

My great fear is that time will run out too quickly. But I'm a firm believer in God

The storyteller

Sonia Faleiro has made an easy transition from the privileged life of a cabinet minister's daughter to that of the hard-nosed researcher who hunts down stories rich in human interest and angst. By Jackie Pinto

AFTER relocating to San Francisco with her American husband Ulrik McKnight and her blogging, tweeting Jack Russel terrier, Zoey, late last year, Sonia Faleiro is now back in the country to launch her second novel, *Beautiful Thing*. This is a 216-page exploration into the secret world of Mumbai's dance bars. Having worked with national news magazines, the 33-year-old Faleiro is well-known for her hard hitting stories and pithy, sometimes acerbic, blog. We caught up with the award-winning journalist and amateur photographer, who is currently on a city tour:

My love affair with books began early. I was born in Goa to a lawyer-politician father and professor mother (Eduardo and Muriel Faleiro). I don't really remember having toys in the house. It was always filled with books. They were given out as treats and rewards, birthday and Christmas presents, read from at meal times and used as references for everything, from family board games to heated debates.

We moved to Delhi when I was six months. My father accepted the post of a Union Cabinet minister in 1977, the year I was born. And my mother began to teach Portuguese at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Goa receded into an idyllic place for holidays and occasional visits but it obviously held sway over my imagination as *The Girl*, my first novel, was set there.

I was pampered and considered the baby of the family. But I had to grow up almost overnight when my other passed on in a tragic car accident. I was 16. An almost parallel incident

Coming soon

Besides another non-fiction book about violence and deprivation in a small family, I'll be appearing in the anthology, *Mumbai Noir*, a collection of fiction and non-fiction stories, edited by Altaf Tyrewala and published by the New York-based Akashic Books, in 2011.

On my feet

I love exploring new places, particularly cities that are great for walking; visiting bookstores and museums in them, taking in art, eating great food and trying not to think of work.

By my bedside

A large glass of water. And my favourite midnight snack is decadent chocolate chip cookies.

Guilty pleasure

Gol guppas. And the reality show, *The Real Housewives of New York/Orange County*.

On holiday

I love to visit Stockholm, a laid back city where my mother-in-law lives.

Dog tales

When I am not blogging or sharing Zoey's view of the world on Twitter, I work out rigorously at the gym or take my terrier for long walks on the beach. Incidentally, while Zoey has never eaten a manuscript yet, when she was a puppy she ate an entire slipper. That's pretty impressive!

happens to the protagonist in *The Girl*.

I found direction from the school I went to. I learned not to send my children there. My early academic career was average at best. I joined St Stephens but I was never an overly enthusiastic student. Studies bored me. (But winning a British Council scholarship changed that.) I chose the University of Edinburgh to do my MSc in Nation, Writing, Culture, because it was a city I had never seen before. I felt the newness of it all would be challenging. And it was. I graduated with distinction and a lot of the credit goes to my professors there. They inspired me and taught me the true joy and value of hardcore painstaking research. It was in Edinburgh that *The Girl* was conceived.

After Edinburgh came Mumbai, an endearing and exasperating, complex and extreme city. I am able to connect with people here whose lives would otherwise never cross mine, enriching me professionally and personally. People often ask me why I don't cover the lives of the rich and famous instead of underage domestic workers, eunuchs, transvestites and suicidal farmers. Well, there are enough people to write about the former. And what is left to say about an over-exposed celebrity?

Beautiful Thing was five years in the making. This includes three years of research. It was born out of an idea that struck me while flipping through channels and I chanced upon fascinating footage on dance bars in the city. The journalist in me knew there was a story there and I needed to find it. I didn't have anything to peg it on then or any idea what I



Top 5 books

- Adrian Nicole Le Blanc's *Random Family*
- Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
- Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*
- Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*
- Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*

would be getting into.

I gained entry into the closed world of Mumbai's dance bars. And I met Leela. A stunningly beautiful woman, all of 19, and the mistress of Purushottam Shetty, the owner of the dance bar, Night Lovers, she was amazing. She was well aware of her place in the

world; the fine line which divided the dance bar, where she ruled by virtue of her 'position' and the rest of the city where she was a nobody at best and a person of ill-repute at the very least.

Leela became my guide to the underworld of Bombay's dance bars. A world of glamorous women, of fierce love, sex and violence, of customers and gangsters, of police, prostitutes and pimps. When a savvy politician decided to inflict his moral code on the city and its 75,000 dance bar professionals, I found my peg. I did a series for *Telhelka* on bar girls whose lives changed irrevocably overnight — like the teenager who joined a dance bar to save a father from a tumour, the wife who accepted her husband's beatings because she expected no more, the mother who returned from nights at the bar to feed her children. These stories were so compelling, so rich in human interest and angst, that they inspired the book.

One of the hardest things about being a writer is the loneliness. Of researching a subject and entering a world so private that talking about it to anyone would be a betrayal of trust. I overcome writer's block by writing every single day. Blogging, if it is done with originality and with regularity, can be a good foundation for writing longer works.

The most annoying thing anyone has said about my writing. "There will be no readership for your kind of stories."

— *Beautiful Thing*, published by the Penguin Group (Rs 450), is available at leading bookstores

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author

I love the cliché: you can't put a price on it

As a liberated woman, I feel it's still a man's world out there, especially in the little, everyday things that niggle me