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Interview with Kristi Saare Duarte, author of The Transmigrant

Did you always want to be an author? It's funny you should ask, because even though I've been writing since I was a small child, the passion didn't crystallize until I was in my thirties. I wrote my first story, *My Dog*, at the age of five. In my teens, I wanted to be an actress, a rock star, a painter... Somehow, writing got pushed to the background while I was exploring other areas of interest. In hindsight, though, writing continued to play a significant part of my life as I constantly wrote poems, lyrics, novels, etc., even when my goals had changed. I would be having drinks at a bar, and if the writing urge came upon me, I would grab a pen and write free flow on a napkin for 20 minutes. I must have been an annoying date.

Is *The Transmigrant* your first book? No, but it is the first book I've published. I wrote a Young Adult novel at 15 and ten years later, I wrote a chick-lit novel about moving to New York City. Those were my practice runs, my Creative Writing MBA. Although my first novels pretty much suck, I had to do the work in order to learn to write.

How did you end up writing about Jesus? I'm not religious at all. Actually, I must confess that, before I started writing *The Transmigrant*, I didn't even like Jesus. I definitely was not attracted to his character, the way he is usually portrayed. Looking back, I'm not sure what pushed me to spend six years researching and writing about Jesus, but along the way we developed a mutual respect for each other, and became good friends. Kidding aside, I knew what I wanted to write was a Herculean task and often questioned my sanity. How could someone who isn't Christian and hasn't studied theology get to the bottom of who Jesus was? To tell you the truth, during the process, I often asked Jesus to help me convey his story the way he wanted to tell it. One of my readers called *The Transmigrant* "divinely inspired," so perhaps Jesus *did* help me write it. [Laughs.]

Does this mean you have become a newborn Christian? Not at all. Instead, Jesus has become a *non-Christian* for me. Let me explain. The more I dug into the research, the deeper I delved into the New Testament and dozens of other books, the more I understood that Jesus never viewed himself as God or Christ. The Apostle Paul, a man who never met Jesus, formed Christianity based on his own Roman-influenced thought structure, and so I believe that the Christian religion is a far cry from what Jesus taught his disciples.

What is the message of your book? Why do you feel this is important? Even before I started working on *The Transmigrant*, I often wondered why Jesus, if he was meant to be *of* God, why he is portrayed as a kind of bully; "Believe in me or you'll go to hell" and "You must believe only in me, not in others." For me, God has always been the essence of love, of compassion. I wanted to write a book that shows that all faiths are based on love, and that we are all one. The man-made rules of religions have distorted their original message and have put priests and rabbis and gurus in charge, and they are free to preach according to their own values and their need to control others. Honoring God—pleasing God—should be

as easy as honoring your neighbor. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that. In this era of white supremacy, terrorism, and war mongering, where everyone blames their misfortunes on strangers, it felt important to show the similarities between us all, instead of emphasizing our differences.

In *The Transmigrant*, Yeshua (Jesus) travels through Asia. Do you believe this happened? Yes, I do. When you look at the timeline in Nicolas Notovitch's *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* [scrolls found in Northern India in 1880] and compare it to the eighteen missing years of the bible, it does make sense that Jesus can have traveled through Asia and studied Hinduism and Buddhism. Several of my readers have also pointed out how plausible I make it seem in *The Transmigrant*. When you start connecting the dots, the picture becomes clear. Jesus's message is similar, sometimes even identical, to the Sama Veda, Bhagavad Gita, and the sayings of the Lord Buddha. The more you compare them, and the closer you look at the time line of his life, the more you will be convinced that it happened exactly that way. To top it off, there are several places along the presumed route that were named after Saint Issa (Jesus): *Yuz-Marg*, the meadow of Jesus, *Aish Muga* near Srinagar, etc.

Do you really believe Jesus meditated? Meditating is like prayer. You silence your mind to communicate with God. I do believe he meditated in rivers (holy water) at sunrise (the holy hour) like any other guru (teacher). Where else would baptism come from? In the Bible, Jesus doesn't baptize, it's something that his disciples start doing once he's passed away, so it makes sense that they wanted to simulate something Jesus had done, and formalize the initiation to their faith. All world religions have a close relationship with ritual washing or bathing before prayer or meditation. I believe he studied Buddhism and I do believe he meditated, not prayed in the manner we do today.

How have your readers reacted to the sex scenes in *The Transmigrant*? The consensus among Christians is that Jesus stayed a virgin throughout his life. In order to write my story, I had to show Yeshua (Jesus) as a human being who ultimately grew into a spiritual leader. As such, he must have had the same urges as other men, especially during his adolescence. Of course, I could have simply insinuated that he had sex, but I wanted to get under Yeshua's skin and make the scenes alive. So far, none of my readers has complained. Again, Jesus's assumed virginity is something that stems from the Apostle Paul. He was the one who preached celibacy, not Jesus. In the first century, Jews were strongly opposed to celibacy and the ruling Romans actually enforced penalties against it.

