

# Author Sharon Bala launches first novel “The Boat People” in St. John's Thursday night

If initial reviews and comments are any indication, those who pick up Sharon Bala's first novel “The Boat People” will be pleased with her interpretation of a difficult refugee situation.

Those reviews have been positive and several literary prizes and awards she has already been afforded only further strengthen the quality of the work she will debut on Thursday, Jan. 18 at the Eastern Edge Gallery in St. John's from 7:30-9 p.m.

“The Boat People” is about a group of refugees who survive a perilous ocean voyage only to face the threat of deportation amid accusations of terrorism.

Bala will read an excerpt from “The Boat People” which will also be available for sale at the event. In addition, musicians from the Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra will perform.

“Right now, I am nervous about bad weather,” she said as the clock ticks towards the launch. So she hopes Mother Nature co-operates to allow people to come out and celebrate her book.

She is anxious to have her work debuted and has gone through the progressions most new writers face, especially in the days leading into completion of their first novel.

“In the fall, I was nervous about it getting published and before I sold the book, I was pushing the demons aside of ‘what if I never get published?’ ” she said.

Once the final draft was complete and the editing process was done, she said she wondered how the people she loves in her life would view her book as she wanted them to like it.

Enter her mother, father and sister to the process.

“My mother read the first draft and she provided feedback more on the plot and characters. She read the first and last drafts and said to me ‘the finished product had improved from the first draft,’ she said.

“My father read it and he told me afterwards that it was the first novel he has ever read,” she said.

“He caught a few spelling mistakes and talked to me about a few things in the book that resonated with him,” she added.

In addition, Bala said she has been texting back and forth with her sister about the novel.

“She said to me that she recognizes (some familiar personal things) this or that,” she said.

A close friend has messaged her after reading it and spoke about a scene at the end of the novel when an old woman with dementia whips a bottle of Ensure — a dietary supplement drink — at someone's head.

“She asked me, is that my grandma and I said yes,” she said, noting she had drawn on a story her friend had told her about her grandmother and the struggles she had with dementia.

Her affiliation with the Writer's Alliance and the two awards she garnered for “The Boat People” — and just living in Newfoundland and Labrador and the support and inspiration the arts community has for aspiring writers — has made this journey special.

“I never would have been a writer unless I moved here. The cultural organizations in this province are very supportive of writers,” Bala said.

Winning the Percy James Award gave her a boost of confidence that led to her shopping the book around to agents and then being shortlisted for the Fresh Fish award led to her getting an agent. In addition, the Writer’s Alliance has provided her with plenty of great, free resources that have helped foster her writing.

Inspired by real events, with vivid scenes that move between the eerie beauty of northern Sri Lanka and combative refugee hearings in Vancouver, where life and death decisions are made, Bala’s novel is an unforgettable and necessary story for our times.

While the book is fictional, it does point to the struggle refugees from not only Sri Lanka, but all countries face across the globe.

The book follows Mahindan and nearly five hundred fellow refugees as they reach the shores of British Columbia as the young father and his six-year-old son seek to begin a new life by putting Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war behind them.

That dream was short-lived as Mahindan and the refugees were imprisoned, suspected of being members of the Tamil Tigers, a terrorist militia infamous for suicide attacks.

Mahindan fears the chances for their asylum are dwindling as suspicion surrounding their affiliations mount.

Told through the alternating perspectives of Mahindan; his lawyer Priya, who reluctantly represents the migrants; and Grace, a third generation Japanese-Canadian adjudicator who must decide Mahindan’s fate, “The Boat People” is a high-stakes novel that offers a deeply compassionate lens through which to view the current refugee crisis.

Some of Bala’s inspiration for the novel came during a visit to Halifax’s Pier 21 museum, a location that has served as a place of inspiration for countless thousands of people who came to Canada seeking a better life.

So too did it serve as inspiration and a reminder of life and history and how the two are easily interchanged.

She and her husband were at the Pier 21 museum during some down time on a visit to Halifax in 2010, when something she saw at one of the exhibits stuck with her.

More than 6,000 kilometres away, in Vancouver, Tamil refugees were being anything but welcomed into Canada.

This gave her some clarity about her own situation and also struck a chord with her as she recounted the quote she had read that came from an immigration officer speaking to a Hungarian refugee hoping to start a better life in Canada in the 1950s was “You’ve come to a good country. There is room for you here.”

She gave those words to one of the characters in the novel that followed the question throughout its pages — and the theme of what kind of nation is Canada — dominated the book.

Bala — herself of Sri Lankan heritage — knew that people who had fled a civil war in her native country, were not being afforded the same opportunities that she had learned about at Pier 21.

“That could have been my family coming across on one of those ships instead of on a plane as my family did.”

