

In her latest work, **Priya Basil** explores the meaning of hospitality and its unifying potential



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"My life has always been this movement between different places and people, between different cultures and flavours." So says Priya Basil, the author of *Be My Guest: Reflections on Food, Community and the Meaning of Generosity*, a short (128pp) and singular autobiographical meditation on what it means to be hospitable in our world today. Rachel Cusk, Nigel Slater and Sarah Moss are among its early admirers, with Moss praising its "rare combination of intellectual sophistication and emotional warmth".

And indeed *Be My Guest* is both a heartfelt and convivial read, and an urgently campaigning one, which moves from enticing descriptions of kadhi, a creamy curry that her mother lovingly prepares every time Basil visits; to calling for democracy to "house difference, shelter diversity and welcome novelty". While it starts by musing on a phenomenon that is as old as human society—shared mealtimes—the book couldn't be more topical; published at a time when immigrants and refugees are sometimes welcomed, sometimes vilified, when most of us spend less and less time cooking and eating, and when that very word "hospitality" is more often applied to the hotel and catering industries than to what takes place in our own homes. And there is no mistaking the message the book's yellow and blue livery sends out. If you and your bookshop want to make a pro-European statement this November, you couldn't do better than pile this book by the till.

Basil's biography makes her eminently well placed to reflect on such matters. Born in London in 1977 into a family with Indian Sikh roots, Basil grew up in Kenya in the 1970s and '80s, and for the past 17 years has lived in Berlin. Her work has been nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, the Dylan Thomas Prize,



Photography: Suhrkamp

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Book Extract

and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Basil is also an activist and the co-founder of Authors for Peace, a political platform for writers and artists which among other causes, has championed the idea of a Europe-wide public holiday to celebrate European unity.

When I speak to Basil down the line to Germany, I ask her how idea for *Be My Guest* took shape. "Actually the book was a commission from an editor here [in Berlin], Ulrike Ostermeyer, who'd been to my place for dinner and so knew both about my activism, and my love of cooking. She asked me to write something about food with a political dimension. I think it was one of the moments when an editor knows better than you do which book you need to write next. Because although at first I wasn't quite sure what I might do, I soon realised that the idea of hospitality—in all its dimensions, and in all the ways it touches our lives—could be my guiding notion. I allowed myself to write quite freely and associatively, and that allowed lots of different ideas to come together in a way that I hadn't expected."

Strikingly, *Be My Guest* is dedicated "To Berlin", the city to which Basil moved from the UK in 2002, at the invitation of her German partner, now husband. "I knew I wanted to write but at the time I was working in an advertising agency and just wasn't one of those amazing people who manage to write alongside a full-time job. My partner offered me the chance to come and live with him for a while, try to write and see what happened. So this offer, this gift of time and space brought me here, and I wrote my first novel, *Ishq and Mushq* (Doubleday). And then I was fortunate enough to keep writing, and so I stayed."

Food for thought

While Basil now speaks fluent German, and became a German citizen at the end of last year, she still writes in English: a translated edition of *Be My Guest* by Beatrice Fassbender is already out in Germany under the title *Gastfreundschaft*. "To date, most of what I've written has been published in German translation but not in the original English. To be writing in one language but mainly being read in another gives you a very strange relationship to a language and a place," reflects Basil. Nevertheless, it was a defining moment when her second novel, *The Obscure Logic of the Heart* (Doubleday), was published in German. "It connected me to literary life here. Being politically engaged in a different culture also helped root me in Berlin. It has become a place where I've felt able to make certain choices about who I am and how I want to live, with a freedom I've never had anywhere else."

Figures from UNHCR—the UN Refugee Agency—show that only 16% of the world's refugees are hosted by "developed" countries, with Germany the only European

For me, it all begins with my maternal grandmother, an ardent eater, force-feeder and devout believer in the stomach as the only way to the heart: Mumji almost everybody calls her, the motherly moniker perhaps partly an acknowledgement of her role as arch-feeder. Her cooking swells

sympathies and bellies, raises tempers and temperatures, sends some running and brings others back begging for more. She wields ingredients like weapons and has made food the front line in a fight for first place in the affections of the family. At her hob or her table, hospitality often holds hands with its brother word

country to appear in the list of the Top 10 refugee-hosting nations. Mindful of the fact that *Be My Guest* will be published in the month that marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I ask Basil to what extent she thinks Germany's history has influenced the country's more recent attitude to refugees. "There's a very official commitment to remembering that permeates every single level of German society that is absolutely to do with the country's history. To remembering, and to understanding that one has a certain duty not to let history repeat itself, especially in terms of people being excluded or mistreated or kept out. That, I think, has been a very big factor in the German response to refugees."

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European community

Be My Guest is not just a paean to the sense of community Basil has encountered in Germany however. It is also a call for a whole new vision

of European identity, and for a "kind of co-operative hospitality, which is perhaps another way of saying a real democracy." I ask Basil what it means to her personally to be a European writer of colour. "Thinking of myself as European has been a way to hold all my different identities together. And being in this cosmopolitan city at the centre of Europe has made me see that it's possible to question our very definitions of identity. I think that's a special thing at this moment in time, because in so many places there's been a narrowing down of what can be said and explored. I believe so strongly in what political and cultural engagement can do for us as human beings—the way it can extend us outside our usual circles and give us possibilities for belonging."

Our conversation takes place the day after the announcement of Toni Morrison's death, and Basil has been reflecting on the impact that Morrison's work has had on her. "There's this notion she talks about: the idea of 'Word Work'. How when language is misused and debased, writers must take on the work of using words differently. I love that idea because right now one can feel so suspicious and repulsed by language. But when it's your tool, you can do a work of repair with it too."

hostility. Both are birthed from ghos-ti, their ancient Indo-European root, which meant host, guest and stranger—the trio of roles through which we shift all our lives. So apt that this inescapable flux was once contained in a single word.