

# THE BOOK REVIEW

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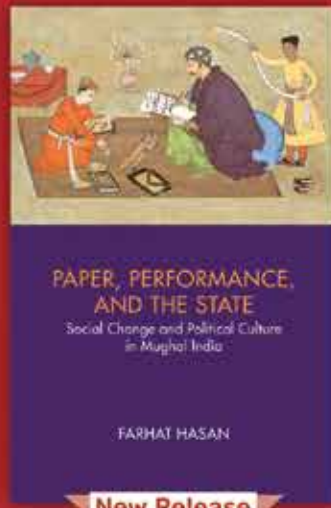
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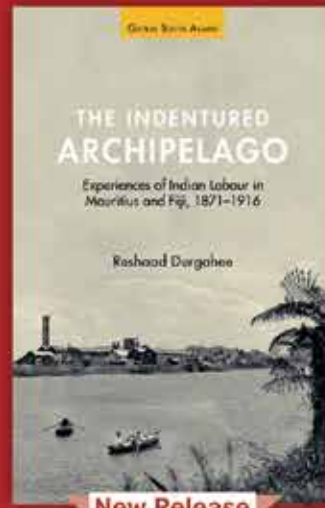
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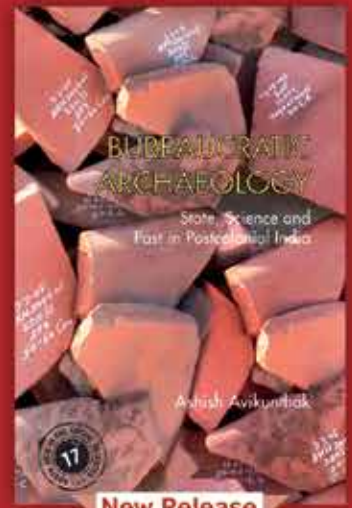
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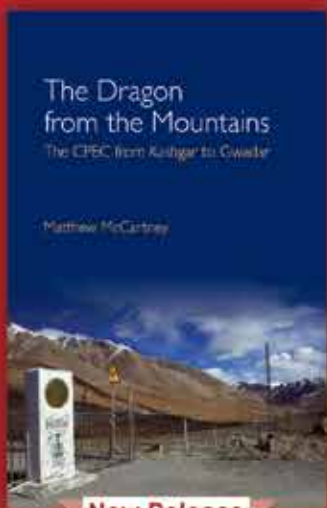
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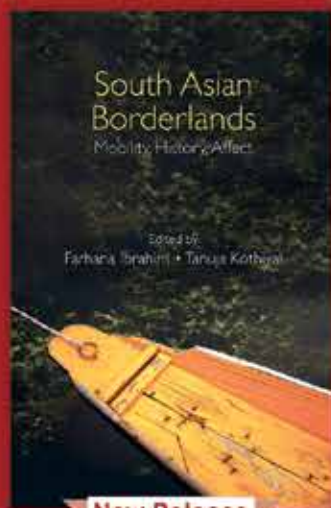
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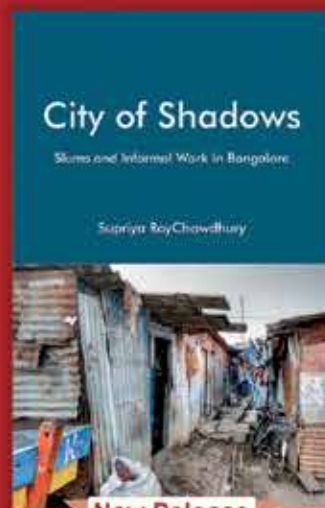
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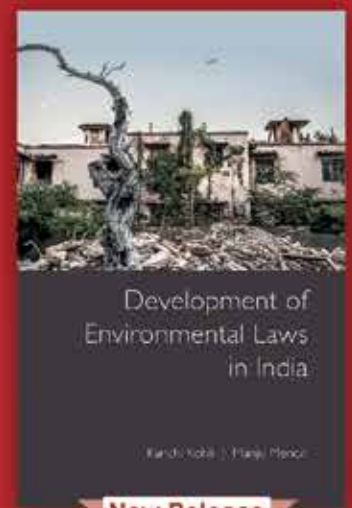
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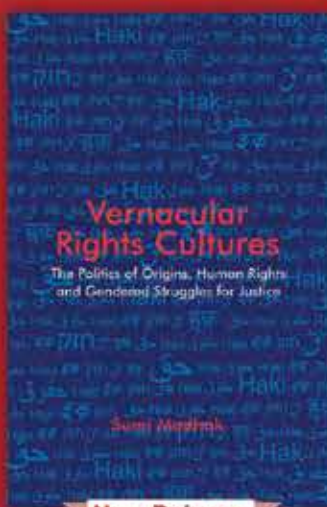
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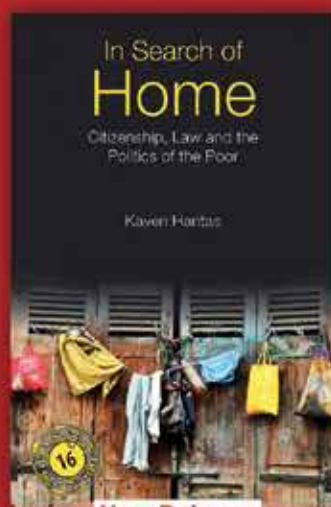
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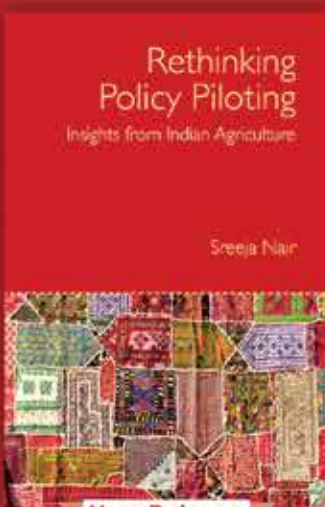
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**Cover photograph:** Students of Society of Autistics in India participating in a drawing competition.

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## Children in the Post-pandemic Era

We are now into the second year of the pandemic; even as discussions on reopening schools gain momentum, signs that the new normal will be very different are already evident. While education systems across age groups have been impacted, the exigencies of the pandemic on children have been particularly acute, given the importance of schooling in the developmental milestones of young children. The implications of restrictions on the ability to form social bonds affect educational, psycho-social, and physical outcomes. The impact on families has resulted in unique challenges for children. As Toolika Wadhwa says in her article ‘Making Sense of a “Changed” World: COVID-19 and Children’s Mental Health’ in this issue, children have been faced with a ‘completely alien set of circumstances’. The article, which focuses on the experiences of children in middle-class, urban contexts, discusses some of the challenges children faced as they navigated the pandemic, while also talking about the extraordinary courage and resilience they have shown in the face of loneliness, fear and grief.

Moreover, as Mansi Taneja’s article ‘*Multiple Childhoods*’ notes, ‘diversity and heterogeneity are the hallmarks of how children live and experience their childhood,’ and ‘must be contextualized in the multiple realities and diverse social worlds of children.’ The experiences of childhood have always been shaped by gender, social, religious, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. The multiplicity of childhood experiences requires due acknowledgment and often differentiated action. Just as the impact of the pandemic has not been the same across families in India and across the world, the particular challenges children have faced have also varied. For example, even as previously normative and medically accepted guidelines on screen usage changed to accommodate the needs of online education and the virtual classroom, constraints on infrastructure, resources and parental involvement—which limit the accessibility of online education—emerged, with poor and marginalized communities particularly vulnerable to the asymmetry in access.

The increased ‘virtualization’ of social interactions itself, which has expanded to cover everything from education to socialization and entertainment—has created additional risks. There is a strong evidence of the medical implications of increased screen usage, with numerous negative medical implications for cognitive, language and behavioural development, especially for younger children. As the need to provide sources of engagement beyond a screen gains urgency, the role books can play, in particular, becomes important. For children books can provide a way to learn and grow which is not reliant on expensive and fragile digital infrastructure, create opportunities for parents and caregivers to engage with children, enable interactions and serve as a springboard for discussions. Moreover, stories have long been used as mediums to convey ethics, morals, and socially acceptable behaviour. Tarika Chari’s article, ‘*We Are More Than “One Story”*’, brings a student’s perspective on social justice, diversity and inclusion. Her project in the class exercise, a novel which discusses the different experiences people in the LGBTQIA+ community go through, is an illustrative example on the role reading and writing can play in the learning process.

Beyond serving as mediums by which complex ideas can be communicated, however, books are also just for fun. They provide readers an escape from reality, avenues to explore different worlds. They take us on adventures, introduce us to new people and places, and expose us to different cultures. And no book is too simple—even a seemingly simple picture book provides young minds with ‘familiarity with words, language and speech through reading the pictures and text for communication’, as Ira Saxena points out in her article ‘*Emotional Content in Picture Books*’. The article discusses how the simple information and profuse illustrations of picture books can aid the learning process and enhance social skills.

This November, *The Book Review* once again brings out its special issue on Children’s Books. This issue is the 41st edition of the Annual Special dedicated to exploring recent publications in children’s literature. The books covered in this issue span a gamut of themes and ages, from fiction and mythology to education; and from picture books to novels. There are books by adults, and by children. Many of those reviewed were written in English, and some in Hindi. Some are intended for parents; some for parents and children to read and engage with together; while some children and adults can enjoy alone. In addition, the cover image of this issue, as well as other illustrations within its pages are by students of the Society of Autistics in India (SAI), a non-profit charitable trust founded by a group of parents of autistic children with an objective of educating individuals with autism. Operating with a 5:2 student to teacher ratio to ensure attention to special needs, the students of the school (who vary from having mild to severe spectrum of Autism) study in specially tailored programmes for early intervention, communication development, and vocational training, and are taught by teachers from various fields including special education, speech therapy, occupational therapy, yoga therapy, etc.

