

PHOTO: DENISE GRANT

Q. Before you began writing short stories and novels, you were a nuclear physicist. How many years were you in that profession?

A. Ten. I did my undergraduate and graduate degrees at M.I.T. in the United States. I worked as a physicist in the U.S. for two years and at the University of Toronto for eight years.

Q. Why did you decide to change careers? Was being a writer not a career option for you?

A. It was not a career option at all. Even in Canada no one would advise anyone to actually do it. I liked science, physics and math, so when I was studying in the United States I chose a career in physics because I thought I would go back home and teach.

Q. What gave you the courage to publish your work?

A. I wrote short stories with the view of recreating the city I grew up in, Dar es Salaam. For me the short story was a small window into a certain aspect of that life. Then I sent my collection of stories to Heinemann's African Writers series.

They liked the stories and suggested that I send them the novel I was working on. When I sent them the novel they really liked it. It was published and went on to win a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. I was also invited to take part in an international writing programme in Iowa. In spite of the novel not receiving great promotional exposure, it was translated into several languages. I was confident that this is what I could do. That writing was not just wishful thinking. In 1989 I quit my fulltime job and began researching *The Book of Secrets*.

Q. Did your family think you were crazy when you quit your job?

A. My father died when I was four and my mother never followed my career. My school life was such that she didn't worry about me. I got the grades and I did well. She didn't know what I graduated in or what I did. Even now she only knows I write books because people have told her.

Q. When you won the inaugural Giller Prize what did it mean to you and what did it do for your career?

A. I never expected anything like that.

Although in the early 90s writers outside of the mainstream Canadian culture were being published in Canada, I never expected a book set in Kenya and Tanzania to win any kind of award in Canada.

I was in Dar es Salaam when my wife told me I was short listed. But then I won.

The ceremony was fantastic! It seemed that even if you did not win the prize, everyone was treated like a winner.

It was really a wonderful experience. Winning it obviously brought in some money – not only the prize money but in terms of book sales. The book was on the bestseller list and this played a role in getting the book published in England.

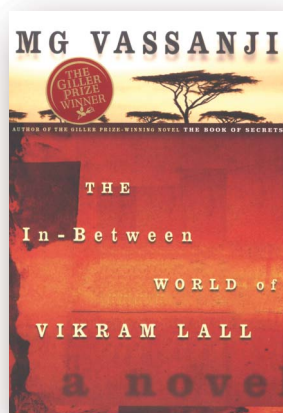
I also became better known as a Canadian writer. But then there is always responsibility that comes with success. And the fear of writing to formula or writing to please or writing for awards. The win was also a burden. But it was a good thing. I had a certain success that I could cash-in for my forthcoming book. The days of being published as floppy paperback were gone!

Q. *The In-Between World of Vikram Hall* is set in Kenya during the revolution. How old were you at this time and what are your memories?

A. I was born in Nairobi (father was from Nairobi, and mother was part Kenyan). I was four at that time and I have a memory of fear, of the dark and of the military police. I also remember one of our servants being taken away. The police conducted raids on neighborhoods and they came to our house, went to the servant quarters, picked him up and took him away. I never saw him again.

Q. What impact did this have on you?

A. They had such an impact on my imagination that I knew that one day I would write about them.



Q. What role does fear play in the novel?

A. The novel looks at how the fear was created and how it operates. The novel looks at what came out of the fear, which was the oppression between two people. Fear of violence, fear of change, of losing one's identity.

But the major thing that stands out in the book is of people who are in-between. The feeling of belonging and not belonging is very central to the book. And that has been a central thread in my own life.