

# Our Town

[snip] **W is for wisdom.** Bush was quoted in 1999 by the Scripps Howard news service saying this about President Clinton's intervention in Kosovo: "I think it's also important for the president to lay out a timetable as to how long they will be involved and when they will be withdrawn." —HH

## Books

### Sex and the Sri Lankan Girl

*Erotica writer Mary Anne Mohanraj moves into the mainstream with Bodies in Motion, a sexy collection about the Sri Lankan experience.*

By Cara Jepsen

One of the first pieces of fiction Mary Anne Mohanraj wrote sparked some controversy when she posted it online in 1993. In "Season of Marriage," which she describes as a "sweet arranged-marriage story," an Indian-American woman named Raji asks her parents to find her an Indian husband after she dumps her American boyfriend. It opens with Raji at the end of her wedding day in New Dehli, contemplating the results of her rash decision, then shifts into a long, steamy

description of her first night in bed with her husband, Vivek. "I posted it to the Internet and got some nice comments—and a bunch of hate mail from South Asian guys upset that a Sri Lankan woman was writing explicitly about sexuality," says Mohanraj. "I also had some defenders saying, 'Why shouldn't she?'" Raji and Vivek briefly reappear in Mohanraj's new book, *Bodies in Motion* (HarperCollins), a collection of 20 interlinked short stories that follow two families across 63 years, shifting between American and Sri Lankan settings. The stories are populated with women, and a few men, who are faced with choices that invariably pit South Asian traditions against contemporary Western values. They're also infused with the eroticism that's defined most of Mohanraj's writing career, which began when she was a student at the University of Chicago and discovered newsgroups dedicated to erotic stories. "My family upbringing was so strict I wasn't able to go to school dances when I was in grammar school," says Mohanraj, who was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka (then continued on page 22



Mary Anne Mohanraj

**Mary Anne Mohanraj**  
**WHEN** Sat 7/23, 2 PM (release party for *Bodies in Motion*)  
**WHERE** HotHouse, 31 E. Balbo  
**PRICE** \$10 suggested donation; \$5 students  
**INFO** 312-362-9707, hothouse.net

**WHEN** Tue 7/26, 7 PM  
**WHERE** 57th Street Books, 1301 E. 57th  
**PRICE** Free  
**INFO** 773-684-1300, semcoop.com

**WHEN** Thu 7/28, 7:30 PM  
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**INFO** 773-769-9299, womenandchildrenfirst.com

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## Our Town

continued from page 20

Ceylon), in 1971 and came to the U.S. with her family when she was two. "It made sexuality very clearly a place of conflict early on—I was aware that the rules were different for me than for my friends, which was frustrating. When I started dating in college I was going out with a white boy, and that was the time I also encountered this erotica... When I encountered stories that dealt with the subject explicitly, it was really interesting to me."

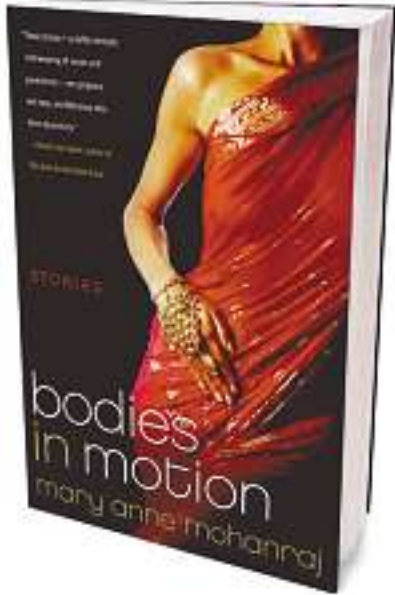
But the stories she found online were "incredibly bad," she says. "I think that was the first time in my life I'd been exposed to really bad writing." Figuring she could do better, she wrote her first erotic story, "American Airlines Cockpit," about a pair of bored women who seduce the pilot and copilot on a flight to England. (Mohanraj archives the "embarrassing" story on her Web site, [www.mamohanraj.com](http://www.mamohanraj.com).)

