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**Award-winning novelist visits UMM**

*Summary: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, novelist, poet and University of Houston professor of creative writing, was a featured World Touch Cultural Heritage Week speaker*

(April 24, 2006)-Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, novelist, poet and professor of creative writing at the University of Houston, was a featured speaker at the University of Minnesota, Morris on behalf of World Touch Cultural Heritage Week. She shared her love of writing, teaching and culture with an eager audience in UMM's Edson Auditorium.

The idea of World Touch Cultural Heritage Week is what drew Divakaruni to speak at UMM: "I think that is such a good idea for students to come in touch with different parts of world culture," she notes. "I think it's a very valuable part of education, to be exposed to different cultures and different people."

Reflecting on her convocation, Divakaruni notes that she had several goals: "I hope that I interested the audience in exploring more Indian literature. I hope it made them think more about political issues, since one of the novels I read from deals with 9/11. We talked about some of the hate crimes that happened soon after. And finally, I hope that overall it did what World Touch Cultural Heritage Week is all about, bringing people in touch with a different culture and making them interested in it."

She encouraged aspiring writers by highlighting this advice: "Read widely, read as writers including looking for technique, and create a working discipline by setting aside time just to write." Divakaruni also recommends journaling: "It really helps with writing skills and is a good place to write down ideas."

Themes Divakaruni often uses in her writing include women's roles, intergenerational conflict, lack of communication, breakup of the family and identity issues stemming from dual cultures. She shares an interesting experience she had at a book signing: "I was in Washington D.C., and there was this little old Jewish lady, very traditionally Jewish with a head scarf and everything, who came up to me and said, 'I really relate to your stories because the families in your stories are just like Jewish families!' I thought that was so neat that she could make that connection across from another culture. That's really what my hope is as I write, that people of different cultures will connect to the books."

Being an immigrant to the United States herself, Divakaruni says that she is very interested in the challenges of immigration and what happens when people immigrate. "I like to write about what happens when people have moved to a different culture that has very different values and a very different basis." She continues: "I'm also very interested in looking into how the community here is growing and changing and how the second generation is dealing with culture. I'm concerned with issues of racism and what minority cultures have to face."

A native of Calcutta, India, Divakaruni shares: "It's always fun for me to go back and visit India," she says "It's important for me to keep up with the culture there because I write so much about India."

Many of her ideas stem from what Divakaruni sees around her, what people talk to her about, and stories she sometimes

hears from them. Above all, Divakaruni feels that imagination is key: "Ultimately, since what I write is fiction, the imagination is the most important aspect."

Divakaruni is in the process of writing an adult novel. She notes: "It's a novel based on one of our ancient epics from a much older period in India. It's retelling the story from one of the women characters' point of view." After she completes this book, she plans on writing another children's novel. One of her most successful books enjoyed by all ages, *The Conch Bearer*, was written for children. Divakaruni has decided to turn *The Conch Bearer* into a series that will be followed by two more books.

Divakaruni informs that two of her books, *Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* have been made into movies. *Mistress of Spices* has already premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and will be coming out in theaters in Great Britain and India later in April. Soon after it will also be showing in theaters in the United States. *Sister of My Heart* has been translated from English into an Indian language for a TV-movie showing in India.

Divakaruni lives in Houston, Texas, and enjoys spending time with her two children, Anand and Abhay, who share their names with the heroes in her children's books. She spoke at UMM on Wednesday, April 13.

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