Books provide an important medium to engage with readers on complex ideas and social issues—while myths, fables and stories have long been used in children’s education as stepping stones to socially acceptable behaviours, they can also be used to sensitize children to issues of diversity and inclusion, and teach them to relate, respect and empathize with both themselves and others; as well as engage them in emerging challenges. In this year’s issue, there were many which explored these important themes. While some such as *Hope: Stories for a Healthy Mind*, *C is for Cat, D is for Depression* and *The Boy in the Dark Hole* use the medium of literature to engage with readers about mental health, others, such as *Big Mistake*, *My Name is Gulab* and *It has No Name* explore challenges of growing up and the ‘othering’ children can face when their experiences don’t conform. *What’s Up with Me* and *Your Body is Yours* discuss body changes and transitions to try and normalize frank and healthy discussions and body positivity.

In these increasingly disconnected times, books also prove invaluable for readers to learn about their own heritage and explore cultures. While some take readers through the past, using fiction to bring history to life (such as *As Strong As Fire*, *Fierce As Flames* and *Tughlaq and the Stolen Sweets*), others, like the *Dreamers Series*, *A Journey to Mars*, and *10 Indian Heroes* focus on the lives of influential or inspiring characters or incidents. Still others seek to make India’s rich cultural heritage more accessible, as in *Young Pandavas—The Royal Tournament*, *Gods, Giants and Geography of India* and the *Mythquest Omnibus*; celebrate the diversity of cultures and traditions in India (as books in the *Have You Met* series beautifully exemplify); or explore fantasy against a canvas of myths and folklore, such as in *Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom*, *Ribhu’s Adventures on Earth* and books in the ‘*The Wrath of Ambar*’ series set.

The above titles provide just a brief glimpse of diversity of ideas the books reviewed in this issue cover. As with previous years, we have also tried to include a variety of perspectives—from teachers and educators, professionals, authors and illustrators, medical professionals, parents, grandparents, students and children. We hope this issue brings to your attention some books which you find interesting as parents, caregivers, children or just as readers. Happy reading!

TCA Avni



# Multiple Childhoods in India

By Mansi Aneja

Childhood has long been an area of interest to psychologists, sociologists, educators and parents. It is important to understand childhood through the lived experiences of children as they give us unique insights into their life worlds. They also provide insights into the ways in which children need to be raised, socialized and enculturated and the different roles and styles of parenting that exist in different families. Reflections on children's lives and experiences also enable decisions on visualizing effective pedagogic processes, curricular structures and school policies and practices that would support children's learning and development in schools. Further, the way childhood is understood in a society at a given point of time tells us about social expectations and aspirations about how a child is required to act, behave and participate in the community.

There are many ways in which childhood has been conceptualized in India over the last few decades. The most popular or widely recognized way is as a stage where children are seen as vulnerable (in need of protection), dependent (on adults) and innocent (of worldly ways). Such a notion of childhood highlights that the world of children is entirely different from the world of adults and the life of children is focused on play while that of adults is focused on work. This notion of childhood also suggests a universalism and a commonality to all children, typified by similar experiences during childhood, irrespective of their social milieus. In fact, this kind of childhood is often considered as the norm or standard against which all the other childhood experiences are evaluated. Somewhere, this construct of childhood tends to focus on its universal applicability. It has however been critiqued on the grounds that it presents a singular, upper class, male-centric notion of childhood. It portrays a childhood which is devoid of children's social realities, lived experiences, religious-cultural identities and the socio-political scenario of a nation. Alternatively stated, the idea of multiple childhoods in India allows us to explore myriad experiences of growing up in varied socio-cultural milieus.

What is well documented is the fact that in India, childhood is often experienced differently by girls and boys. Right from birth, millions of girl children struggle for their right to good health, a nutritious diet and opportunities to start (or continue) their studies. Although some changes in this trend have been steadily observed in the last decade in the form of progressive mindset of a few educated parents and grandparents, the ground reality still reflects rootedness in the gendered growing up experiences of children. Right from an early age, children are socialized into different roles and responsibilities of being a boy or a girl. Girls are encouraged to contribute in household chores, take care of young siblings, develop calm and docile dispositions, and aim to become good caretakers and homemakers who are reasonably educated as well. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to participate in outside home chores, take keen interest in financial or other decision making in the family, aspire to get good education and become bread-winners of the family and develop strong, assertive personas. The practice of gender socialization is at times extended (or reinforced) to the school and the community.

Drawing further from this, childhood needs to be understood from the purview of the gendered experiences of children.

An aspect of equal importance relates to locating the construct of childhood in the lived realities of various caste groups. Caste is an important identity marker in our country which is reinforced and asserted in the everyday lives of individuals, especially those belonging to the lower castes. Childhood experiences in low caste groups are often characterized by experiences of social stigma and humiliation, participation in caste-based occupations, acceptance and negation of ascribed caste identities, remaining embedded in the vicious circle of poverty, experiencing segregation and trying hard to achieve social mobility through education.

Somewhere, at different points in an individual's life, social class emerges as an important dimension, especially in many parts of the English-speaking world. A small peep into this reveals that childhood in low-income groups is characterized by the everyday struggles of subsistence, deficits in cultural capital and inadequate support to children to negotiate their class and caste identities that impact their everyday lives. Such caste- and class-based experiences of childhood also make us question whether the lives of children can be completely isolated from the social realities that adults experience.

So far, we have discussed the varied and diverse constructions of childhood through the lens of gender, caste and class in the everyday lives of children. At times, when the everyday is disrupted by a political turmoil or conflict, it often triggers an early onset of the adultification of children. Like adults, children too experience uncertainty, insecurity, rootlessness and cultural bereavement. The lived childhood in such circumstances ceases to provide nurturance and protection to children. Children like adults also face anxiety and conflict. The imminent threat and violence, often associated with such socio-political circumstances, has been seen to impact the everyday discourse of childhood as well. What comes out very clearly from those childhood experiences cannot be restricted merely to aspects of play and schooling without taking cognizance of the context and milieu in which the children are living and experiencing the world. Thus childhood as a construct must be contextualized in the multiple realities and diverse social worlds of children marked by their gender, caste- and class-based identities. Also, it has to be recognized that the world of children and world of adults cannot be entirely segregated in situations of political upheaval and uncertainty. Multiple childhoods are a reality and demand that we acknowledge them. Diversity and heterogeneity are the hallmarks of how children live and experience their childhood. It is the fascinating socio-demographic and socio-cultural landscape of India that creates not singular but multiple childhoods in which intra- and inter-regional differences abound. So there are childhoods and childhoods and

“ At times, when the everyday is disrupted by a political turmoil or conflict, it often triggers an early onset of the adultification of children. Like adults, children too experience uncertainty, insecurity, rootlessness and cultural bereavement. The lived childhood in such circumstances ceases to provide nurturance and protection to children. Children like adults also face anxiety and conflict.”





# Making Sense of a 'Changed' World: COVID-19 and Children's Mental Health

By Toolika Wadhwa

The first quarter of 2020 was marked by a fear of COVID-19 in India. A sudden lockdown was declared and although it seemed to be initially for a finite period, it soon became clear that the period of uncertainty would continue for a while. While adults grappled with illness, loss of job, relocation, and a changed lifestyle, children were themselves faced with a completely alien set of circumstances. The experiences of children have been heterogeneous, essentially marked by their socio-economic contexts and family circumstances. This essay delimits itself to a discussion on the experiences of children from middle-class, urban contexts.

The initial experiences of the pandemic were marked by novelty and an attempt at making sense of what was happening. As the situation slowly settled, many children realized the loneliness that accompanied them when they were at home all day. They missed their conversations with friends in school and the long hours of play in neighbourhood parks. Adolescents quickly resorted to communicating more and more through social media. Younger children, who did not have access to mobile phones, had to be dependent on their parents to allow them to use their phones for something as 'banal' as just chit-chatting with friends and sharing their selfies. As online classes in schools became mandatory in private schools, access to devices where they could engage with their friends became easier. Video conferencing platforms started being used for playing games together. In the absence of physical interaction, children thus learnt to be with each other through virtual platforms.

Despite the pathways that children created for engaging with their friends, the amount of time that they had at their hand increased substantially. Meanwhile parents were busy with their office work as also with household chores that had doubled in the absence of domestic help. Children were left to find their own occupations. Some parents engaged children in household chores, and found family time to play with them. This ensured that family bonds grow stronger. Yet children were increasingly faced with boredom emanating from the absence of school engagement. Access to websites and video sharing platforms allowed them to self-learn and improve their skills. Many children explored sketching, painting, reading, video editing, and pursued other interests which they could hone at home. They were encouraged by their parents and family groups to engage constructively with these pursuits. Once again, video conferencing platforms allowed for family meetings with extended families staying in far off places to meet regularly.

“The pandemic brought out the best and worst in human kind. Children and adolescents have shown exemplary courage and resilience in coping with the world turning upside down. Like the plague, holocaust and Partition, the experience of the pandemic is likely to stay with them for the rest of their lives.”

The downside of family time that was particularly experienced by adolescents was the constant nagging of parents and grandparents. Most middle class families are characterized by both parents working. With parents busy at work, adolescents who were considered old enough to take care of themselves, were away from the scrutinizing eyes of their parents on most days. The advent of the pandemic placed a restriction on this freedom. They now had to increasingly abide by when to sleep, wake up, engage on social media and which friends to interact with. The mere presence of parents at home, even when adolescents enjoyed the privilege of their own rooms, meant that there was a dent on the freedom to be.

