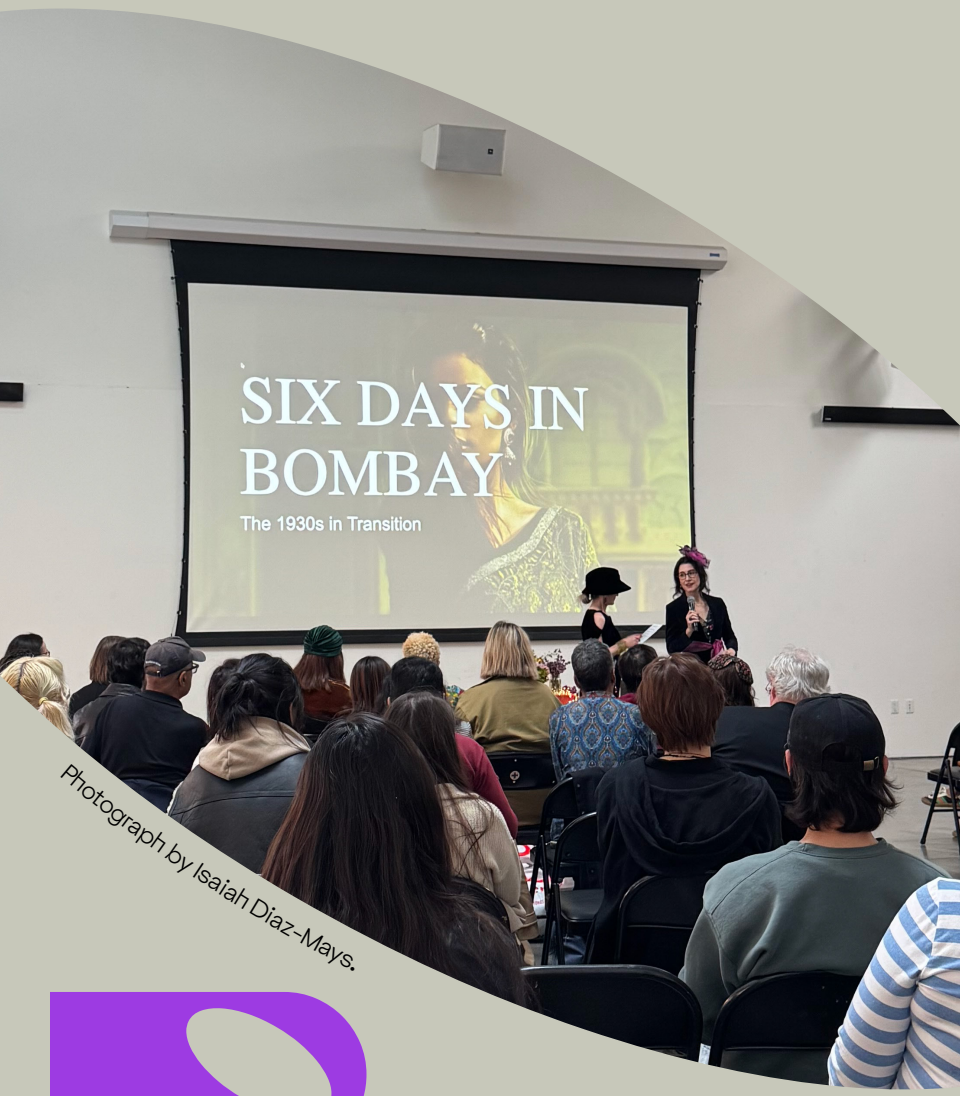
Six Days in Bombay: Novel Inspiration, and the Importance of Celebrating Our Wins



Photograph by Isaiah Diaz-Mays.

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By
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"Aside from shattering age, gender, and race norms, the pride that the [MFA Writing] program takes in any one of its representatives doing well in the publishing industry and in life is immense. It's personally inspiring to share scholarly kinship with someone who has traveled along an unorthodox path toward literary success."

Of all the exceptional features of the MFA Writing program at CCA, one of my favorite practices embedded within the program is the exercise of celebrating wins, both large and small. As writers, the sentiment of cheering both yourself and others on comes naturally, particularly if your writing process feels overwhelming and isolated, often the norm. From poems and essays getting published in online journals to participating in public readings, nerve-racking events where you find yourself introducing your words to an audience for the very first time, each win along the journey toward your customized definition of success is a win worth honoring. And when you're an internationally successful writer like Alka Joshi, celebrations come frequently.

The bestselling author of *The Henna Artist*, *The Secret Keeper of Jaipur*, and *The Perfumist of Paris*, Alka Joshi has stacked up a long list of wins to clink glasses over throughout the last decade. Since graduating from CCA with her MFA in Writing, she's earned the privilege of being a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick, getting her work translated into 30 languages and optioned for television, publicly speaking at thousands of libraries, bookstores, colleges & universities, and even being chosen by Forbes for their 50 Women Over 50 series. The best catch? All of this followed after she began her writing career at the young age of 62.

