



ONE AMAZING THING

By ChitraBanerjee Divakaruni

- CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. If you were to tell the story of one amazing thing that had happened in your life, what would it be? Would it be a memory of a gift, an experience, a person that you met, or an event that you witnessed? What made it *amazing*, and how did it change your life?
2. Would the experience of reading *One Amazing Thing* have been different had the narrative been from the point of view of just one person, or if the story was told by an outside figure removed from the events in the book?
3. The book begins and ends with Uma Sinha, the graduate student. Why did the author choose Uma's story to "bookend" the novel in this way? What about Uma set her apart from the members of the group, in your mind?
4. If you were trapped in a similar dangerous situation as the characters in *One Amazing Thing*, how do you think you'd react? Was there an action or behavior by a character that resonated with you?
5. Out of the nine people in the visa office, did you identify with any in particular? Which one(s) and why?
6. Why was each character's "one amazing thing" remarkable?

7. Which character's story did you find the most unexpected? Conversely, were you able to predict what was to happen in any of the stories?
8. Refresh your memory with the stories of the female characters in the book. Did these stories have anything in common?
9. "Apologize to a woman and she would gain the upper hand. Mangalam knew better than to let that happen" (pg. 55). What did you first think of Mr. Mangalam, and did this change after you learned his story?
10. Discuss Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett. Were you surprised, as their stories unfolded, to discover their reasons for going to India?
11. Almost all of the characters experience or perpetuate some kind of cultural misunderstanding. What did you learn about some of the cultures and religions explored in the book?
12. What did you think of the book's ending? What do you think the group's fate was? Why did Uma's story end where it did?

Late afternoon sun sneaks through the windows of a passport and visa office in an unnamed American city. Most customers and even most office workers have come and gone, but nine people remain. A punky teenager with an unexpected gift. An upper-class Caucasian couple whose relationship is disintegrating. A young Muslim-American man struggling with the fallout of 9/11. A graduate student haunted by a question about love. An African-American ex-soldier searching for redemption. A Chinese grandmother with a secret past. And two visa office workers on the verge of an adulterous affair.

When an earthquake rips through the afternoon lull, trapping these nine characters together, their focus first jolts to their collective struggle to survive. There's little food. The office begins to flood. Then, at a moment when the psychological and emotional stress seems nearly too much for them to bear, the young graduate student suggests that each tell a personal tale, "one amazing thing" from their lives, which they have never told anyone before. And as their surprising stories of romance, marriage, family, political upheaval, and self-discovery unfold against the urgency of their life-or-death circumstances, the novel proves the transcendent power of stories and the meaningfulness of human expression itself. From Chitra Divakaruni, author of such finely wrought, bestselling novels as *Sister of My Heart*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and *The Mistress of Spices*, comes her most compelling and transporting story to date. *One Amazing Thing* is a passionate creation about survival--and about the reasons to survive.

Author Interview: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni



Sharing Humanity: A Talk with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni about Her Latest Novel, *One Amazing Thing*

Over the last decades, tragedies – both human-made and those wrought by an ever-angry Mother Nature – seem to be coming at humankind with fast and furious regularity. The latest oil spill devastating the Gulf of Mexico promises to be the worst disaster of its kind in history. This short year alone, horrific earthquakes, erupting volcanic plumes, and tumbling mud slides have not stopped their violent paths.

And yet, somehow, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni manages to craft some of the worst tragedies into memorable, haunting stories of human connection. The last long conversation I shared with Divakaruni became a featured cover article for the November/December 2004 issue of *TBR*. Her just-published novel at the time was *Queen of Dreams*, which she wrote as a direct personal response to 9/11, haunted not only by the vivid images of what happened, but also by the repercussions felt throughout the country, especially in the South Asian American community.

In February of this year, bookstores across the country lined their bookshelves with *One Amazing Thing*, the latest from Divakaruni, an award-winning, multi-platform writer of short stories (*Arranged Marriage*, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*), poetry (*Black Candle*, *Leaving Yuba City*), middle grade/young adult titles (*Neela: Victory Song* and the three-volume *Brotherhood of the Conch* trilogy), and adult novels (including *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Vine of Desire*, *Sister of My Heart*). At the core of Divakaruni's new novel is a violent earthquake in an unnamed U.S. city, its aftereffects almost a character itself. Incredibly, the book was written long before the too-recent tragic earthquake disasters in Haiti, then Japan, Chile, and China. Divakaruni's timing proved presciently shocking.