A freedom that adolescents and children did enjoy was to be able to disconnect from an uninteresting class. In physical spaces, children were caught if they day dreamt. The pandemic saw teachers learning online teaching. Most students chose to keep their cameras off. This was accentuated by the lack of adequate network bandwidth to meet the needs of all family members. Students could thus stay connected and not pay attention to what the teacher was saying or disconnect completely from the class. Adolescents and children thus became increasingly responsible for their own learning.

Coupled with increasing usage of electronic devices, the freedom to not study in an online class resulted in a shift in focus of students away from studies. There was little written work undertaken in classes and homework mostly involved engaging with digital media. Books were made available online. The same device thus provided choices between studying and entertainment. It was easy for children to shift away from work and use some time to get rid of their boredom. To the best of their intention, children did not think of *not* completing their work but never realized the amount of time and engagement media can provide. Digital media took over their lives. The impact on eyesight and sleep cycles is reportedly immense. Increasing usage of filters on selfies and a need to share these with friends is an indication of the impact of increasing engagement with electronic devices, self-image and psychological well-being. But creative children have found ways of dealing with this as well. Digital detoxification has become a common practice in children as young as twelve years old.

The pandemic, particularly the second wave in the country, impacted many families directly. There were instances of entire families being wiped out by the virus. Other families saw the loss of a parent, grandparent, close relative or neighbour. Even where families were not directly affected, children were acutely aware of the impact the virus had on others around them. Adult conversations in hushed tones; stories of their teachers, friends and neighbours being affected; large scale loss of life and the absence of health care have developed anxiety and fear among children of how the virus may impact them or their parents. In addition, adolescents in high school have had to deal with the uncertainty of their academic future.

The pandemic brought out the best and worst in human kind. Children and adolescents have shown exemplary courage and resilience in coping with the world turning upside down. Like the plague, holocaust and Partition, the experience of the pandemic is likely to stay with them for the rest of their lives. Yet, it is children who seem to be carrying the baton of hope and taking responsibility for their own learning, mental health, and lives.



## 'We Are More Than "One Story"'

By Tarika Chari

Recently, my school has started a quarter-long course called Eagles Enhancing Lives (EEL). In this course, we learn about social justice and issues that have happened and are currently happening in the world. There are four mini units we go through, and we explore the concepts of Justice, Equality, Diversity, and Identity. In each unit we explore different social justice issues and learn about how each concept links to the issue. For example, in our Identity unit we learned about intersectionality, and how we're more than 'one story', or one perspective and trait. We explored different parts of our identity, and watched a short film called *Bibi* to see how intersectionality affected implicit bias, and how bias affected stereotypes. In all the units we would watch videos about people describing their experiences in dealing with discrimination. We saw an African woman describe how she would purposely hunch herself in a train to seem smaller and harmless, due to the stereotype belief that black people are violent.

Throughout the course we would go back to the concept of discrimination and privilege, and why there would be people who wouldn't want to get rid of the former since it would also get rid of the latter. In the Justice and Equality unit, we learned about the difference between equality, justice, and equity. We talked about how people united to get justice, and how they did that. Especially in this unit, we explored past and current protests, and explored women's suffrage activism around the world. In our Diversity unit we first made our own definition and reflected on our own reaction to diversity. Implicit bias played a big part in this unit, and we all realized how we unconsciously associate different traits to different races or genders, or how we have gotten accustomed to being judged by our appearance. We also talked about the diversity in abilities and researched more about both physical and mental disabilities. We linked this back to the previous unit, and how diversity affects justice, equity, and equality. After all, if we didn't have diversity in things like our abilities and looks, it would be much easier to achieve some sort of equality (although we can't ignore the impact a person's socio-economic status has).

Finally, in our last unit, we take action. While it's very important to learn about social justice issues in our world, it's also extremely important to do something about it. It could be to educate others, to give voice to others, to unite others, or simply to listen to others. There are more ways to take action, and these are some simple categories in which you could take action in. In this unit, we're also learning about allyship and the difference between allyship and performative allyship. This is important since in this unit, everyone in our grade is taking some form of action, and we want it to have some impact. Personally, me and my friend are writing a novel with illustrations to educate others about different experiences people in the LGBTQIA+ community go through. We're creating our own characters, but are asking real people for their experiences in moments like coming out, or discovering the label they feel the most

“While it's very important to learn about social justice issues in our world, it's also extremely important to do something about it.”

comfortable in. While we know that making this novel will take longer than the time we have until the unit is finished, we're planning to continue this even outside of class because we really do want to take this action. Other people are also taking their own form of action. Two other people are making a choreography to demonstrate gender inequality, a group of three are making a series of artworks to represent racial diversity. Some are writing comics, others essays, some doing interviews, a few even making sculptures.

Regardless of the diverse methods in taking action, everyone wants to make something that when shared will make an impact. That's what this course is mainly about. We learn about the social justice issues in our world, and then with our new understanding, we take action to make a difference. Sadly, not a lot of schools have a class just for these issues, but that doesn't mean that people aren't capable of doing something to raise awareness or bring change. Really, you could do something like join the nearest protest that you support or upload a picture of a sketch you drew about a social justice issue on Instagram. It doesn't take a lot of effort to simply voice support, but a lot of people still don't due to not being aware of what's happening or think that it doesn't affect them. This social justice course has shown me the importance of action, and that these issues really do affect everyone. Hopefully, more schools will start such courses and educate their students on these topics, since this is important to everyone and impacts everyone.



## Learning to be a Parent

Toolika Wadhwa

### PERFECT PARENTING: HOW TO RAISE HAPPY AND SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN

By Sushant Kalra

Rupa Publications, 2021, pp. 142, ₹295.00

### HOW TO RAISE A TECH GENIUS

By Shahneila Saeed

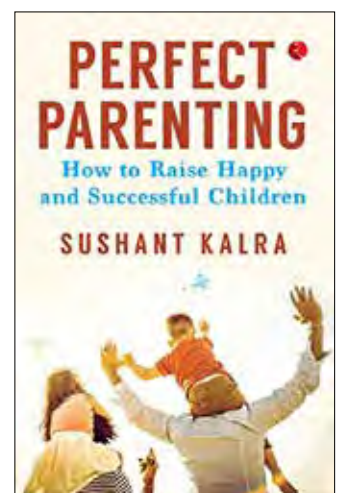
Hachette India, 2020, pp. 240, ₹599.00

### 13 STEPS TO BLOODY GOOD PARENTING

By Ashwin Sanghi and Kiran Manral

Westland, 2018, pp. 172, ₹250.00

The 'present' generation and its values have oft taken the blame for much that is wrong in the world. The generation keeps changing just as the wrongs keep changing. As people age, the side of this blame game that they represent also changes. Yet, seldom do people sit and think who is responsible for the changing values of the 'present generation' that has led to so much 'wrong' in the world. Parenting for most people is not a conscious choice. We grow up, build careers, and start a family, because that is what society teaches us. This is taken as a given without any conscious thought about who can be a good parent. Considering that family is





the primary unit of socialization, it would seem obvious that families would take greater responsibility in the value system that children inherit. Sadly though, parenting is taken as a task that everyone already knows how to do. New parents thus try to recall what their parents did, sift through what seems to make sense in their context and tumble their way around parenting.

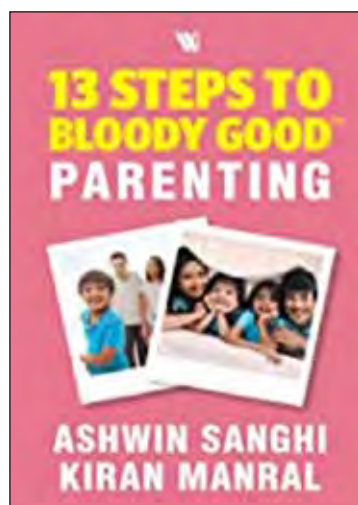
Given this context, the three books covered here are worthwhile reads by new parents who are still trying to unravel the complexity of parenting their twenty-first century children. The contexts around us are changing fast and what seemed as sound parenting even a decade ago needs to be retuned to fit the changes that the turn of the decade would have seen. Many books that address the issue of parenting tend to do so in the context of theories of child development, developmental milestones, needs of children at various developmental stages and the various parenting styles. All three books addressed here are a sharp deviation from this academic approach. The books are written in a simple language that parents with little knowledge of psychology can understand. The books are contemporary and replete with specific suggestions for improving the everyday parenting experience.

Sushant Kalra is the founder of Parvarish Institute of Parenting. He describes the role of a parent as ‘Making children responsible for their own lives.’ This sums up the description of the sixteen chapters of *Perfect Parenting: How to Raise Happy and Successful Children*. The book begins by talking about the need for learning to be a parent. The initial few chapters are dedicated to helping what they envision for their children. The rest of the chapters talk about common issues that parents and children face in their engagement with each other. Recognizing children’s abilities, motivating them to perform beyond their limits, building self-esteem, addressing conflict areas around eating junk food, restricting screen time and comparison between siblings are some of the issues that the book covers.

The book provides practical advice on how to engage with children by using anecdotes and case studies from Kalra’s work in his institute, using the Parvarish model. Many aspects of the model are in consonance with the principles propounded by the humanistic approach in psychology. Accepting children for who they are, recognizing their potential, their wishes, desires and aspirations, acknowledging the individual within the context in which he/she lives are some of the suggestions given in the book. Another important aspect that has been emphasized by the approach is the need for negotiation and collaborative decision making. Parents and children, particularly adolescents, can work together towards arriving at a common understanding. The Parvarish model, Kalra claims, revisits the western model of cognitive development. For instance, the use of third person to talk about self during early childhood, known as egocentric behaviour in developmental psychology, Kalra interprets as an indication of high self-esteem of children.

Kalra reiterates the need to focus on the limitlessness of children’s capabilities and encourage them to work with confidence.