Today Mohanraj lives in Bucktown with Kevin Whyte, a math professor at UIC, and this fall she'll be teaching writing full-time in Roosevelt University's MFA program. When she graduated from the U. of C. in 1993, she intended to earn a PhD

**"I didn't want to write a book about one person, especially one woman, because I was afraid people would read it and think, 'Ah, this is what Sri Lankan women are like.'"**

and eventually teach English. But when she didn't get into any of the top-tier graduate programs she applied to, she changed course, moving to Philadelphia with Whyte and studying creative writing. In 1995 she began an online journal, which she still updates regularly; one of her musings there about putting her work in book form prompted a fan to advance her \$500 to publish her first collection of short stories and poetry, *Torn Shapes of Desire*, in 1997. In 1998 she launched an online erotica magazine, *Clean Sheets*, which she ran until 2000, when she let a new editor take over.

As she continued writing, more offers came her way: she edited a pair of water-themed erotica collections that were published on waterproof paper, and wrote two novels as part of a series of choose-your-own-erotic-adventure books. "Every writer should write a cheesy erotic adventure at some point," she says. "It makes you think about plot in a way you haven't before." One of her stories involved a character who attends an orgy with her roommate. "They start



having sex—there's a pile of people—and on the bottom of the page it says to go to the top of the page," she says. "It's an endless orgy loop. That was fun to write."

Mohanraj earned an MFA in creative writing in 1998 from Mills College, where she had tried her hand at narrative nonfiction and fantasy; later this summer she'll receive her PhD in English, with a creative writing concentration, from the University of Utah. Her doctoral thesis, drawing from earlier erotic stories as well as her research into Sri Lankan history and postcolonial fiction, became *Bodies in Motion*. "My more recent writing has become more interested in culture and politics, race and ethnicity," she says. "And the places where sexuality intersects with that."

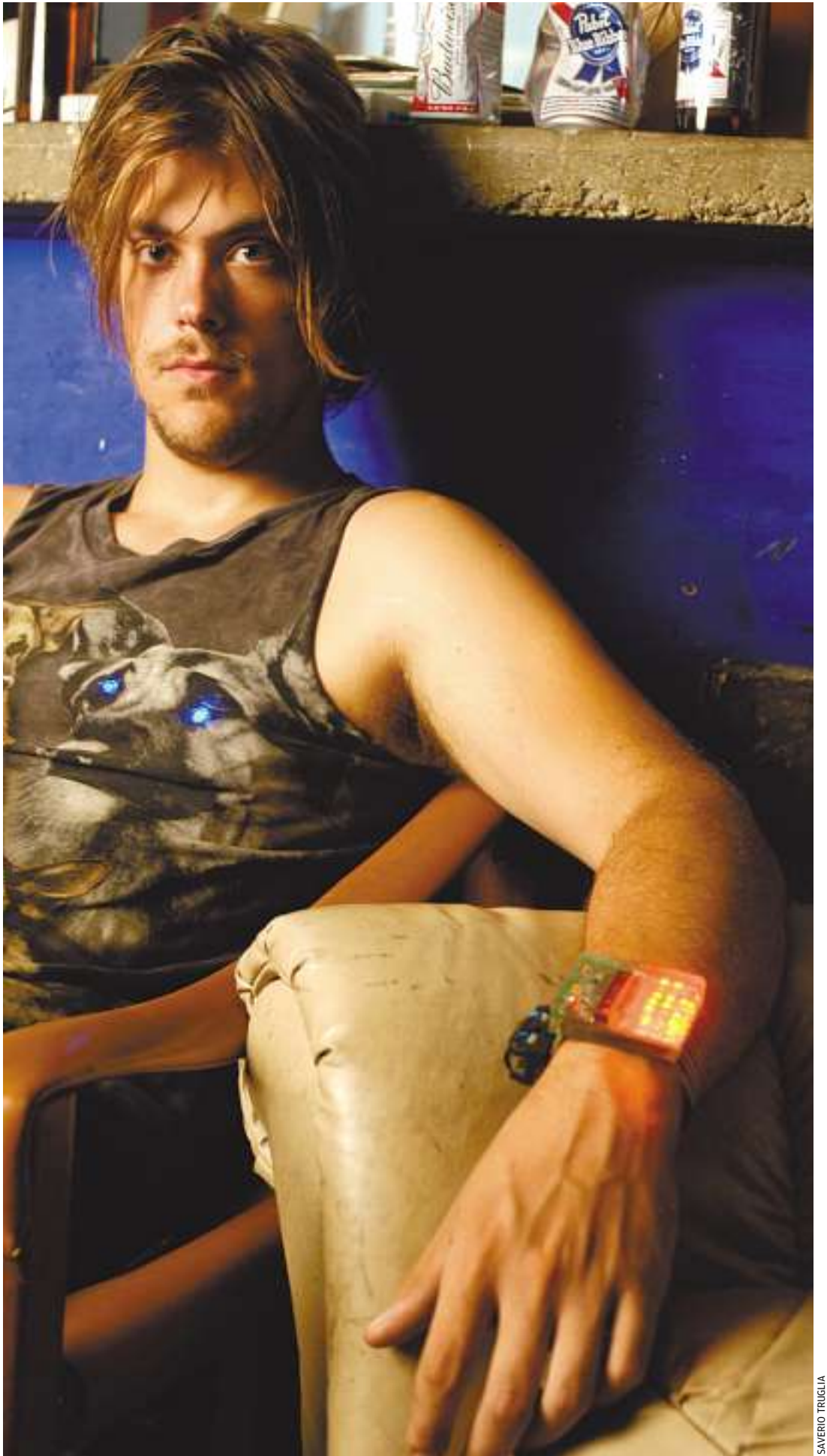
Last year Mohanraj submitted *Bodies in Motion* to an agent, who sold the book to HarperCollins in three weeks. Though the stories in the book are interconnected, Mohanraj wanted to avoid having a central character. "I was aware that there would be marketing and the book would have a certain presence as an early Sri Lankan-American book," she says. "There aren't a lot of us publishing yet—mostly it's isolated short stories. Given that position, I didn't want to write a book about one person, especially one woman, because I was afraid people would read it and think, 'Ah, this is what Sri Lankan women are like.' I wanted to write a book that had many different protagonists and many different choices."

