

**Cleveland Novel Club, October 6, 2020**

**Biographical Paper: Dr. Manil Suri, *Death of Krishna***

**Submitted by: Jill Korbin**

The biographical essays for the Cleveland Novel Club are an opportunity to learn more about the remarkable individuals who produce the literary works that stimulate, engage, enthrall, and sometimes dismay or offend. Learning more about these authors has offered an intriguing perspective to understanding how their work became notable enough to be selected by our well-read and dedicated group to read and, importantly, to discuss. In this case, Dr. Manil Suri, author of our book selection for this evening, *Death of Krishna* (and other works) is, in my view, stunningly fascinating.

In our country's current unfortunate xenophobia one should not look only to exemplary individuals like Dr. Suri, but the larger view of humanity in need. Nevertheless, Dr. Suri stands out as an immigrant who has made substantial contributions to the fabric and well-being of our nation. Dr. Manil Suri is a Ph.D. mathematician (appointed as a Distinguished Professorship at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County), an affiliate faculty member in the Asian Studies Program at UMBC, an award-winning novelist, an author of a play, an essayist and columnist for some of the most prestigious news organizations in the country (e.g. *The New York Times*), a proponent of the links between mathematics and the humanities, and an advocate for democracy and for human rights (notably LGBTQ rights and recognition).

Dr. Suri was born in Mumbai (Bombay at the time). His father was a Bollywood music director and his mother a schoolteacher. He was educated at the University of Bombay (now Mumbai), then moving to the United States and earning his Ph.D. in mathematics at Carnegie-

Mellon in 1983. He then accepted a faculty position at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which he says on his UMBC website “This is the only job I’ve ever had.”

In an interview with the Asia Society in 2001, the year *Death of Vishnu* was published (<https://asiasociety.org/manil-suri-and-death-vishnu>), Dr. Suri said that he was raised in an apartment building very much like the one in the novel, though of course the characters were fictional. There was indeed a man named Vishnu, who died, living in the building in which he grew up, but he did not know him. His family indeed shared a kitchen with another family, though this was not an unusual or remarkable living arrangement. “*The thing that probably reflects my own experience most is the fighting between the neighbors.*” Dr. Suri wrote in a column for *The New York Times* (3/15/16), *The Segregation of India*, in which he noted, “*In the building where I grew up Hindus and Muslims lived side by side.*”

Also in the interview with the Asia Society, Dr. Suri commented on his own religious background and its relationship to the book: *I was brought up a Hindu but it was more cultural. I didn’t have much of a background in mythology and I hadn’t read any of the texts. I had to do a lot of research, especially when I started writing the third and fourth chapters.*

We often comment at my own university, and I hear at others, about the connection students interested in science have with the arts, notably music (and his father was a music director). In this case it is mathematics and writing. Asked about the connection in the same Asia Society interview, Dr. Suri responded: “*I like to think of this book as a theorem where you have this building and events occur in it and then you can think of this building as a representation of India with all of these religions or it’s this ascension in Hinduism where all the floors represent different levels of life. It’s sort of an abstraction, much like in mathematics where you have a theorem and apply it to different settings or applications and you get different roots out of it.*”

Dr. Suri began writing short stories in the 1990s, none of which were published until he began writing *The Death of Vishnu* (which remember, was published in 2001) and published an excerpt (2000) in *The New Yorker* as *The Seven Circles*. As a novelist, Dr. Suri is known for his trilogy of novels all named for Hindu gods and reflecting the tensions in modern-day Mumbai and India. His first novel, *The Death of Vishnu* (2001) was on the long-list for the 2001 Booker Prize, short listed for the Pen/Faulkner Award, and winner of the Barnes and Noble Discovery prize. His subsequent novels were *The Age of Shiva* (2008) and *The City of Devi* (2013). It is interesting that *The City of Devi* was originally supposed to be about the god Brahma, but he decided instead to write about the goddess Devi.

Dr. Suri won the "Bad Sex in Fiction" prize in December 2013. This prize was established by The Literary Review in 1993 to recognize "crude, badly written or perfunctory use of sexual description" in modern novels. (Norman Mailer was an earlier recipient.) Lest you wonder, it was for a scene in another book, *The City of Devi* that involved a description of the three main characters, a physicist, his wife and a young gay male Muslim (note that Dr. Suri is gay and has written about this). This is the text that the judges pointed out (I did not read the book to verify): "*Surely supernovas explode that instant, somewhere, in some galaxy. The hut vanishes, and with it the sea and the sands - only Karun's body, locked with mine, remains....*" However, other reviews (*The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times Literary Supplement*) took a different view about his writing about sex saying that Dr. Suri "admirably" handles the strands of "sex, mythology and global politics" (according to the *Times Literary Supplement*). Dr. Suri two years later wrote a column in *The New York Times*, "Don't Feel Bad About Bad Sex" (11/28/2015) to the newest recipient offering advice, including "prepare to be humiliated," and expect to see your face on "websites from Vietnam to the Czech Republic." "As everyone will

insist, the award is supposed to be all in fun (theirs, not yours, unfortunately). Which means you're forced to be a good sport." Dr. Suri also offered support to the new recipient to take heart.

Dr. Suri co-authored a play with a faculty member in the UMBC Department of English, Michele Osherow, *The Mathematics {of being} Human. Can the Precision of Poetry Match the Precision of an Equation?* It has been performed in full production in India and the U.S. and has had staged readings at multiple universities. The synopsis on his website describes the play:

*"Battle lines are drawn when an English professor and a mathematician are compelled to co-teach a course at a university bent on promoting interdisciplinarity. They tussle over everything: from the value of 'nothing' in King Lear, to the fractal nature of cauliflower. Will they be able give their students a glimpse of synthesis or will their insularity prove impossible to surmount? In their provocative new play The Mathematics of Being Human, professors Michele Osherow (English) and Manil Suri (Mathematics) explore how finding common ground between two very different ways of thinking can shape our understanding of what it means to be human."*

As an academician, Dr. Suri is also a success. He has research funding as the Principal Investigator from the National Science Foundation, the Army Research Office, and the Air Force Office of Scientific Research. He is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Computational and Applied Mathematics* (1993-present) as well as multiple other awards including a Guggenheim award for his work as a novelist. This again shows his remarkable abilities to bridge intellectual fields.

Dr. Suri is also an activist on many fronts. As a gay man, he writes op-ed pieces about growing up gay, and about the need to promote inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in science (*Why Is Science So Straight: Gays and Lesbians Are Underrepresented in Many Stem Fields*, New York Times 9/4/15), as some examples. He also works to promote math literacy and the love of

math in adult and K-12 populations. One such editorial, *The Importance of Recreational Math* (New York Times 10/12/15) talked about doing math for fun as in games like Sudoku and cases where doing math for fun led to future scientific inquiry. Dr. Suri further brings his expertise in math to pressing social issues, for example gerrymandering, writing an op-ed in the New York Times (3/29/19) *Want to fix gerrymandering. Then the Supreme Court needs to listen to mathematicians*. The list is long in topics he tackles, including, as one more example abortion rights: *India's Inverted Abortion Politics...The Poor Suffer*. New York Times 8/3/15)

I will end by saying that many many more pages could be written about the multi-talented Dr. Suri. I am left with the question: Where does he find the time??

(Dr. Suri's website at UMBC is: <https://manilsuri.umbc.edu/>)