That inspirational ship was the MV Sun Sea, a ship that was intercepted off the coast of British Columbia by Canadian authorities in 2010 after a three-month journey from Thailand.

The passengers claimed refugee status due to the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil fighters, but were detained on suspicion that some of them had links to the Tamil Tigers terrorist organization.

Sharon Bala lives in St. John's where she is a member of The Port Authority writing group.

Her short story "Butter Tea at Starbucks" won the prestigious Writers' Trust/McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize in 2017.

In addition, she received the 2015 Percy Janes First Novel Award and was a finalist for the NLCU Fresh Fish Award for her first novel — "The Boat People" manuscript.

## Sharon Bala's Boat People haunted by enigmas of arrival

Sharon Bala credits moving to Newfoundland with helping her become a writer. It was there in 2011 that Bala, whose background is in public relations, found herself adjusting to the local job market after years in Toronto, and enrolled on a whim in an evening fiction class.

Growing up in Pickering, Ontario, she'd taken writing courses by correspondence and later completed the first draft of a novel, but it wasn't until she was in her 30s that she embraced the craft. The first story she wrote that pleased her was about an adult daughter's reaction to her mother's death, and this began her portrayals of fellow Sri Lankan Canadians and the trials of children and parents.

"It [the material from that period] was more about identity and generational conflict," Bala says today, reached by the *Straight* in St. John's. "Those weren't stories that were any good, by the way. But I think I was working out what my obsessions were."

Regardless of quality, these pieces paved the way for Bala's recent win of the Journey Prize and for her debut novel, *The Boat People*. Inspired by the 2010 *MV Sun Sea* incident, when a Thai cargo ship ferrying 492 Sri Lankan asylum seekers was intercepted off the coast of British Columbia, the novel opens with refugees who've fled the turmoil between their government and the Tamil Tigers in search of a better, if uncertain, tomorrow.

Their belief is that " 'the hardest part is behind us now. We've left our war-torn country, we're in a safe place, we've arrived.' But," Bala says, "of course they're not. They're met with a rather hard welcome mat."

The Ministry of Public Safety suspects terrorists are among the asylum seekers, which complicates the lives of Mahindan, a Kilinochchi mechanic who made the journey with his six-year-old son, Sellian; Priya, the Sri Lankan-Canadian articling student in Vancouver who works on Mahindan's case; and Grace, the Japanese-Canadian adjudicator who must decide whether Mahindan poses a threat to national security. Investigating the invisible suffering carried by the displaced, and by those tasked with shaping their futures, the timely novel delivers volts of emotion and establishes Bala's narrative poise.

Starting the novel in 2014, Bala had no intention of writing about refugees. "And I didn't mean to write about this boat at all. Originally the book was supposed to be set in the middle of the country," she says. "It was supposed to be the character Priya's family, and originally she had a much bigger family with lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. It was really supposed to be more about this split that happens between immigrant parents and then their children who are raised in Canada."

Born in Dubai before immigrating to Canada at age seven, Bala, whose mother is Sinhalese and whose father is Tamil, hadn't reflected on patriotism until she relocated, in 2009, to England, where her husband was pursuing postdoctoral studies. This sense of national identity remained

when she returned to Canada the following year and was also with her when she visited an exhibit at Halifax's Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, shortly after the *MV Sun Sea* hit headlines, which spurred her to see connections between refugees past and present.

Thoughts on arrivals lingered in her imagination—"When do you show up? Do you show up by boat? Do you show up by plane? Are you one of the people we've airlifted out of Kosovo?"—and initial versions of the novel used the boat as a talking point. Mahindan, the protagonist Bala suggests she most resembles, wasn't in the fore at that stage either, but developed once early readers encouraged her to give him a larger role.

Haunted by memories of Sri Lanka, where compliance and williness were necessary to survive, Mahindan holds the hope that Sellian will thrive in Canada, even as he himself is kept in a correctional facility, facing review after review. Preparing his case, Priya feels waylaid from her ambitions in corporate law, but gains a greater perspective on justice and heritage. "It irked her, the gulf between the letter of the law and how it was executed," Bala writes. "How could a process so influenced by public opinion and politicking have the audacity to call itself law?"

Part of Bala's research was consulting papers by the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University. This was essential to fleshing out Grace, whose family was subject to the Japanese-Canadian internment, and who struggles herself with the weight of her duties. ("Listening to these horror stories day in and day out—that cycle of three weeks of listening to stories and then one week for making your decisions—that's real," Bala says. "Think about the emotional toll that would take.")