Mohanraj says that while her parents were pleased with the cookbook collecting her mother's recipes that she self-published in 2003, they're still not comfortable with her writing erotic stories. "My mother often asks me why I don't write children's books instead," she says. "They were really unhappy about it for a long time—we had a lot of screaming fights about it. I think now that I'm moving toward more mainstream stuff, even though it deals with sexuality, they're dealing with it better."

She's now on the third draft of her first novel, titled "The Arrangement." The story centers on three characters from *Bodies in Motion*—a gay man, his straight wife, and his boyfriend—who negotiate a relationship as a threesome. "It's about friendship and love and sex and family," she says. "I'm still trying to add in more of the family complications." ■

Just Curious

## What Are You Wearing?



Todd Bailey

## It's a Watch

**T**odd Bailey, 27, a resident of the alternative space known as Camp Gay, designs electronics for toys by day. On his own time he's invented a binary wristwatch called Concept = Bling.

*How does it tell time?*

Binary is typically represented by ones and zeros, but it's really just a numbering system based on twos. Instead of one and zero, a person could represent binary with any set of opposites: on or off, true or false, up or down, etc. This watch displays hours, minutes, and seconds as rows of binary numbers—in this case the on/off pattern of the lights in a row add together to indicate the time.

*What does Concept = Bling mean?*

It's a mission statement about what's valuable, really. In electronics, you have to start with an idea, something you've never seen before, that you're willing to spend a lot of time and trouble bringing into the world.

*What is the watchband made of?*

Ribbon cable, which is already a band and keeps with the aesthetic of the watch. The colors are ordered the same as the wavelengths in the light spectrum, and each color has a numerical value, a sort of electronic numerology. It makes a statement about the nature of physics and electronics, and it's a beautiful rainbow. I totally endorse rainbows.