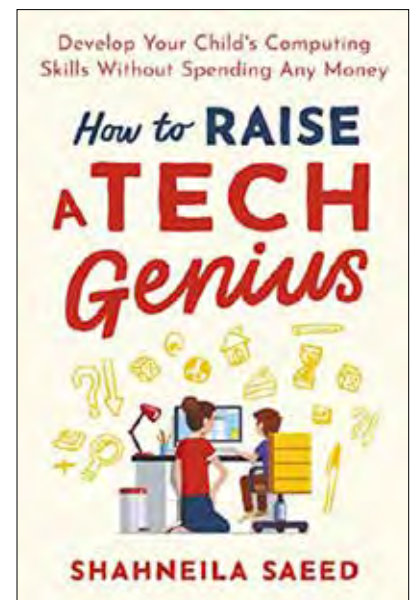
Ashwin Sanghi and Kiran Manral’s book *13 Steps to Bloody Good Parenting* is in sharp contrast to Kalra’s book. While Kalra emphasizes the need to delabel children, Manral in the Introduction section to the book questions the labels attached to parents. She writes, ‘We can never



be perfect parents, because there are no perfect parents’ (p. x). The book as the name suggests covers thirteen domains that spread across the broad spectrum of parenting concerns. It talks about loving children unconditionally, celebrating their achievement, protecting them but also letting them free, presenting challenges, inspiring them to do better, listening to each other, and praising children for who they are. Among each of these areas, the authors have shared practical tips on what parents should do. Contrary to what Sanghi writes in the Foreword, these tips are prescriptive. Much of this advice stems from his personal experiences of parenting. The advice is thus strongly grounded in practicality. The constant effort of a parent in trying to balance care, concern and exasperation is evident. The central theme that cuts across all the chapters in the book is that of creating strong parent-child bonds based on communication.

Two of the chapters of the book are dedicated to the important issue of detachment and protection. The authors highlight the need for allowing children to be free and learn from falling down. The focus is on raising children to be independent. Too much protection and clinginess can stifle their growth. Children must thus be encouraged to face their challenges by themselves. Parents should strive to stay connected and provide support to prevent children from getting hurt. But in most situations, facing failure would also be an important lesson in growing up.

Shahneila Saeed’s *How to Raise a Tech Genius* is focused on children’s ability to develop and use technology as they grow up. The author points out that while the world is filled with the use of technology and children are able to adapt to it with far greater ease than adults, there are far fewer people wanting to develop technology than the number of employment opportunities. This is likely to increase in the future when technology will replace all tasks that can be automated. In this context, it is important that children of today make the best use of this opportunity and develop technological skills.



The book presents a plethora of simple activities that can be performed with children at home that help them recognize the presence of technology in their lives. The activities also present opportunities for children to develop logical thinking and computational skills that will help them to prepare cognitive expertise for engaging in the field of technology. The activities are supplemented by resources that can be explored if children show further interest. The book is thus practical and useful for developing technological genius.

All three books present practical ideas that can be implemented by parents in engaging with children. While Kalra’s book attempts to link to theoretical ideas on parenting, the other two books follow an even more grounded approach. Thus, all three are useful resources for parents and professionals engaging with children. However, it must be noted that the books are situated in an urban context where children’s lifestyles are steeped in extended screen time, consumption of junk food, extensive engagement with social media, and the like. Although the books presume a homogenous Indian family context, parenting strategies recommended in all three books are suited to the cosmopolitan, middle class Indian family.

# A Swansong in the Garden of History

Sucharita Sengupta

**LET'S GO TIME TRAVELLING AGAIN! INDIANS THROUGH THE AGES**

By Subhadra Sen Gupta. Illustrations by Tapas Guha

Puffin Books, 2021, pp. 184, ₹250.00

Celebrated children's writer Subhadra Sen Gupta's swansong, *Let's Go Time Travelling Again! Indians Through the Ages*, is a remarkable addition to her already brilliant repertoire of publications. The second in the *Time Travelling* series, published posthumously, will also be the last of her many books aimed at making history fun and accessible to young people. She leaves behind a formidable legacy. Her non-fiction publications, especially on Indian history, continue to set a benchmark for introducing children to critical themes in an engaging way.

In this book, Sen Gupta explores history through the lives of ordinary people. Across seven chapters, she brings to life actors other than rulers and nobility who were instrumental in shaping Indian society, economy and politics. School level history has for decades been focused on significant events that usually involve states and warfare, foregrounding extraordinary events. This is a one-dimensional method of recording human life. It privileges the role of the elite decision making strata of society. It ignores the role of the rhythms of daily life, of the lakhs of ordinary individuals who shaped society. By doing so, it puts distance between the reader and the story, giving history a proverbial stiff upper lip, and alienating those who may otherwise be interested in understanding the past. The writer's approach challenges this method.

Sen Gupta takes the reader through history via the professions that were of utmost importance. The first chapter, for instance, deals with potters, weavers and sword makers. The writing starts with a story where a little girl is curious about her father's work—weaving sarees. After hooking the young reader with a story, the author adds sections that are factual, discussing what is weaving, how is cloth woven, various technologies that were prevalent in the past, the rich history of India's textiles, and its role in India's politics. Not too far into the first chapter itself, while writing about potters, iron smiths and jewellery makers, caste is introduced into the text. The complex structure of the caste system and its discriminatory nature is delivered in a manner that would be comprehensible yet not simplistic. Sen Gupta did not shy away from talking about the elephant in the room of 'history from below'.

In a similar vein, the author writes about the travelling bards of Rajasthan. Folk-singers known as Manganiyars, following both Hinduism and Islam, travelled across the land to entertain people for a living. The best among them would be selected to perform before the local ruler, something that would bring fame, dignity, and therefore wealth and sustenance. Similarly, poets wrote the Vedas, recording history, mythology and rituals in Sanskrit. Sen Gupta writes about Tamil Sangam poetry, as well as the poetry of the masses

that was developed during the Bhakti and Sufi movements.

In the remaining chapters, the author covers scientists, doctors and mathematicians, artists such as dancers and musicians, farmers, gardeners and cooks, and merchants and sailors. The pattern in every chapter is the same—a fun story followed by facts. The text is enriched by beautiful illustrations by Tapas Guha, hugely entertaining with their whacky sense of humour. They match the energy of the written text, standing as a testimony to the writer and the illustrator's long-standing professional partnership going back to their days at *Target* magazine.

The book does a fantastic job of highlighting a variety of issues while weaving the tapestry of history. Gender is highlighted through the stories of Gargi and Maitreyi, of powerful and famous female dancers. These figures occupy a pride of place, to show that men were not the only significant actors in society. The fictional characters in the stories embedded in the book show little girls aiming to be doctors. Religious diversity is written about with a casual sense of normalcy, a much-needed style in times where 'othering' minorities is making strangers of our own people. The author breaks down ancient history logically, ensuring that a reader would be far less susceptible to the capture of this particular part of history by dodgy narratives peddled by narrow minds. However, the most critical aspect of the book remains the manner in which it challenges the caste system. By granting massive amounts of space to traditional 'low caste' professions, according them dignity and their rightful place in history, Sen Gupta has shown unparalleled genius. There remains no excuse for not discussing caste.

India's professional historians have made concerted efforts to write history as if people mattered. Subhadra Sen Gupta has joined the bandwagon and brought this sensibility to a younger age group in the book under review. This work segues in with much of her fiction too, where stories and characters are set in historical times, helping imaginations absorb what life must have been like in a different era in a realistic manner. One feels pained to think of how much more she would have contributed had COVID not snatched away her life in an untimely way. However, she leaves us with the garden she planted, one where the reader can wander as and when she wishes. That will remain a solace as we hold her last work in our hands like a treasure.



## TCA Avni

**TUGHLAQ AND THE STOLEN SWEETS**

By Natasha Sharma

Duckbill Books, 2021, pp. 73, ₹199.00

Many years ago, one of our regular sojourns to the Delhi Book Fair found us buying books *Written in Blood: History with the Gory Bits Left In* and a few titles in the Horrible History Series. The normal childhood fascination with the macabre meant that those were one of the few books on history I willingly finished reading. Reading Natasha Sharma's *Tughlaq and the Stolen Sweets* reminds me of those books. The book is a fictional story revolving around the 'theft' of a fruit prized by the Sultan, and the reluctant 'volunteers' made to identify the thief.

In a note at the end for readers, Natasha Sharma provides commentary and contextualization to the story. In describing her research on the Sultan, she writes that she 'found the Sultan's



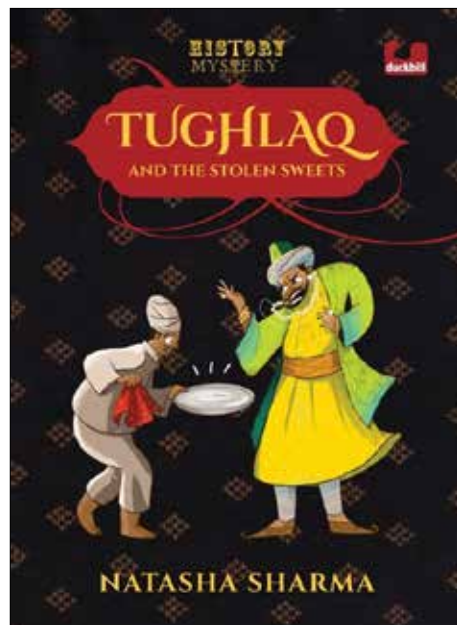
personality rather difficult to understand', as he combined a deep knowledge of philosophy, astronomy, medicine and logic with a mercurial temper and a capacity for unfathomable cruelty. While the author goes on to describe other linkages in the story to historical events and characters, it was this reference which initially piqued my curiosity.

