

Newsroom

December 13, 2006

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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Newsroom" (2006). *Newsroom*. 33.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom/33>

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'River Crossings' tells unique story of Georgia Southern professor's beginnings

DECEMBER 13, 2006

Sometimes a story glides easily from a writer's pen. In another case, a story must live in a writer's soul for a time, bubbling and fermenting until, fully refined, it grows into a completed work. "River Crossings: Memories of a Journey" (Wipf and Stock, 2006), is the second type of story, a memoir that lived and grew in Hemchand Gossai until he could no longer contain it.

Gossai is of East Indian heritage, but lived his early life in Guyana, South America. The last of ten children, he was born late in his parents' lives and lost his father at the tender age of nine. Because he was the youngest, and because his mother was a widow, he sometimes felt like the only child of a single parent. On the other hand, according to the Indian cultural tradition, he and his mother were cared for by his oldest brother, and he grew up in the company of nieces and nephews similar in age. The memories of those years flow through "River Crossings," demonstrating the way of life that made Gossai's early years unique.

"In his engaging memoir, Hemchand Gossai invites the reader to accompany him on a journey toward home, self-realization, a life's vocation, and most importantly a faith by which to live," said David Dudley, author of the award-winning "The Bicycle Man" and a colleague of Gossai's at Georgia Southern University.

When slavery was abolished in Guyana more than 150 years ago, workers "including his ancestors" were brought from another British colony, India, to work on rice and sugar plantations. As indentured servants they could buy their freedom and return to India, and some did, but many chose to stay because their family ties in India had long been severed. They were in a "no man's land," maintaining Indian culture and tradition, but with no desire to return to that part of the world.

Gossai was raised in that Indian culture, and his family was devoutly Hindu. According to his mother's wishes, he was formally educated in the English system. At age 16, while still in Guyana, he experienced a conversion of faith, accepting Christianity and moving away from his family's Hindu tradition. He came to the U.S. in 1976 to attend Concordia College, where he earned degrees in religion, English, and Spanish, and he went on to earn a master's of divinity degree from Luther Seminary. He spent three years in Scotland researching and completing a Ph.D. in the Hebrew Bible.

In the prologue to "River Crossings," Gossai learns of his mother's death. The work has symmetry, beginning with a plane trip to Guyana to accomplish his mother's Hindu funeral, and ending with a

plane trip that brings him back to the Christian life he has chosen. The story between the two plane trips is a poignant one filled with love and loss, history, choice, and transformation.

‘Only when you become a parent do you realize the depths of the sacrifices your parents have made,’ said Gossai. ‘When I became a Christian at 16, my mother saw it as a rejection of her beliefs, yet she accepted my choice and eventually came to understand my reasons. When my mother told me, ‘Go and make a life for yourself!’ she knew I would never be able to return to life in Guyana. Yet she encouraged me, and I was enormously moved by her sacrifice of letting me go.’

Although the volume examines his return to Guyana, Gossai also wrote this as an immigrant’s story, delving into the struggle, the pain, and the humor involved as he makes the transition to American culture.

Copies of “River Crossings: Memories of a Journey” will be available in area bookstores, including the Georgia Southern University Store, after Dec. 1.