



## *Author Asks*

*from Neela Vaswani,*  
*author of You Have Given Me a Country*

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- 1 This book is about my in-between sense of identity. If someone asked you the question, “What are you?” how would you answer? How would the question itself make you feel?
- 2 My mother was raised Irish-Catholic but felt close to and comforted by Buddhism and Hinduism. What traditions that you were not born into do you feel close to and why? As an extension to this question: I am not a gay man but gay men are my people. What group to which you technically “do not belong” do you feel you belong to? And why?
- 3 Most of the revelations and experiences in this book are very specifically tied to place. What places in your life have shaped you? How has moving between places or staying in only one place formed you?
- 4 Do you find yourself in conflict or in agreement with your place(s)?
- 5 A common ethnographic exercise involves looking at yourself as a “subject.” Fill in the following identity categories and then ask yourself if you conform, resist, or negotiate (and how) within these categories: race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, region, and age.
- 6 This book is a family memoir populated by the stories and people I grew up with. How do the stories and experiences of your family affect your personal foundation—from your values and cultural identity to your tastes in food and movies?
- 7 What photographs from your life would you use to explain or describe yourself?
- 8 This is a memoir but it is also infused with fiction and fictional writing techniques. Can changing or crafting a story bring out a deeper truth? Do you think fiction is on the side of truth? How do the categories of genre affect a work and how it is received by readers?
- 9 What is your first memory of an awareness of “race”/ethnicity or of being racially/ethnically categorized? Ask yourself the same question for class, religion, gender, and sexuality.



# *Writing Exercises*

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## **Exercise A**

Write about a time when you were sick in bed. I gave this assignment to students in a creative nonfiction writing workshop and did the assignment along with them. What came out of it was the section of my memoir, set in Vermont, where I am sick in bed with my grandmother and we communicate without words.

## **Exercise B**

Write about your first love. This could be a book, a song, a parent, sibling, lover, etc. I gave this assignment to a fiction workshop and did the assignment along with them. What came out of it were two different sections of the book that deal with Lord Ganesh.

## **Exercise C**

Write about what you find beautiful. Make sure your personal politics—how you see the world, and why—shapes your response.

## **Exercise D**

Continue writing past the following prompt. Make sure to stay in the present tense even as you write about the past: “I am six.”

*For writing exercises from other Sarabande authors, visit our website at [www.sarabandebooks.org](http://www.sarabandebooks.org).*

## *Suggested Reading*

*Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon Silko  
*Imaginary Parents*, Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor  
*Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje  
*Passport Photos*, Amitava Kumar  
*Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, Dorothy Allison  
*Bridge and Tunnel*, Sarah Jones  
*The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston  
*Where the Stress Falls*, Susan Sontag  
*And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, John Berger  
*Death of A Beekeeper*, Lars Gustafsson  
*Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh  
*The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault  
*Words Under the Words*, Naomi Shihab Nye  
*Unaccustomed Earth*, Jhumpa Lahiri

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AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF CREATIVE WRITING.



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