In *The Transmigrant*, several women play significant roles as teachers in Yeshua's life. Do you believe women influenced men at that time in history? I believe the cliché that behind every successful man there is a strong woman. I don't think this differed then, just like I'm sure that women rule today in countries where they appear largely suppressed. However, the three women that Yeshua loves in *The Transmigrant*—Ramaa, Pema, and Mariamne—were not planned. They showed up in the story and I decided to include them. This is where I say, "the book is fiction."

Where did you grow up, and how did this influence your writing? I grew up in Sweden, but my culture was largely Estonian, as my parents were refugees from the Soviet occupied Estonia. By the age of ten, I had already travelled to nearly twenty different countries, and as soon as I graduated high school, I moved to England. I believe that all this travelling and my cross-cultural upbringing planted a seed of

curiosity within me. I never felt I belonged anywhere, and this made me want to understand and embrace those who are visually and culturally different from me. And although both Swedes and Estonians are Protestant, we were never brainwashed by the church. What also helped was that my parents encouraged my sisters and me to question authoritative persons and not believe everything we read. It has definitely influenced who I am and what I write. I want people to question what they have been taught and use their common sense, their gut feeling, to decide whether something is true or not. Or perhaps – just accept that there is no single truth.

Who are your gurus? I believe our higher self is our best teacher. We are all humans with flaws, and no single person has all the knowledge. Having said that, there are many people whom I admire and who inspire me to be a better person: the Dalai Lama, Oprah Winfrey, Marianne Williamson, Shirley McLaine, Louise Hay, among many others. I admire kindness and wisdom.

What are you working on next? I'm in the editing phase of the sequel to *The Transmigrant*. It's a story about the life of the disciples after Yeshua's (Jesus's) passing: the struggle for leadership, the fears of persecution, the arguments with strangers who appear from nowhere and want to change his peaceful message to something more powerful, more mainstream and befitting the Roman audience.

What's the story behind it? It continues the storyline of *The Transmigrant*, where I feel that Jesus's message of "we are all one" and "we are all one with God" got lost. This book attempts to explain how it happened, and where "the Jesus people" disappeared. While doing my research, especially when reading the New Testament, two things stood out: 1) the Apostle Paul did not get along with Jesus's followers and had a completely different opinion about Jesus and what he had taught, and 2) Jesus's brother James was his chosen successor and the leader of the so-called Jesus People after the crucifixion. This book is about Yakov (James), hoping to give him the credit he deserves and has not been given thus far.

When is your next book coming out? The goal is the summer of 2019. If interested, you can sign up to receive news about it and enlist to be a beta-reader of an early version of the book, or to receive a pre-launch copy, by sending a request to: ConspicuumPress@gmail.com

When you're not writing, how do you spend your time? I like to read, but I also like to go out to bars and listen to live bands. Living in Harlem makes it very easy, there are plenty of low-key jazz bars and music places where different bands (jazz, world music, rock, folk) perform every hour. It's a great way of discovering new music.

Who are your favorite authors? I like specific books more than specific authors. I read around 50 books a year, and tend to gravitate towards books set in other cultures. My favorites among the ones I read in 2017 were *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *Happy Dreams* by Jia Pingwa. The book I always come back to, however, the one I recommend to everyone, is *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts. It's such a beautiful story.

How do you discover the books you read? I like to browse bookstores for stress-relief. I have a Barnes & Noble five minutes' walk from the office where I go during lunch when I'm having a bad day. I pick up

any book that seems interesting and I read different genres for different purposes. Some of my favorite books I've received as gifts. Lately, I have read a lot of spiritual fiction to support and build a community with other authors in my genre.

Do you read mostly ebooks or print? Both. I love the feel of a real book in my hands. But ebooks are extremely convenient. I read books on my Kindle before going to sleep, on my iPhone on the subway to work, and when travelling.

What would you do if you weren't an author? I still have a day job, so I do work outside of writing. But if I couldn't write, I would paint.

Are there any tips you would want to share with other writers? Don't give up. Ever. Publishing is such a fickle and competitive business and most of what gets published these days is commercial and not necessarily quality writing. I feel that the industry as a whole is suffering. If you've written a different kind of book, it might be more difficult to find an agent and a publisher, but that doesn't mean that your book is bad or not worthy. Keep trying; quality writing and a good story will always rise to the top in the end.

Kristi Saare Duarte, author of *THE TRANSMIGRANT*, is Estonian by origin, but Swedish by birth. She has spent her life traveling the world and chasing adventures. Always open to change, Kristi has lived in Sweden, England, Estonia, Spain, and Peru, where she has studied languages, art, and acting, and has had careers in health care management, advertising, and finance. She is a Reiki healer and a spiritual channel. Currently, she lives in Harlem, New York City.