What can you make of a Sultan the likes of Muhammad bin Tughlaq? What is commonly known about him has been

of his ill-fated decisions to replace silver and gold with copper and bronze currency and a disastrous decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and then back again in quick succession. In contemporary writings, these are often presented as ideas which were ahead of their times. However, such arguments gloss over the human consequences of these decisions and distort what living through such events could have been like. Reading the history of the Sultan gives a glimpse into the challenges the author describes. For example, the shift in the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad required every resident to move. When on the orders of a Sultan, the city was swept for anyone remaining and a cripple and a blind man were found, the former was flung from a catapult, and the latter 'tied with the tail of horse and was dragged to Daulatabad'. Descriptions of torture in his reign too are, as the author describes in her note, 'too gruesome to put down', as the story of Bahauddin Gurshasp vividly illustrates.

*Tughlaq and the Stolen Sweets* sets these facts about Tughlaq—with his extreme shifts in temperament, and said to have been too brutal by even his contemporaries, as the context of an engrossing tale weaving fact with fiction. While modern interpretations of historical events at times seek to underplay the cruelty of sections of history, Sharma's story is an interesting dive into one of Indian history's dark periods and explores what life for those under the Sultanate could have been like through an engaging children's book.

Sharma laces the story with fascinating tidbits, which she talks about in her note at the end. A boil on the bum of a leading protagonist, which is a key early driver of the plot, derives from a real incident; as do descriptions of the postal system and the food. There are other interesting implications which are left for readers to realize, for example, the reference in the story to the rising banditry is also historically accurate. The devastating combination of the shifts in capital, currency changes and high taxes had led to a rise in banditry when Muhammad bin Tughlaq shifted his capital back to Delhi. Ibn Battuta's arrival in this aftermath would have borne witness to this. The greatest use of artistic license is possibly in the descriptions of punishments the book employs: the author takes great care to ensure that punishments and torture meted out in the story are markedly toned down, with gory reality replaced with more acceptable versions. The deft combination of drama, humour, and macabre makes this period novel an enjoyable read, one which will likely be enjoyed by children indicated to be of suitable age, as well as adults.



## Bharati Jagannathan

### QUEEN OF FIRE

By Devika Rangachari  
Duckbill Books, 2021, pp. 120, ₹250.00

### NIDA FINDS A WAY

By Samina Mishra. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Duckbill Books, 2021, pp. 68, ₹175.00

### JAMLO WALKS

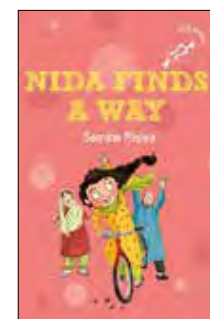
By Samina Mishra. Illustrated by Tarique Aziz  
Puffin, 2021, pp. 30, ₹250.00

There's scarcely a child in India who hasn't heard of the courageous Jhansi ki Rani—while my generation grew up memorizing and stridently reciting Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's '*Khoob ladi mardaani voh to Jhansi vali rani thi*', subsequent generations have met her in picture books and most recently in a Bollywood production which is, as usual, less concerned with historical fact than with creating alternative histories. What then could another telling of this tale have to offer a reader? It turns out—plenty.

To begin with, the child's perspective is centred throughout the book, even though it is purportedly about a queen celebrated primarily for her martial prowess. Opening with the adoption of a kinsman's young son, Damodar, by Jhansi's royal couple to bypass the British Doctrine of Lapse, the narration eschews the hackneyed descriptions of grandeur to focus on Damodar's bewilderment at acquiring a new mother when he already had a 'perfectly nice mother'. His silk robes chafe his skin. In fact, silken garments, whenever they appear, are almost always portrayed as irritants rather than desirable, and jewellery is only minimally mentioned, and that too in specific contexts such as the Rani donating her heavy, gem-studded necklace to the cause of the 1857 rebels.

The Bundelkhand region is dry and its economy rather stressed, and the small kingdom of Jhansi was frequently at loggerheads with its neighbours such as Orchha and Datia. Presenting the 1857 events as a nationalist saga might be tempting, but is ahistorical. While the author's sympathies are evidently with the queen of Jhansi and the diverse groups challenging the British—she mentions the rapacious tax regime and general brutality and treachery of the British. Rangachari is committed to historical accuracy and gives a glimpse into the internecine struggles as well as the fractured nature of the uprising. Carefully avoiding glorifying violence, she presents the Queen of Fire as an efficient ruler concerned about her subjects' well-being, a capable intelligent woman who can think on her feet, or rather, on the saddle of her mare—for she is an accomplished horsewoman, a conscientious human being who makes every effort to protect the women and children of even her adversaries, the British, from enraged rebels and, of course, an intrepid warrior. And little Damodar is always present, almost like a window for the child reading this fabulous presentation of a well-known tale. If the Queen of Fire emerges as an admirable heroine worth emulating, *Queen of Fire* is an admirable example of what historical fiction should be.

Nida's father could—and in many ways should—be a familiar figure to many children. Not in all ways, though. A lovely doting parent, he is overly protective which means that Nida, the 'apple,



mango, guava and litchi' of her father's eye (what a lovely image!) could not do most of the things her big little heart wanted. And her heart wanted very much to ride a bicycle. But her worrier-Abba's eyes became at the slightest suggestion of adventure, round as *pooris* (what's not to love here!).

Nida finding a way to finally achieving her dream would have been a heart-warming story in itself. But Mishra weaves in contemporary India in a way that makes this so much more than a snuggle-to bedtime story. Nida's learning to cycle coincides with perhaps the greatest mass movement of our times, the nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that was passed in Parliament in December 2019. Nida lives in Abul Fazl Enclave, a residential colony very close to Shaheen Bagh which became the epicentre of the protest movement. The Shaheen Bagh protests were noted for, among other things, being led and driven by women, specifically Muslim women, who have conventionally been perceived as oppressed and invisible. Familial power works along the lines of gender as well as age. So, while Nida's overly cautious Abba, whose primary motto in life is caution, goes 'No, No, No' every time Nida wants to explore something new, he is powerless to object when his venerable mother decides to step out to join the women's sit-in. A passport application turned down for want of obscure papers, the anxious chatter among neighbours regarding the implications of the new law, a protest march winding down Nida's lane echoing with calls for Aazadi, and finally, of Nida winding up, thanks to a set of unexpected events, at the site of the protest itself, make one ponder the questions of what constitutes citizenship, how democracy functions, and participative politics. I found myself in tears at the end of each reading—even though it is what is traditionally considered a 'happy ending'. If we want a better world, we need this, and stories like this, to become bedtime stories.

*Jamlo Walks* is, however, heartbreaking. Alas, it is a true story. Jamlo, a Muria Adivasi child of twelve from Bastar who worked in the chilli fields of Telangana was thrown out of work by the sudden lockdown in March 2020. With a group of her acquaintances, she began to walk back to her village almost 160 kms away under the punishing April sun. She didn't make it home. My chest constricts as I type this brief summary; I can only wonder at the courage with which the author and illustrator created this book. The story of Jamlo's trek, during which her slipper breaks before she herself collapses is interposed with the lives of three urban children during the lockdown. The news of thousands of labourers suddenly rendered without any means of livelihood on the march across the subcontinent reaches them in mere flashes as they grapple with the challenges of online schooling. However, every single Tara, Rahul and Amir in India needs to know the story of Jamlo, to ask why she wasn't in school but working in fields far from home and her parents, why people like Jamlo are not thought about by policy makers and, in fact, what education means.

I have a huge complaint, however. The books, priced at Rs 175 and Rs 250, are too steep for most families of even the middle class. Surely a big publisher like Penguin Random House could have decided to subsidize just these two important books to ensure that they get into the hands of every child with some degree of privilege? For, those with privilege—of caste, class, and also faith in contemporary India—need to hear the stories of those who cannot take even basic rights as citizenship and/or livelihood as given, to learn to empathize, and eventually to act on that if we are to awaken into a halfway decent dawn.



## Ranjana Kaul

### ONE DAY ELSEWHERE SET

#### MY FATHER'S COURAGE: 1930, GANDHI AND THE SALT MARCH

By Anne Loyer. Illustrated by Chloe Fraser

#### A GIANT LEAP: 1969, WE WALKED ON THE MOON

By Thomas Scotto. Illustrated by Barroux

#### THE BLACK TIDE: 1978, THE SINKING OF THE AMOCO CADIZ

By Marie Lenne-Fouquet. Illustrated by Marjorie Beal

#### A CELLO ON THE WALL, 1989: THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

By Adèle Tariel. Illustrated by Aurore Pinho E Silva

All four titles in the series translated from the original French by Nakashi Chowdhry  
Puffin, 2021, pp. 48, ₹299.00 each



The One Day Elsewhere series by Puffin consists of a set of four beautifully illustrated books,

translated from the French by Nakashi Chowdhry, which tell the story of individuals and events in history that changed our world. Picking up incidents from world history which have resonated across time and have significantly impacted politics, environment, science and humanity, these books place them within the context of a child's life. They link the personal and the public, thus making these intertwined momentous events come alive and seem like they are a natural part of a child's life. The political and the public become a more immediate and felt experience.

In each of the books, the reader is gently led into the wider context but the focus remains on the impact of these events and their intersection with the lives of the children through whose eyes and in whose voice we see the events unfolding. The book which deals with the earliest of these events is *My Father's Courage*, which introduces the young reader to one of the most important landmarks in India's struggle for Independence, Gandhi's historic Salt March. The event is seen through the eyes of a young boy, Aslam, whose life is brutally impacted by the unjust and unfair laws of the ruling British. His father, Adil, is a simple straightforward man who has never been a rule breaker. He has always told his son, 'Stay straight, my son. On your feet and in your head. Then no one can find fault with you.' But the unfairness of the law pushes him to challenge it, a brave act which leads to his arrest.

