

A letter from author Naseem Rakha about *THE CRYING TREE*

Dear Bookseller,

People ask me: why write a book that takes place in Illinois? Why that state, those people, that land? My answer: because I love Illinois, and I want others to fall in love too.

I grew up twenty-two stories above the ground in one of Chicago's first urban renewal projects. From my bedroom window, I could see Lake Michigan, the loop, and the tenement houses that lined what would later be named Martin Luther King Drive. I watched the riots that took place along that road when King was assassinated. I attended elementary school at the University of Chicago, and later, when I was ten, attended public school in Chicago's suburbs.

Then, when I was seventeen years old, I moved to Carbondale, Illinois. It was there, living on a farm set in the midst of the Crab Orchard Wildlife refuge, that I learned about the land. I received my degree in geology and worked with farmers who were trying to reclaim their land after the coal mine companies finished taking what they wanted. Later, when the farm crisis hit, I worked with those same farmers to try to stop banks from foreclosing on their homes and livelihoods. Sometimes I was successful. Sometimes, sadly, I was not.

The Crying Tree is a story about that land and the kinds of people that live and depend on it. People whose farms, communities, history and families are as strongly attached to them as their skin. The book is set in the fictional town of Carlton, Illinois, which sits on a ledge of the Mississippi River in southern Illinois. It is about a family whose child is murdered during a brief move to Oregon's high desert. When the family returns to Illinois, they struggle with their loss and the secrets it unfolds.

From *The Crying Tree*:

Beyond the tree and barn lay a land Irene knew by sight, color and smell. Placed there blindfolded, she'd easily find her way home. There was the fence line, warped osage boughs wrapped with wire. And the fields, all neatly plowed for the winter. Beyond that were the trees that abutted the river. They stood still as statues, bright reds and yellows against the darkening sky. Irene didn't need dramatic landscapes. Thunderstorms were her mountains, the rounded ridges that lined the Mississippi gorge enough for her. She loved the russet color of dried millet and sumac, liked seeing men in coveralls and seed caps, felt at home with the sound and smell of disks breaking soil. She loved it, actually. Absolutely loved it. And she didn't want to lose a bit of it. Not her sister, as overbearing as she was; not Nate, not her daughter, not her home or her life beside the Mississippi where storms often rolled in.

I hope you enjoy *The Crying Tree*, and I hope you will tell others of the opportunity to hear from yet another author who has been shaped by the people and land of the mid-west.

Naseem Rakha