



Yet Saira is sure that clerks usually don't know quite what they are getting into. The clerkship process is often too chaotic and secretive for applicants to make informed decisions. Frenzied law students apply to as many as 100 judges across the country. The pressure is intense on applicants vying for few spots. Interviews are scheduled quickly and offers are sometimes made on the spot. And while many clerks enjoy their judicial tenure, some find it disastrous. The legal profession is notoriously hierarchical, and clerks may face constant criticism without the chance to talk back. Law graduates who moved to a distant city to clerk can be completely isolated without family or friends. They may also be undervalued by mainstream society.

A CHAT WITH THE AUTHOR

By Richa Gulati

Sheila Raj is the typical overachieving South Asian female. As a diligent student, it's no surprise she gets accepted to a top-10 law school. Upon graduation, she effortlessly lands a coveted federal judicial clerkship. And even after she becomes utterly miserable at her job, her sense of duty won't allow her to quit.

Sheila may remind you of a friend, a family member or even yourself. However, Sheila is not real. Her character is the protagonist of author Saira Rao's debut novel *Chambermaid*, which hits bookstores nationwide July 10. The comical novel chronicles young law graduate Sheila Raj's tumultuous year clerking for the fictitious Judge Helga Friedman, whose antics threaten Sheila's sanity.

Kirsten Neuhaus, Rao's agent, was passionate about the author's manuscript when she received it. "From the moment I started reading *Chambermaid* I knew I had found something very special. Saira draws readers into Sheila Raj's world with intelligence and wit." Early buzz for the novel has termed it *The Devil Wears Prada* of the legal world for its intimate glimpse into judicial chambers, and it is being considered for a television series.

Ironically, like Sheila, author Saira Rao has experienced courtroom clerking in an intimate way. Saira worked as a clerk for Federal Judge Dolores Sloviter of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals. Although she does not admit to a correlation between her own experience and her novel, she says she was inspired by the bizarre experiences of law clerks she has encountered. Rao leads readers into the rarified judicial world, where law graduates as young as 25 years old write important legal opinions, and where judges rely on clerks to handle daily legal research and writing tasks.

"Few people know that judicial clerks are responsible for drafting many opinions on cases that set forth law on nearly every critical legal issue," Saira says. "Students, like Sheila's character, are repeatedly told in law school that clerking is essential to professional success."

"Clerks don't realize that the experience depends almost entirely on the particular judge for whom they work," Rao says. "They work closely with a judge and a co-clerk for a year or two in a constant pressure-cooker environment." Of course, law clerks themselves bear some responsibility for their predicaments. Law students notoriously avoid professional introspection, failing to challenge pervasive legal lore that says that clerking for a judge is a necessary step on the path to an illustrious career. Rao acknowledges that she, too, fell victim to law school's rote path to prestige. "The kind of student typically at the top of the law school class doesn't usually question the accepted path of success; that's how most of them got to top law schools in the first place," she says. "It is often easier to listen to what other students and professors collectively think is the right job to pursue, rather than listen to what your gut says," she notes.

A combination of blind ambition and aversion to risk renders many law students incapable of leaving clerkships, too, when the job heads south. In the book Sheila's behavior is typical of unhappy clerks who suffer rather than quit clerking, the beginning of a vicious professional cycle. Federal judicial clerks likely leave one pressure-filled environment for another by moving to corporate law firms. This was true for Rao, who worked at a large New York firm for nearly two and a half years. But unlike the many lawyers that flounder at firms but fail to look for other careers, Rao knew that she wanted to write a book. Armed with the perfect topic, she wrote *Chambermaid* while at the firm.

"The novel took four and a half years to come together, from idea to final manuscript," she says. "Clerking gave me the idea to delve into this world where so many law students either end up or yearn to be, but know so little about." Though clerking provided inspiration, law firms offer little time to write. "There was a time after I started writing *Chambermaid* while working as a full-time associate where I did not even touch the book for eight months," Rao says. But perseverance paid off. She has since left to pursue writing full time.

While a second novel is in the works for the author, Rao has returned to law-firm life again, but this time on her own terms: she's busy speaking to the lawyers eagerly anticipating *Chambermaid's* release. She believes law gave her much more than just the subject for *Chambermaid*. "It also gave me the skills and discipline necessary to make my debut novel a reality," she reflects.