For Aslam, the law is incomprehensible. He cannot eat a meal without salt and he cannot comprehend why his father should be jailed for harvesting some salt from the sea which is at their doorstep. Aslam's father's arrest is a moment of despair for the entire family but there is also a sense of hope in the solidarity which brings all the neighbours around to help Aslam and his family in any way possible. People visit to show their support, some of them bring food and in a heart-warming gesture, an old woman gifts a Ganapati idol to the Muslim family saying, 'He will help you overcome all obstacles.' Aslam's mother accepts the idol with reverence well aware that 'this solidarity means more than our religious beliefs'.

Soon Gandhiji arrives in Jamalpur having walked nearly 400 kms to denounce and break the Salt laws. When Aslam walks up to Gandhiji and tells him about how his father has been imprisoned



for breaking the salt laws Gandhiji asks everyone to follow Adil's example. A few months later the law is revoked and on coming home Adil is delighted and proud to hear how Gandhiji told Aslam, 'I will always remember you and your father's courage.' Adil's rebellion may be just a small contribution but it was such acts of courage by ordinary people led by an extraordinary man which finally helped to win India's Independence from the British.

The next book, in chronological order, *A Giant Leap*, deals with a very different event, one which celebrates the scientific temper of mankind and its adventurous spirit, the landing of Apollo on the moon and the first moon walk by Neil Armstrong in July 1969. The event is filtered through the eyes of a little girl who is waiting in a hospital waiting room for another kind of momentous 'landing', the birth of her little sibling; while the whole world is glued to television screens waiting for the space module, the Eagle, to land on the moon. Watching television as she waits, she wonders why there is so much hoopla about the first step on the moon but not a word about a new baby! So, when the announcer remarks that 'tomorrow the world will no longer be the same', she is happy that finally someone has realized the importance of the event in their lives! Is a space voyage 'really more important than the nine month voyage of a baby?' But even she is caught up in the excitement of the moment as a phrase falls from space directly into the ears of the world: 'one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' And that is the very moment when her dad walks in and takes her to see the 'little Eagle' which has landed in her mom's lap and their lives, someone whom she already loves 'farther than the ends of the universe and for light years and light years.'

The third book in the set, *The Black Tide*, is about the sinking of the oil tanker Amoco Cadiz off the coast of Brittany in 1978. It draws attention to the far-reaching consequences of such disasters on the environment and on the livelihoods of ordinary people like fishermen whose earnings depend on the sea. Young Bee wants to grow up to be a fisherman like his dad though he is well aware that the sea, while being a generous provider, can also be very cruel. The boy knows his father's job is a difficult and dangerous one and everyday he waits anxiously along with his mother for his father to return from his fishing trips. But on this particular day he is shaken by the despair and sorrow in his dad's voice as he explains how this oil spill will kill all the marine animals, destroy the beaches and travel far with the ocean currents spreading destruction wherever it goes. Looking at the beach covered with the black oil spill Bee says, 'It's as if the night has come and washed up on the shore... With one single shipwreck, just one single human error, kilometers of the beach and thousands of fish and seabirds will never wake up from this dark and gluey night.' The only light in this darkness comes from the volunteers from everywhere, ordinary people, children, housewives, students who come to help clean up the beach and rescue birds and animals. This is the beacon of hope at this moment of darkness, the fact that human beings do make mistakes but they also have the ability to learn from them and correct those mistakes.

The last book in the series, *A Cello on the Wall*, illustrates the



victory of the human spirit and the desire for freedom which is an intrinsic part of human nature. The Berlin Wall which divided East and West Berlin for so many years since the Second World War has been a constant presence in the life of Charlie, who has been named after the famous checkpoint Charlie through which people crossed from East to West Berlin. One day Charlie discovers a beautiful cello which once belonged to his grandmother and hears the story of how his parents fled from East Germany with this cello while his grandparents were left behind on the other side of the wall. The human tragedy of this forced separation comes to an end suddenly one day in November 1989 when thousands of East Berliners push their way through one of the checkpoints and everyone comes together to demolish this wall which had separated so many families from each other and caused so much anguish. Intertwined with the story of this momentous event is Charlie's yearning to be a musician and play his grandmother's cello as well as the lovely story of the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich who came all the way from Paris to play music to celebrate the event.

This set of books is an excellent example of how it is possible to make non-fiction interesting for young readers. Each of the books ends with a few pages that give important facts related to the events focused upon in the book. They put the event in perspective and give some additional information related to it in brief paragraphs which are an easy read. The simple format and beautiful illustrations make the books attractive to young readers and the story, which is related in the voice of a child who lived through these events, makes them conscious of the human impact of these significant moments in history on the lives of children like themselves.



## Serena Shah

### STRONG AS FIRE, FIERCE AS FLAME

By Supriya Kelkar

Scholastic, 2021, pp. 315, ₹395.00

This story is set in 1857 in British India. It is centred around 13-year old Meera, who, at the age of 4, was married off to a 4-year old boy named Krishna. Sadly for Meera, her teenage husband is killed during a trip to Delhi when he is caught in the middle of gunfire during the Mutiny, also known as India's First War of Independence. This rebellion was a major turning point for British rule in India. Meera's life is entangled in these historical events as she is caught up in cultural expectations that she does not agree with. Her father expects her to die on her young husband's funeral pyre, but Meera chooses her own path by running away.



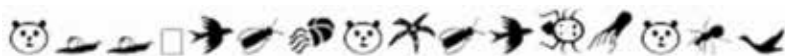
The book's themes, which entwine history, courage, struggle and freedom are gripping. The story charts Meera's journey and the people she meets along the way. Fierce characters like Bhavani and Charan, and villains like Captain Keene, the Collector and the cook, make the story come alive. The plot shows the reader how terribly Indians were treated by the British, and how acute gender inequality was back in the 1800s. The reader is gripped by Meera's determination to forge her own path and write her own destiny.

The author of the book, Supriya Kelkar, is the winner of the Neev Book Award for her book *Ahimsa*. Kelkar grew up in the United States and also works as an illustrator and script writer on Hindi movies. She has worked on the writing teams for numerous Bollywood films and even a Hollywood one. Kelkar has written multiple books which include *American as Paneer Pie* and *That Thing about Bollywood*, amongst many others.

The author’s writing ability shines through the prose. You can tell she writes for movies when you read such paragraphs as the one below that Meera says to Bhavani: ‘I shook my head, brushing the stray hair out of my eyes and back into place behind my ears. ‘I’m not like you. I did not have a loving father who taught me. I didn’t go to school. I had no say in my life. I had no say in my future. Now I’m finally earning money to start a new life where I can have a say. I can’t risk all that because you want revenge on the British.’”

Dialogue like this makes the reader feel involved with the characters and their emotions. It conveys how Meera felt trapped her entire life but now she feels free of her burdens and responsibilities. She was always looked down upon and prepared for an arranged marriage that she never wanted. So the reader cannot blame her for not wanting to get caught in the crossfire between the British and the Indians.

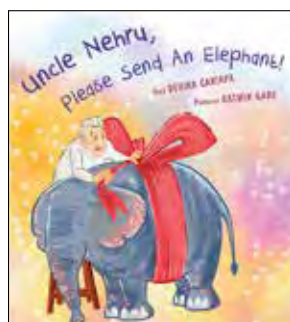
*Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* is a very enjoyable book written by someone who understands children. I loved how the book had a lot of character development, portraying how Meera went from a shy, timid, at times spoiled girl to a brave and confident woman. It was a bit scary in some parts so I would recommend it for ages 10+.



## Shailaja Srinivasan

### UNCLE NEHRU, PLEASE SEND AN ELEPHANT!

By Devika Cariapa. Illustrated by Satwik Gade  
Tulika Books, 2021, pp. 32, ₹225.00



What do Indira, Ambika, Murugan, Asha, Mohini, Ravi, Shashi and Ambika the Second have in common? They were all India’s ambassadors, but you will not find their names in the civil list. And who would have thought that ambassadors, diplomacy and international relations could be topics for a children’s book? Clearly Devika Cariapa did! She presents the most appealing aspects of Nehru’s ‘Elephant Diplomacy’, in a well written, easy-to-read narrative for children. Jumbos sent as gifts to children across the world who wrote asking for one. But those were different times—indeed, when letters not only got replied to, but also got acted upon!

*Britannica* defines diplomacy as the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and people through dialogue, negotiation, and any other measures short of war or violence. Animal diplomacy is one such measure! Symbols of power (like lions or bears), strength (like elephants or horses) or beauty (like exotic birds), wield soft power. Many nations practised animal diplomacy by gifting animals iconic to their culture and land, like India with elephants, China with giant pandas, Australia with koala bears (formerly platypus) and Indonesia with komodo dragons.

Cariapa recounts the anecdotes lucidly. She captures the essence of the correspondence between children and Nehru, selection of the animal and its journey engagingly and provides historical context and

backdrop of a young nation, busy Prime Minister, pressing needs of the people and the urgent requirement to foster goodwill among the global community. What better than creating a soft spot for India and her people in the hearts of these young citizens of the world? She seamlessly raises her questions: What did Nehru’s daughter Indira think of having an elephant named after her? How did the elephants feel travelling so far from home and away from their families? Her observations on elephant research are a perfect segue for spirited discussions on conservation and ecology, whether animal diplomacy should be practised or not...

Satwik Gade’s captivating illustrations enliven the text. His use of colour has good cultural association with symbols of the countries where our elephant emissaries made their new homes. The Japanese Sun seal, Lion Capital of Ashoka lac seal for the envelope (oh for the niceties!), Ashoka Chakra and the Hinomaru on the caparison for Indira (the elephant), Canadian maple leaf, and the multicoloured onion domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow. His magical trees and forests present a very pleasing texture. The visual elements complement the story beautifully. Gade’s attention to details and visual connect with the narrative are evident in his use of maps, colourful containers in the Port of Yokohama, Ambika’s ‘trunk’ and Murugan spraying the children with water as the newspapers and magazines splashed Murugan, the new celebrity across their pages.

