.”

In this and other stories, Abdullah, who is Pakistani-American, explores the lives and loves of Pakistani women. She describes their struggles between tradition and individuality, between East and West, and between hearts and minds. Whether she is writing about arranged marriages, adoptions, or the “rat-children” of Shah Daullah’s shrine, Abdullah proves that she definitely is the exception. This book, her first, has already received national acclaim, and it was published less than six months ago.

Growing up in Pakistan is much different from growing up in Austin. Karachi, where Abdullah was born and where many of the stories in her book are set, is almost as different as you can imagine. Described as “a South Asian Beirut,” Karachi is known for both its diversity and its violence.

“Sectarian and ethnic violence were a norm even when we were growing up, but it has grown progressively worse. It wasn’t uncommon for us to miss several days of school a year because of curfews imposed after an escalation of violence,” Abdullah says.

Abdullah’s family was progressive compared with many Pakistani families. The children were raised to be strong and independent, regardless of gender. Abdullah knew they supported her no matter what course she took.

“My parents performed the role of gentle guides throughout our lives,” she says. “They nudged us in the direction we were inclined toward and then stepped back and watched us. They were never judgmental or overbearing and never gave up on us as we stumbled, faltered, paused, gained momentum, and eventually reached our goals.”

Abdullah attended a Catholic school — “a fact many people find hard to believe,” she says. She later received a bachelor’s degree in English literature from the University of Karachi and a diploma in graphic design from the Karachi School of Art. She worked for an advertising agency and started writing articles and short stories on the side for local publications. It was during this time that she began writing “Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust,” which became the second story in *Beyond the Cayenne Wall*.

Like that of many Pakistani women, Abdullah’s marriage was arranged. Her parents wanted their children to marry whomever they chose, but they were happy to arrange matches as well. When a proposal came from her best friend’s brother, Muhammad, who was studying in the United States, her parents were initially hesitant to consider it due to Abdullah’s age but then agreed to meet and interview Muhammad.

“I had my say, he had his, and the knot was tied. I probably saw him five times during chaperoned visits before we were engaged,” she says.

Abdullah wrote about an arranged marriage in the story “Moment of Reckoning,” a story she says resonates with her strongly. While she understands that many people in the United States may not understand or agree with the idea of arranged marriages, she says she believes in them.

“Arranged marriage is a custom I have great faith in, not because of the success I have had in mine, but because there are deep-rooted reasons and a method to the system,” she says. “However, I am against forced arranged marriages because they force women into an unsatisfactory relationship, which can be devastating to all parties in the long run.”

After her wedding, Abdullah moved to California with her husband. Their careers later took them to Austin, where she works as a graphic designer and he works as a contracts administrator for a local transit company. She didn’t write again for 10 years.

“My father has always been a driving force behind my writing. When I initially moved here and stopped writing, I felt his disappointment, but he encouraged me to start again,” she

says. “When I did, I decided not to tell him and surprise him with a book in print. His extreme happiness at the news made it very rewarding.”

Abdullah published *Beyond the Cayenne Wall* last fall. Since its publication, the book has received national acclaim, winning the Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction in the 2005 Norumbega Fiction Awards. One of the stories from the book, “Moment of Reckoning,” won a *Writer’s Digest* Award. The book also received a notable mention in the 2006 *Writers Notes* Book Awards. Abdullah has received many requests for interviews and in December was invited to read from her book at a benefit held by *Chowrangi* magazine for victims of the recent Pakistani earthquake.

Abdullah received inspiration for her stories from many sources: relatives who passed down tales from generation to generation, friends who experienced events firsthand, and even news articles she read. When she began writing again in 2002, she had no idea she was creating a book, but friends who had read her work encouraged her to pursue publication.

“In hindsight, that was the best advice I had ever received,” Abdullah says.


Today, Abdullah is working on two novels



Courtesy Photo

while balancing her job, husband, and 2-year-old daughter, Aanyah. She plans to keep writing this time.

“I am humbled by the attention the book has received,” Abdullah says. “The best gift, though, was the look of pride in my parents’ eyes when I surprised them with my book.”

For more information or to order a copy of *Beyond the Cayenne Wall* (iUniverse, 2005, \$10.95), go to [www.shailaabdullah.com](http://www.shailaabdullah.com). 

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