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The panel has similar tones to others in that the blending of fact and fiction came up, and Rakesh Satyal said he always tried to be aware of whose stories are his to tell, and that it was imperative to get inside the head of all his characters, whether inspired by real people or not.

Mandvi added that, like in acting, he found a part of himself in every character: “Even if the character was a dwarf astronaut, I’m like ‘What would I do if I were a dwarf astronaut?’ That’s how I approach it.”

When it came to writing in general, Rakesh Satyal had one of the best pieces of advice of the weekend for aspiring writers: “There’s this whole myth of the muse. The idea that you have to wait until the muse strikes you for something to get done, and the truth of the matter is that you just have to sit down and do the work. You’re either doing the work or you’re not. You’re either sitting down and actually writing, and not just thinking about writing, but actually sitting down and doing it, or you’re not.”

The day wrapped up with ‘Cooking Up Tales,’ a conversation on food writing. Though Top Chef host Padma Lakshmi was supposed to be a speaker and didn’t make it, Floyd Cardoz, Jehangir Mehta, Beena Kamlani, and Krishnendu Ray provided enlightening information on what it’s like to work in the food space, either as chefs, food writers, or food critics.

Both notable New York chefs, Cardoz (Tabla, North End Grill) and Mehta (L’Absinthe, Mehtaphor) pointed out that though attitudes about Indian food in the US had changed, there was still a lot of ignorance. Mehta said he was once asked, ‘Do you make food like Indiana Jones?’

But Kamlani, an editor and food blogger, said that when she got to New York, there was only Dawaat and Bombay Palace, and strides have certainly been made since then —

not only with the presence of Curry Hill and 6<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village — but with Indian food having a place in haute cuisine.

Ray, Associate Professor in food studies and Chair of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, agreed. He said Indian arts and fashion coming to the West had impacted tastes and expectations in the culinary space, but he’d like to see more: “It’s still very difficult to find the richness and variety of Indian regional domestic cookery, like Dals should be relatively prolific in terms of variety and relatively easy to store and serve in large scale, but we seem to have a very limited imagination in terms of Dals.”

Though there wasn’t quite as much talk about food writing, the dialog was interesting nonetheless and still indicative of the growing Indian presence in the culinary world, whether through restaurants or shelf space for cookbooks. And Kamlani spoke of how the desire to cook, particularly in India, represented a shift in cultural attitudes as the kitchen had long been considered a space where domestic workers prepared food, not those who lived in the house.

The festival finale was another reception at the regal Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan. The closing treat was playwright Ayad Akhtar in conversation with Patrick Healy. With interspersed clips from Akhtar’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play *Disgraced*, the evening provided a warm rapport between Akhtar, Healy, and the crowd, which was captivated by Akhtar’s eloquent narrative about his upbringing, his thoughtful self-reflection, and his philosophies about his craft and how he ended up as a writer.

He had the quintessential bit about his Pakistani parents wanting him to be a neurologist, a memory of his dad’s stern advice about how to handle being different in

America, the perfect story about how a high school teacher changed his life by immersing him in literature and planting the seeds for his current success.

“I fell in love, and I never fell out of love,” Akhtar said.

He found a way to move from lightness to profundity, imitating his parents’ accents as he told the audience about their reaction to *Disgraced* and explaining his relationship to Islam, his desire to make art about the Muslim American experience, the tradeoff between artistic integrity and political correctness, and, of course, the beauty of writing what you know.

“(I went through) the process of understanding that I was not going to escape who I was *and* that I had been spending 15 years writing about stuff that had nothing to do with me, and so it should not be a surprise that I was not getting anywhere,” Akhtar said, talking about the struggles on his path to success.

“The reason I do all of these different things is because I failed at every one of them for so long that I decided I was going to start to do something else,” he continued. “But I had failed at it enough that when I gave up on it, it turned out I actually had learned something about it. So then I’d fail at another thing and realize, ‘Well I was actually better at that thing that I just gave up on, so let me go back to that.’ But when I’d go back to that, I would have actually acquired some other craft from the other thing!”

Shivdasani expressed satisfaction with the weekend’s turnout. “I conceived of the First Annual IAAC Literary Festival to give South Asian authors a platform; I just did not realize *how* important it was until we experienced the enthusiasm, energy and fantastic participation of all the authors, veteran and debut!” she said. “We had authors from Kyrgyzstan, Canada, Britain, India, Bangladesh and all over the United States involved in a fun, stimulating weekend of fabulous sessions... I am really looking forward to the second edition in 2015.”



OUR STORIES,  
their words

A peek into the session  
with Sir Salman Rushdie.