The book is engaging, entertaining and evocative. It is glorious and goofy. Eminently readable and read-aloud-able!



## Madhurima Kahali

### ITIHAAS KI AATMAYEIN

By Shefali Jha and Rekhraj. Illustrations by Chinan and K.P. Rezi. Translated from the original English into Hindi by Swayam Prakash  
Eklavya Publication, 2020, pp. 44, ₹100.00

Both the stories in this volume have been translated from the Malayalam, and bring alive people from the past. The first story, ‘*Badshah, Mera Dost*’ written by Shefali Jha is an innocent tale narrated by an eleven year old boy. The young protagonist Adil’s hatred for history turns into love in a fascinating turn of events. Adil, a bright child who loves sketching is very attached to his father. Despite having a great history teacher, he finds no interest in the subject and gets demotivated easily. On one such day, he meets an unusual person and only later realizes that this person is a historical figure, one that he has read so much about. The story is short, engaging and enjoyable. It took me back to history lessons in school.

The second story, ‘*Pyari Aatmayein*’ is about an elderly farmer couple whose dream of owning a land finally comes true, after years of struggle and hard-work. The story touches upon the woes of poor labourers who tirelessly work on rich people’s farms, dreaming every day of owning a piece of that land. Mathai Apachchan, the protagonist, works day in and out, to make ends meet. Even through limited means, he raises his children well, and they become capable enough to gift him a piece of land. Sadly, when he finally owns some land, the rich people get irked and forbid labourers from working on his land. There is no one by his side, supporting him in the field work. Mathai is devastated at the thought of losing the crop due to lack of help. When he has lost all hope, he prays to his ancestors and the Almighty to help him save his harvest. At the end, he does get help, although this comes from places he never dreamt about.



## Andal Jagannathan

### THE PHOENIX IN THE SKY: TALES OF WONDER AND WISDOM FROM WORLD RELIGIONS

By Indira Ananthakrishnan. Illustrated by Sahitya Rani  
Hachette India, 2020, pp. 170, ₹299.00

In *The Phoenix in the Sky: Tales of Wonder and Wisdom from World Religions*, the author Indira Ananthakrishnan tells stories of wandering monks, wise kings, foolish gods, ordinary people with extraordinary deeds, heart-warming miracles, and daring escapes.

You get to read the story of Raikv, a mystical cart driver. It is from the *Chandogya Upanishad*. You will get to know the three questions Prophet Mohammed asked his disciples. Most of his older disciples did not know the answers but a young boy gave all the right answers!



There's one story that has pointers from a sage on how to ask for the greatest boon of all. Good to know, right? You never know when you might get a chance to ask for a boon!

You can read about the Prince who gave up all that he had and went in search of truth. Have you heard the one about the squirrel that helped Lord Rama when his army was building the bridge to Lanka? Oh, and do not miss the one about the coat that was a guest at a banquet.

The author has chosen stories from a wide range of texts from various religions. The Mahabharata, the *Upanishads*, the Quran, the Bible, the Jataka Tales, Jain parables and Lao Tsu's teachings are some of the sources used.

Some stories teach you simple things such as being kind and generous. Others talk about searching questions about the meaning of faith, about life, about the universe, and a lot more. The book gives you plenty of food for thought. By the time you reach the last page you will comprehend the harmony in the basic beliefs of all religions.

Sit back and put your seatbelts on. This book takes you on a soul-searching trip around the world!



## Ilika Trivedi

### MYTHQUEST OMNIBUS BOOKS

#### FANTASTIC BIRDS AND BEASTS

#### VEHICLES OF THE GODS

#### DIVINE CREATURES

#### MIGHTY ASURAS

All by Anu Kumar. Illustrated by Maya Magical Studios and Pen2Print Media Solutions

Hachette India, 2021, pp. 166 each, ₹199.00 each

Hindu Mythology is often seen as a complicated, contradictory and inaccessible compendium of stories that we all have heard bits and pieces of, but never really knew sequentially or entirely. Despite the unique stories and characters involved in Hinduism, the fact that there are multiple sources and versions of the same myth makes it difficult to involve children in learning these extraordinary tales. *Mythquest Omnibus* is a beautiful series of four books, which resolves this dilemma in a simple way. Each book is better than the next and includes three independent stories of the same theme.

The beauty of these volumes lies in their simplicity. Each story is narrated in an engaging manner with beautiful details and a coherent start-to-finish for each theme. All stories are divided in short and succinct chapters which have amazing illustrations that add an appealing visual component. Since the stories are about magical creatures that children may never have even heard of, these pictures give a beautiful depth to the story and make it even more delightful. The plain book covers of these volumes do not truly reflect the actual adventure-packed journey that these stories take us on. They deserve some beautiful cover art depicting the fascinating tales and creatures that we get to read about inside.

An interesting component of these stories is the fact that they are all accompanied by a page in the beginning which details the source of the information. Which Veda, Purana or Jataka tale has been referred to for each story is described for reference. Garuda, for

instance, has been mentioned in Rig Veda, Mahabharata, *Garudopnishad* as well as the *Kakati Jataka* and *Sussondi Jataka* of Buddhist mythology. In addition to these details, the contemporary relevance of these mythological stories is also described. The story of Indra's elephant Airavata is introduced with facts about how white elephants are considered sacred in South Asia, how it is an important symbol in countries like Laos and Thailand and an account of the heritage sites which depict the story of this fabled being even today.

Mythological tales toe the line between fiction and reality, and these details bring this aspect to the forefront. To believe or not is one's own prerogative, but the importance of myths lies in knowing their cultural and historical value, which is beautifully recounted along with the magical stories.

As kids, stories about Greek and Egyptian mythology did come up in some place or another and despite Hinduism being equally rich in such fables, tales about unique creatures and different avatars of Gods were not really commonly known. These volumes are a step in the right direction. Not only are these books the perfect way to introduce Indian mythology to kids, reading them can actually be a great experience for adults as well. Although some stories can sound a bit repetitive with the same incident being recounted in multiple accounts, this may not be much of a concern for first time readers who have never heard these before. All tales have been compiled in such a way that the story is a gradual progression in terms of introduction, leading to hurdles and challenges filled with epic battles and grand events, finally leading to a resolution with a



satisfying culmination. Even if the tales have different stories from different sources, they can be seen to find a place within the book in a naturally interesting manner that adds to one’s knowledge rather than create any kind of confusion.

The books contain tales about famous mythological characters like Mahishasura and also about understated creatures like Sarama and Sarameya whose stories are not commonly known. These stories may seem to be fantasy fiction on the surface but a simple reading can easily show many values and lessons that children of today can learn from. Gone are the days of *Panchatantra* tales, but the values of the same do not have to expire. Children can learn leadership from the story of Jambavana. Lessons about negative traits like greed, jealousy abound in these stories. The follies of gods and good qualities of asuras show that nothing is black or white and shades of grey dominate humanity. A great feature of these volumes is that the focus is not on well-known characters like Rama or Krishna though the bravery of the former and the cleverness of the latter does shine in the stories of Jambavana and Sheshanaga. The supporting characters get to be heroes in the limelight and children can learn that no matter who the main character is in the most renowned story, we are all the point of focus in our own lives and ultimately what matters is how well we write our own story.



## Ira Saxena

### YOUNG PANDAVAS: THE ROYAL TOURNAMENT

Written and illustrated by Anupam Arunachalam  
Hachette India, 2021, pp. 196, ₹250.00

The enchantment of the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, is soul stirring and timeless, capable of reviving the thrill of the tale with every fresh presentation of the drama down to the current times and newer audiences. So many creative attempts have been made, using a variety of formats, styles and texts to analyse the story and the characters through the years in novel interpretations but the main source still remains a fountain of joy for authors to re-create the original tale. Salutations to Vyasa for painting such a rich canvas of the Mahabharata from where writers can never tire of highlighting every single square inch of the grand picture, time and again.



Here, the author has successfully selected appropriate sequences, constructing a gripping development of the graduation of the Kuru Princes and the five Pandavas from the Gurukul of Dronacharya, to focus on their excellence in martial arts displayed in Hastinapur at the well-known tournament of the royals. The characters outshine in their maturational timeline as super warriors, yet face jealousy and challenges thrusting them towards the Great War. In age and aspirations, the characters suitably resemble the group of the readers this book is meant for, rather it carries them along in their sojourn through their adventures and war-games. The characters are known, the story is familiar to many, but here, the author has given a modern

perspective appealing to the rational mind.

The most striking aspect of the book is the description of strategies and command in warfare. While the tale of antipathy between cousins demonstrates extremes of hatred and enmity, their training and knowledge exposes not just physical sharpness but deep wisdom of mental eloquence. Even potent weaponry, drawing from the force of Nature, attaches a spiritual angle to corporal power lifting today’s readers in a fantasy world of believable possibilities. The research of the author into the battle formations of pre-historic age is insightful and interesting. The story of the Royal Tournament is visualized through the eyes of Sahdev, the youngest Pandava, who loves reading, writing and solving puzzles. The motion of events glides to its culmination with other hardy boys as role-players in the exciting drama, never ceasing to stall at any juncture. The illustrations done by the author ensure a strong grip on readers’ attention. The black and white line drawings are bold, imaginative and appropriately placed, assembling meaningful extensions to the text.