*Actually all the elements of the watch are exposed—the circuit board, the battery. Why?*

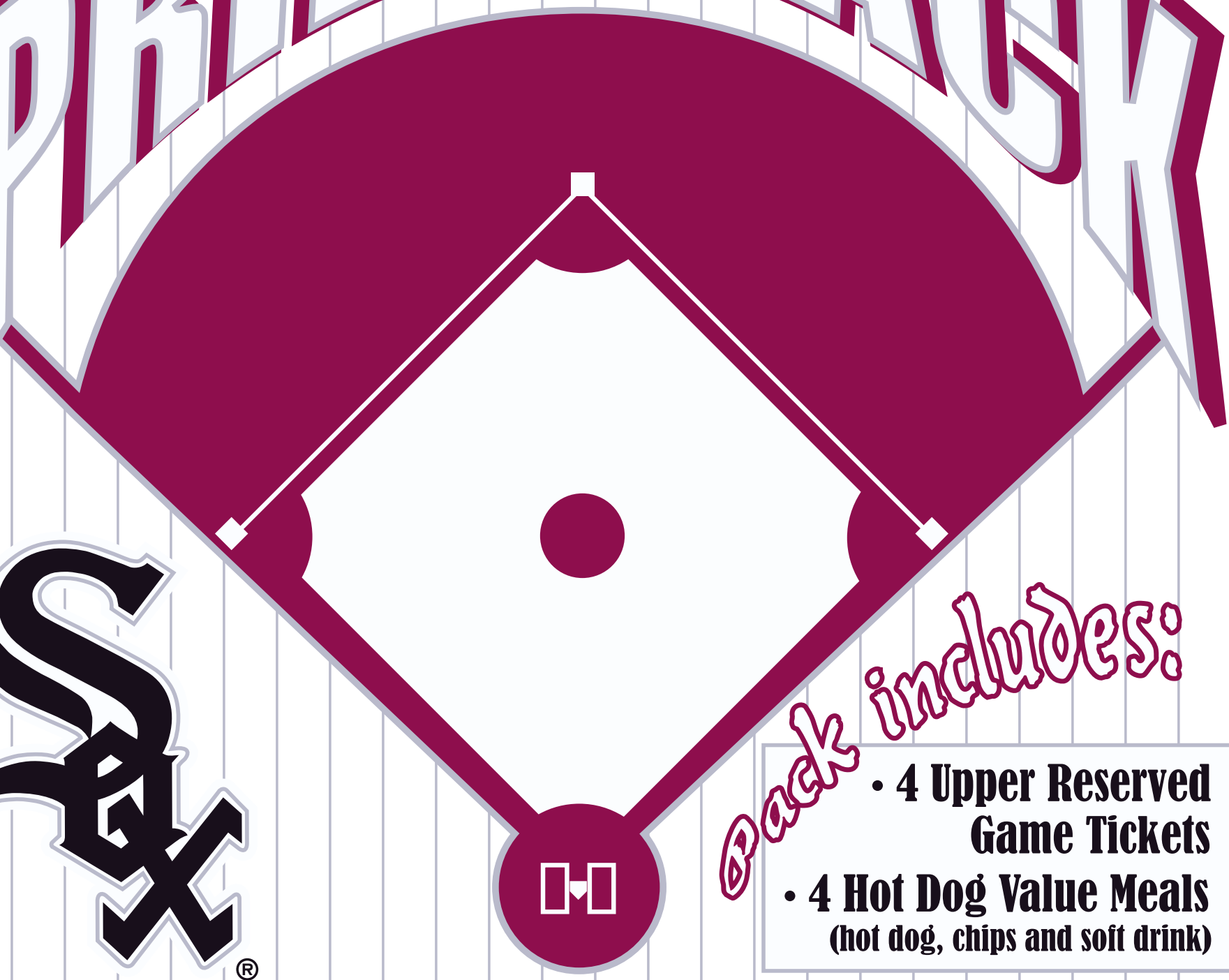
Transparency exposes function. Not only can you see that electronics are beautiful, but seeing how it works makes it more meaningful.

*Does seeing something mean you understand it?*

These circuit boards are in everything electronic we use. People want to believe in the wonder of what's going on around them. So either they think it runs on a magical crystal or on a PIC16F872 microcontroller. Either way, they're right. —Kim Soss



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