In *One Amazing Thing*, nine men and women are trapped in the basement visa office of an Indian consulate, and must gather their strength, both physically and mentally, in order to survive the devastating earthquake that wipes out all contact with the outside world. Two characters emerge as the group's leaders: Cameron, an African American Vietnam veteran still fighting demons, is the most qualified to deal with the group's physical safety, while Uma, an Indian American graduate literature student inspired by the heavy copy of *The Canterbury Tales* she carries in her backpack, turns to storytelling to distract the group's growing anxiety. "We can take our stress out on one another," Uma admonishes after a desperate incident, "... or we can focus our minds on something compelling ... we can each tell an important story from our lives." Uma

assures her audience. “I don’t believe anyone can go through life without encountering at least one amazing thing.”

And so the stories unfold: Grandmother Jiang’s first love in the Chinese quarter of Calcutta, Mr. Pritchett’s beloved kitten that shuts down his little-boy heart, Malathi’s gleefully brave revenge on an abusive wealthy woman, Tariq’s firsthand experience of post-9/11 injustice against his innocent family, Lily’s discovery of her prodigious musical talent, Mangalam’s emotional destruction, Mrs. Pritchett’s longing to escape her overprivileged life ... and finally Cameron’s desperate search for a lost child and Uma’s own need to understand true, lasting love.

As the waters rise, the gas leaks, and disappointments prove almost crippling, nine strangers who once expected to change their lives in faraway India, share a life-altering experience right here at home. [... [click here for more](#)]

Author interview: “Sharing Humanity: A Talk with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni about Her Latest Novel, *One Amazing Thing*.” *The Bloomsbury Review*, Summer 2010

One Amazing Thing, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – Book Review

Written *by* Nicole Bonia *on* February 10, 2010



Hey! If you're new here, you might want to **subscribe to the RSS feed** so you'll always know what books I'm in the midst of reading, what books I'm loving, and which books I'm giving away.

Powered by



One Amazing Thing, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni opens with a young woman sitting in an Indian passport and visa office in an unidentified city in the United States (my guess is somewhere in California), observing the employees and the other varied strangers seeking travel visas to India. An older couple with marital problems, an ex-soldier tormented by his demons, an angry and militant youth, a perky granddaughter with her decades silent grandmother, employees of the visa office who are flirting with having an affair...each of them, along with their youthful observer, have a story. When an earthquake leaves them trapped underground with diminishing expectations of rescue and few resources to sustain them each is tasked with revealing just one amazing thing they have experienced in life.

Have you ever had the experience of being so totally into a novel that you only come up for air to wonder what other books the author has written, and how fast you can get your hands on more? *Nods.* Yup. I felt that way about Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's book *One Amazing Thing*. I had to reassure myself with a quickie google search to certain that there were indeed more of her books out there just waiting to be read and enjoyed. Whew! There are 14 more!

One of the great joys of this book is the way that Divakaruni is able to develop the characters so completely through the little ways they interact with each other and how they handle themselves in the aftermath of the earthquake. The characters were varied and I initially reacted to each of them differently as a reader, much the way they had different opinions of each other as they are sitting in

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Background

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author and poet. Her work is widely known, as she has been published in over 50 magazines, including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies. Her works have been translated into 20 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese.

She was born in India and lived there until 1976, at which point she left Calcutta and came to the United States. She continued her education in the field of English by receiving a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

To earn money for her education, she held many odd jobs, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread in a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. At Berkeley, she lived in the International House and worked in the dining hall. She briefly lived in Illinois, Ohio and Texas, but has spent most of her life in Northern California, which she often writes about.

Divakaruni currently teaches in the nationally ranked Creative Writing program at the Univ. of Houston. She serves on the Advisory board of Maitri in the San Francisco Bay Area and Daya in Houston. Both these are organizations that help South Asian or South Asian American women who find themselves in abusive or domestic violence situations. She is also on the board of Pratham, an organization that helps educate children (especially those living in urban slums) in India.

Divakaruni has judged several prestigious awards, such as the National Book Award and the PEN Faulkner Award.

Two of her books, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*, have been made into movies by filmmakers Gurinder Chadha and Paul Berges (an English film) and Suhasini Mani Ratnam (a Tamil TV serial) respectively.

Divakaruni lives in Houston with her husband Murthy, her two sons Anand and Abhay (whose names she has used in her children's novels) and Juno, the family dog.



Marianne says she needed
1/2 page more!