



Aaron Lynett, National Post

Anita Rau Badami's book, *Tell It To The Trees*, is about an Indian family living in a remote part of British Columbia. The story is part literary whodunit, part psychological drama.

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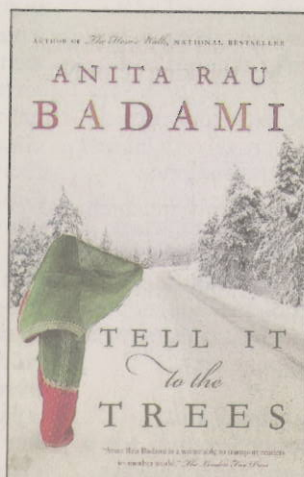
BADAMI: Book explores 'being at war inside your own home'

When Anu Krishan, a New York-based visitor to the Dharmas, underestimates the unforgiving nature of her new environment, she pays with her life. Incidentally, that makes her one of two characters in *Tell It to the Trees* who end up freezing to death under suspicious circumstances.

Which just might be a CanLit record; I can remember characters routinely dying of exposure in the Sinclair Ross stories I was forced to read in high school, but that was one at a time. When I tell Badami this, she seems both pleased and surprised.

She also has never been quite sure of her place in this country's literary stratum. Never mind that in 2000 she won the Marian Engel Award, an honour bestowed on a female Canadian novelist in mid-career. Or that her last novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, published in 2006, is a sensitive fictional retelling of one of this country's worst tragedies — the 1985 Air India bombing.

It just may be that Badami, like most writers, relishes her outsider status. She has also managed to make the most of her ambivalence.



"Sometimes I feel as if I'm standing between two worlds," Badami told Montreal writer Mary Soderstrom in a magazine interview a few years ago. "It's taking a long time to figure out what it means to be an immigrant in Canada. I feel as if I must write several more books before I figure it out."

But *Tell It to the Trees* might be enough. It's her first novel — she has written four — set entirely in this country.

"I don't know how far north the town in the story is," she says, "I just know it snows a lot there."

But snow and cold aren't the only things isolating the

Dharmas. Suman, her husband, stepdaughter, son and mother-in-law form a close-knit unit, probably too close.

Suman's 13-year-old stepdaughter has her own unsettling view of her family's dynamic: "Tight as a fist, we are, and as hard if you get in our way. Suman is the only weakness, the little finger, but Papa and I knew right away we'd have to hold her hard in our grasp. That way she wouldn't have a chance to do anything silly."

Part literary whodunit, part psychological drama, *Tell It to the Trees* is all about solitude and secrets — and how the two can combine to hold a family together; and, at the same time, tear it apart.

Badami set out to explore what happens to a group of people faced with extreme isolation and not just from the climate.

"The family, here, is also besieged from within, trapped in all kinds of ways," she says. "That feeling of being at war inside your own home, a place that is supposed to be a safe space, but is instead extremely unstable, even violent, well, what do you do? What kind of tactics do you bring to bear?"