

Relative Truths

For his luminous second novel, Tony D'Souza retells his multicultural family history.

BY LISA SCHWARZBAUM



Author
D'Souza



The Konkans
Tony D'Souza
Novel

Is *The Konkans* autobiography disguised as fiction? Author Tony D'Souza says it isn't, but he's ready for readers to assume like crazy that it is. After all, he's the Chicago-raised son of an Indian father and a white American mother, and he has installed the Chicago-raised son of an Indian father

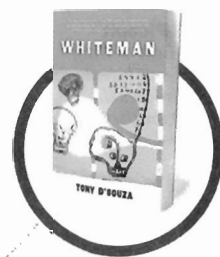
and a white American mother as the narrator of his second novel. D'Souza calls his hero Francisco D'Sai, and explains that Francisco's parents, Lawrence and Denise, met in India during Denise's stint as a Peace Corps volunteer. But never mind that D'Souza's own mother was herself a former Peace Corps volunteer in India; let's assume the whole tumultuous tale is a feat of imagination. The author, a savvy storyteller with a clear, soulful voice, just knows good source material when he lives it.

What he has created—with an appealingly unfashionable simplicity of language—is a rich, warm, personal yarn, bright with a pride and love that survive even the choppiest shifts in his chapters. Anyhow, perhaps choppiness is inevitable when there are so many terrific vignettes to squeeze in. D'Sai/D'Souza has certainly lucked into a flavorful heritage: Both the real and fictional fathers are Konkans,

descended from generations who converted to Catholicism following the arrival of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama on the shores of India at the turn of the 16th century.

In *The Konkans*, firstborn son of a firstborn son of a firstborn son Francisco describes how his father, Lawrence, decisively left India behind in the 1970s, coming to the New World to drink too much and chase the American dream of business, golf, and country club. He tells how his poor-born mother, Denise, fell in love with India and married Lawrence almost as a souvenir. And he delights especially in describing how Francisco's uncle Sam made his way cautiously through America caught between two cultures, just like his nephew. (Sam goes with the flow—and the flow leads, for a time, to an affair with Denise.)

"You are a very small people in India, as are we Sikhs," a fellow Indian immigrant explains to Sam early in his Chicago days, by way of bonding. "But when you roar in the crowd, your roar is heard like ours is. We are the soldiers of India, you are its Jews. Both are good." *The Konkans* is D'Souza's own roar in the crowd, an affectionate exploration of personal identity in order to make sense of conflicting parts—and thus become whole in a multicultural world. In this Age of Obama, the search couldn't be more timely, nor the result more gratifying. **A-**



Backstory

+ Tony D'Souza is no stranger to semiautobiographical fiction. For his first novel, 2006's *Whiteman*, he mined his own experience as a Peace Corps volunteer to tell the story of a young American aid worker in western Africa.