In writing the novel, Bala wanted to show that Canada has been built by wave upon wave of newcomers. Chance, as much as politics, she insists, guides how they're received. "If we're going to be real patriots, if we're going to be responsible Canadians, we have to look at the bad stuff, too," she says. "We have to say, 'We did these bad things, let's try to learn from history and not do them again.'

## **Novelist Sharon Bala shares stories of immigration, luck and 'the good place' with new Canadians**

Sharon Bala has come a long way since the days when she used to obsessively watch *The Price Is Right* as a kid new to Canada.

Speaking Tuesday night to a jam-packed crowd in her adopted home of St. John's, Bala — author of the bestselling novel *The Boat People*, a finalist in CBC's Canada Reads competition this year — said she is still struck by the similarities of watching someone trying to win at Plinko and the way some immigrants are granted entry into this country.

"Trying to apply as a refugee or show up and claim asylum, it's a bit like a game," Bala said at a forum at the Association of New Canadians (ANC) in St. John's.

"You're just hoping that you get in and whether or not you do is so much dependent on luck and timing."

Just one month after it landed on bookshelves across the country, Bala's debut novel continues to generate buzz for its compassionate look at refugees seeking asylum in Canada.

*The Boat People* is one of five finalists in this year's Canada Reads competition and is currently sitting at No. 1 on CBC Books' fiction bestsellers list, reflecting sales at independent booksellers.

On Tuesday, Bala was the guest of honour at a Canada Reads event hosted by *Weekend AM's* Heather Barrett at the ANC in St. John's.

A Sri Lankan immigrant herself, Bala was inspired to write *The Boat People* by the real-life story of a group of Tamil refugees who arrived in Vancouver in 2010 on a cargo ship and were detained after government officials began to suspect they had connections to the Tamil Tigers.

"They arrive on the west coast of Canada and they try to claim asylum, but the government at the time doesn't believe them, doesn't trust them, and puts them all in jail," said Bala.

It's a riveting novel about heartbreak, the ways in which immigrants are often subjected to the luck of the draw when they seek asylum, and how Canadians choose whether to succumb to fear or give newcomers the benefit of the doubt.

All of the characters in *The Boat People* are fictional, said Bala, but a lot of the things they go through really happened.

Families were placed in separate prisons and detention facilities, some children of refugees were put into foster care, and adjudicators decided the fate of asylum claims.

One of the things Bala wants to make clear with the book is that the political climate of Canada can — and does — change on a dime.

"One of the [new immigrants] who were speaking here said, 'You have come to a good country,' and it's true, in this moment right now, it is a good country," said Bala.

It was a good country too, she said, in 1986 when a different group of Tamil refugees arrived in Canada off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

They were rescued by Newfoundland skipper Gus Dalton and granted asylum and supported by Brian Mulroney, the prime minister at the time.

In a quote that's repeated in Bala's book, he explained his decision by saying, "We don't want people jumping to the head of the line . . . [but] if we err, we will always err on the side of justice and on the side of compassion."

"But," said Bala, "just a couple of decades later, 2010, different Tamil refugees escaping the same war who come to the other side of the country, it's not a good country at that point."

It's not a spoiler to say that *The Boat People* ends on a note of uncertainty, and readers will be left with some unanswered questions.

Readers simply cannot know if the refugees they are introduced to in the novel will be OK, or what awaits those who are sent back to live in Sri Lanka.

But the event on Tuesday made clear that there is a future for those who make it here, and are given a chance to start something new in Canada.

Near the end of the evening, Bimpa grabbed the microphone one last time.

He looked to the crowd.

"Here ... is the good place."

**SOURCE 1 (Website)**

**TITLE:** Author Sharon Bala launches first novel "The Boat People" in St. John's Thursday night

**DATE OF PUBLICATION:** January 16, 2018

**AUTHOR:** Sam McNeish

**WEBSITE:** The Telegram

**URL:**

<https://www.thetelegram.com/lifestyles/author-sharon-bala-launches-first-novel-the-boat-people-in-st-johns-thursday-night-177763/>

**SOURCE 2 (Website)**

**TITLE:** Sharon Bala's Boat People haunted by enigmas of arrival

**DATE OF PUBLICATION:** January 24, 2018

**AUTHOR:** David Chau

**WEBSITE:** Straight

**URL:**

<https://www.straight.com/arts/1023306/sharon-balas-boat-people-haunted-enigmas-arrival>

**SOURCE 3 (Website)**

**TITLE OF PAGE:** Novelist Sharon Bala shares stories of immigration, luck and 'the good place' with new Canadians

**DATE OF PUBLICATION:** February 21, 2018

**AUTHOR:** Andrew Sampson

**WEBSITE:** CBC

**URL:**

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/sharon-bala-talks-the-boat-people-with-new-immigrants-1.4544465>