

Former LINK Reporter Neelam Verma's Debut Novel 1971 – A War Story Examines The Missing And Presumed Dead 54 Indian Soldiers Inside Pakistan

Lest we forget that the 54 Indian defence personnel who had gone to 1971 India Pakistan war, never came back despite the presence of evidence of them being alive. Based on this true story, Canadian writer Dr Neelam Batra-Verma's debut novel was released by High Commissioner of Bangladesh in India Honourable Syed Muezzam Ali in New Delhi on January 6, 2019.

1971: A War Story

Author – Neelam Verma

This is an emotional tale of a family's anguish whose only breadwinner goes missing. A pilot goes missing somewhere over enemy territory during the 1971 India-Pakistan war. For survival, he joins a band of nomads who steal for a living. Back in India, his wife waits endlessly for his return, firm in her belief that he is only Missing in Action.

As the pilot makes vain attempts to cross the border multiple times for 28 years, his daughter, whose very existence he is unaware of, resolves to bring him home. Who will finally seize the initiative and cross the border to attempt a daring rescue? Full of surprising twists and turns, this is a story of love and hate, of the human cost of war and the apathy of governments about the lives of armed forces personnel and the lives hanging in limbo when a loved one goes missing. A suspense thriller, which will keep you engrossed till the end.

About the author

Dr Neelam Batra-Verma is a Canada based writer who has been writing professionally for about 30 years and published thousands of articles in national and international mainstream newspapers, magazines as well as producing news bulletins for a 24-hour News channel in India.

She was among the first few who started a health bulletin in the country, before the concept caught on. Despite earning a Doctorate degree in Forensic Science, she continued with her

passion of writing and took up journalism as a career, writing on crime, social and political issues till she moved to Vancouver with her family in 2002.

After working for print and electronic media for decades in India and Canada, she successfully published and edited the first Hindi magazine in Canada, this is her first attempt at fiction based on true events.

Inspiration

It was while working on an article, her research led her to meet the families of missing defense personnel who had gone to the 1971 India-Pak war, but never came back. Despite consistent pleas by the families and evidence that their loved ones were languishing in Pakistan jails and needed to be brought home, both the Indian and Pakistani governments turned a deaf ear. Till today, families of 54 missing defence personnel have not lost hope that their family members will come.

Talking to the families, the author felt the pain and saw with her own eyes the suffering the families were going through – parents waiting for their missing sons, longing to see them just once before they leave for their heavenly abode; wives living like widows despite evidence that their husbands were alive; children growing up not knowing who their father is.

After moving to Canada, Neelam felt the pain of missing family first hand and resolved to put it on record, albeit in fictionalized form. She dedicates this story to all forgotten Bravehearts and their families. Their legends will never die!

The novel is now available on Amazon and Goodreads. Making a difference with her first book Neelam has pledged to donate 70% of the proceeds when her novel reaches the Amazon or Barnes & Noble top 100, to Glaucoma Research Foundation, and sponsor a blind child's education if the book makes it into top 20, in honour of her father who lost his sight due to Glaucoma. Since there is no cap on donation, the future of the charity is in the reader's hands.

Review by Manjula Lal, free-lance journalist and author of In search of Ram Rajya: A Journey through UP politics; That's News to Me: A presswallah's journey and other books

This book reminds us of what India was as a nation and asks where the country is going. It recreates with loving detail the lives of girls only half a century back, their struggle just to be allowed to go to school and college, only to be pushed into marriage before their dreams and aspirations crystallized. When such a girl gets married to an Air Force officer who goes missing in the 1971 war, the cocoon in which she was raised is shown to be a hollow shell, for the big bad world out there is much more uncaring and callous than she knew. If an officer becomes a casualty of war, it seems as if only the family cares about bringing them back, and the government is apathetic. This is a compelling story of human resilience in the face of extreme deprivation, reminding us in this day of connectivity and relative prosperity how phenomenal are the gains of civilization, and how little armed forces personnel (and their families) get in

return for the hardship and peril they face. It shows us how impenetrable the border between two countries can be, despite shared language and racial characteristics. It surprises us with a solution based on subterfuge which is far removed from the heroism expected of soldiers, and reminds us that all's fair in love and war – another good reason to regard war as abhorrent. It urges us to love our families and treat women with respect and care, for they are the repositories of our culture. And of course, it is about love that transcends all boundaries and warms the cockles of our hearts. A must-read, and a must-keep for future generations.