The release of her fourth novel, *Six Days in Bombay*, was the cause for celebration here at CCA last month on April 15th. If you're a student in the MFA Writing program here, you've likely heard of Alka. The program does a phenomenal job at updating everyone on some major highlights and accomplishments via a monthly newsletter written and published by Jasmin Darznik, Program Chair. Alka is often cited as a continual highlight in said newsletter, often taking part in well-known talk shows, podcasts, and speaking on panels alongside a plethora of other highly respected authors.

Aside from shattering age, gender, and race norms, the pride that the program takes in any one of its representatives doing well in the publishing industry and in life is immense. It's personally inspiring to share scholarly kinship with someone who has traveled along an unorthodox path toward literary success. Born in India, Alka came to the U.S. with her family at nine years of age. She earned her BA from Stanford before taking on a distinguished career in marketing and public relations.

The celebration for the release of Alka Joshi's *Six Days in Bombay* took place in the Nave Presentation Space in CCA's main building. To closely align with the temporal setting of the novel, the Nave was decorated with roaring '20s and great-depression era fabrics, garments and attire. The book release party was also accompanied by South Asian snacks and treats, as well as warm chai. I may or may not have had three humble cups of the latter.

Upon walking in wearing a long bright red trench coat, fabulous purple glasses, and custom handmade shoes, Alka's aura matched my perception of her as relayed through paper and television screens. Her energy was

Jasmin Darznik (Program Chair, MFA Writing) and Alka Joshi in conversation on April 15th, 2025, Nave Presentation Space.
Photograph by Isaiah Diaz-Mays.

Excerpt from Alka Joshi's lecture on April 15th, 2025.
Photograph by Isaiah Diaz-Mays.

dazzling, and she wasted little time getting to the history lesson on how exactly her fourth novel came about. Through an engaging picture slideshow combined with oral storytelling, Alka Joshi introduced us to the artist Amrita Sher-Gil. A name I had never before heard of, but one which, since then, has yet to escape my mind.

Born in Budapest to an aristocratic Indian family, Amrita Sher-Gil and her kin lived in close proximity to the atrocities and hardships of the First World War. Her family was stranded in Hungary throughout the war, but thankfully relocated to India several years later in 1921. Throughout this time, Sher-Gil displayed a remarkable knack for expressive painting and drawing. Due to social norms and practices back then, this was a feature often suppressed. Rather than give in and pursue more socially acceptable careers for women, such as teaching, nursing, and embroidery, Sher-Gil pursued her artistic practice with a head full of steam, and was even encouraged to do so by her mother. At age sixteen, she sailed alongside her mother and sister to Paris so that she could train full time as a painter under some of the more renowned artists in France. This voyage led to a marvelous period filled with adventure and exploration as she continued to travel throughout Europe, creating alongside revered artists of the time.

In 1938, Sher-Gil returned to Hungary, where shortly after, she married her cousin. They both spent a year in Budapest before moving back to India, settling in Saraya. The novel's narrative picks up in 1941, when Sher-Gil and her husband move to Lahore, and under extremely mysterious circumstances, she swiftly falls ill and dies. The majority of her unfinished works curiously revealed a desired gravitation toward abstraction with royal colors, distinct from her previous works.

Alka then introduced us to the lead protagonist in *Six Days in Bombay*, the fictional character Mira Novak, who comes across as a very relatable woman whom the reader automatically wants to befriend. Joshi described her as outspoken, romantically curious and active, flamboyant, politically conscious, and indisputably charming. Similar to Amrita's real life, Mira is of Indian and European descent, as is the other protagonist in the novel: Sona.

Mira and Sona closely connect on account of their half Indian identity, eventually befriending one another through social gossip and attending the same gatherings. During this time, India is in the thick of their fight for independence from Britain. One of the women empathizes fully, while the other chooses to take full advantage of their half-Anglo ties. Pondering where the story may go, a singular reality is made clear by Joshi as she bounces between historical fact and her own written fiction: Indian women of the time were not divided on the matter of independence and liberty from colonialism. They knew that together, the goal of freedom would be accomplished far quicker than apart. Without diving too deep into the dynamic between Mira and Sona, Alka Joshi had the entire room excited to find out how the story she created explores the way women were viewed back then, and even till this very day, when they operate outside their assigned positions—in all aspects of life.

After Joshi's presentation, she took pictures with new fans and familiar faces, then signed some fresh copies of her book. One whose cover is utterly gorgeous, might I add, decorated by a sleek forest green jacket with a title written in a powerful, elegant font, featuring a stunning woman looking out into the distance. Smiles were shown and laughs were had, all in the spirit of celebrating a huge win for one of our very own. I haven't had the chance to read *Six Days in Bombay* just yet due to an intense spring semester, but when I do, which will likely be this summer, I have no doubt I'll be celebrating Alka and her hard work once more.

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