It was just by chance that lately I have been reading many books on mythological characters, particularly stories from the Mahabharata which seemed to have created a special dimension to my reading interest. Most of these books cater to the logical modern thought. This book, the third in the series, introduces the world of Mahabharata to young readers. Book I is *Young Pandava: The City of Elephants* and Book II is *Young Pandavas: The School for Warriors*.\* This delightful retelling is bound to win the great Indian epic a whole generation of dedicated readers. It captured my imagination while studying it from the viewpoint of young adults. The text is lucid and rich with elements of fantasy of larger mental resources superseding material equipment. It draws the reader into a strangely enlightened era of the Mahabharata period, of unique combat techniques difficult to imagine in modern times and the physically mighty and mentally evolved range of amazing people.

\*See review, *The Book Review*, Vol XXXIV, No. 11, November 2020, Digital Edition only, pp. 15-16

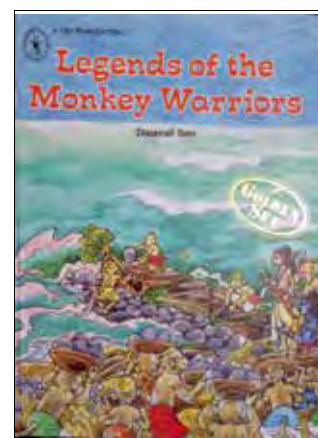


## Kavita Tiwari

### LEGENDS OF THE MONKEY WARRIORS

By Dipavali Sen. Illustrated by Neeta Gangopadhyay  
Children’s Book Trust, India, 2020, pp. 108, ₹190.00

The book is mainly based on the story of Ramayana. But it differs from most of the books narrating the story of Ramayana in the sense that other books have Rama, Lakshmana and others as the main characters, but this book gives you a new perspective on the journey of Rama. It depicts the contribution of the monkeys in Rama’s Ayana i.e., Rama’s journey. Whether it was the search for Sita or the construction of a bridge over the sea to reach Lanka, or defeating the greats of Ravana’s army, or bringing the *Sanjeevani* herb to save Lakshmana, all this would not have been possible without the cooperation of the monkeys. The book also tells us that the role of monkeys in Rama’s journey was not limited





to just the Rama-Ravana war; from the coronation of Rama to the organization of Asvasmedha *Yagnya*, the monkeys had an important role in establishing peace on earth. They supported him till the end of Rama's life. The stories of monkeys (Hanuman, Sugriva, Nal, Neel, Shatabadi, Gawayya, Dhumra, etc.) dedicated to the work of Rama have been told in great detail.

However, I did not appreciate the fact that in the entire book the monkeys are depicted just as devotees of Rama. When the monkeys hear that Sita has been sent to the forest, they are sad. They wonder if they had found and helped rescue Sita for this day. But none of the monkeys question this step of Rama, not even Hanuman (who regards Sita as his mother). Also, on page 49, Ravana is described as a dark and massive figure. In the entire book, there is nothing about the colour of any other demon like Kumbhakarna and Meghnad. Therefore, such a description about the colour of Ravana's skin (Ravana is considered to be the main villain of Ramkatha) does not seem right. Associating a particular colour with a character considered negative sends the wrong message about people who are of this colour.

As far as the illustrations in this book are concerned, they are mostly a representation of the text in a visual form. They do not add to the text in any way.

In all, this book may prove to be an interesting read for young readers, but the embedded messages it conveys need questioning.



## Anupriya Pillai

### RIBHU'S ADVENTURES ON EARTH

By Dipavali Sen

Evincepub Publishing, 2020, pp. 59, ₹160.00

**R**ibhu's *Adventure on Earth* is a fun story where a fun-loving air-spirit Ribhu, a child of the Gandharvas of Indian mythology and student of Gandharva Vasusen gets cursed by sage Durvasa for disturbing his meditation. With his dholak as the only companion he is cursed to go down to the earth as a demon rakshasa in Dandaka.

The story revolves around Ribhu's adventures in his new life with his dholak as a friendly reminder of the past, where he meets demons like Tadaka *rakshasi*, Mareecha (Tadaka's son) and observes how Rama frees them from their curses. Ribhu then moves away to Mithila where he meets Ahalya (the wife of Rishi Gautama) turned into a rock and waiting for the young Prince Rama to come there and touch her with his foot to free her from the curse.

Then Ribhu floats off to Uddalaka's ashram, where he observes



how Kahoda curses his own unborn son to be born with eight perversities. Years later, Ribhu meets Ashtavakra, son of Kahoda, who saved his father Kahoda from the under-water prison of Mithila, who in return revealed how to free himself from the curse.

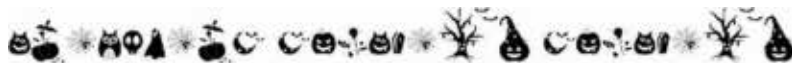
During his adventures on earth Ribhu witnesses how Demon Viradha was saved from his curse by Rama, where he learns to patiently wait to be freed from his curse like Demon Viradha. He floated over many villages, towns and many pilgrimage places, where he comes across many creatures including human beings who are spending time on earth like him to overcome their misdeeds and curses. During this journey, Ribhu once finds himself in the pilgrimage spot of Panchatirtha where he meets five crocodiles who were indeed cursed *apsaras*.

Ribhu learns many things through his journey on earth. One of the important lessons learned by him is to stay positive through which he too sent messages for his mother *apsara* Shinjini through Meghadootam in Hill Ramagiri (the Ramtek of today) where he meets the *yaksha* who was sending messages for his wife Alka in a similar way.

Throughout Ribhu's adventures on earth, Ribhu meets various characters and observes how they all get freed from their curses. All of these characters knew what will free them from their curses but poor Ribhu doesn't know how to free himself. Is there an end to his punishment?

In this entire journey his only constant companion is his dholak. How Ribhu's dholak helps him to end his punishment in the city of Mahilaroupya, find his way back to the timeless world of the Gandharvas and makes him part of an important mythological storyline is to be read and found out.

This book is very well written with simple and easily understandable text. It takes children into magical worlds with anthropomorphic beings of Indian myths, and gently embodies important values of staying positive in life. Dipavali Sen has presented the mythological storyline in a simple and fun manner to teach 21st century kids a new way to visualize and learn life's important values through the Indian mythological story of Ribhu's adventures on earth.



## Partho Datta

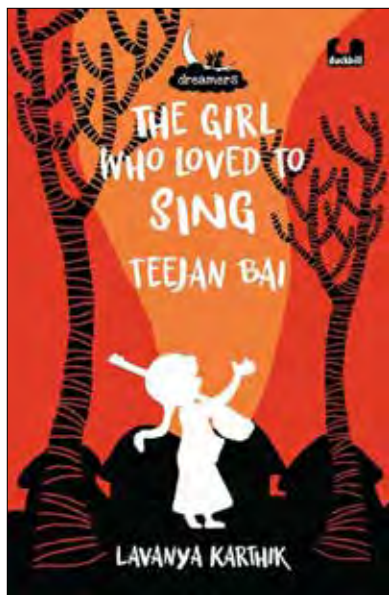
### THE GIRL WHO LOVED TO SING: TEEJAN BAI

By Lavanya Karthik

Duckbill, Delhi, 2021, pp. 48, ₹199.00

**T**his is the story of a determined, stubborn and spirited girl who has become famous as Teejan Bai. She has been heaped with honours, but her journey from the humble Bhil village of Ganiyari (Chattisgarh) to the world stage was a struggle. Teejan's birth was not welcome in her impoverished family, and her enthusiasm for playing kabaddi and climbing trees met the disapproval of her disciplinarian mother. She was mesmerized by her grandfather Brijlal's performance of Pandvani—narration of tales from Mahabharata and wanted to sing also. Brijlal did teach her, but her community disapproved of women performers, and to stop her, she was married off at the age of twelve.

Lavanya Karthik's accessible narrative tells the young reader (6+) what happened next. Teejan ran away from her marriage and settled in the neighbouring village of Chandkhuri, making a living by weaving mats, immersed in her music, seized by '*paagalpana*',



haunted by the rhythms of Pandvani—‘*jhunjhuni*’, ‘*sa na na na mo ha*’. Her first public performance to the small community of her village dissolved the resistance and scepticism of her audience. After this, there was no looking back.

The evocative drawings by the author are an integral part of the narrative and a visual treat. Done in style with bold colours (black, white, orange, red), dots and dashes, silhouettes and masks, which resonate with the themes of Bhil art, the reader is reminded of the pioneering graphic biography on Babasaheb

Ambedkar *Bhimayana* (2011). Verrier Elwin, in a catalogue essay on ‘Folk Paintings’ (1961), wrote that this art drew inspiration from natural things —‘the wings of butterflies, the markings of a snake, the ripples on the surface of a mountain stream...’. I particularly liked the way Karthik lets her images take over—the ominous hand with the stick, the rolling eyes of disapproving elders and the red mat with two tiny hands weaving a pattern reminiscent of the melody and rhythm of Pandvani songs. Teejan Bai’s personality in this book—the girl with the tanpura/tamboura, her defiance of her natal home and marriage, invites associations with rebels like Mirabai and also authors from recent times like Mahashweta Devi.

This is a valuable addition to the small number of books on performers and music—a theme rarely addressed for young readers. I asked friends to hunt around and looked for titles in my collection also. Pride of place must go to *Freddy* (Watering Can Foundation)—a biographical account of Hindustani vocalist Firoz Dastur. Tulika lists three evocative titles—*Zakir and his Tabla*,\* *Music for Joshua* and *Rooster Raga*. Penguin is publishing *A Cello on the Wall*, translated from French. The late music critic Kishore Chatterjee wrote *Pulu Pelo Piano* (Pratikshan) in Bengali. Subhadra Sen Gupta, the much-loved author, has a chapter on ‘Singers, Drummers and Flute Players’ in her posthumously published *Let’s Go Time Travelling Again* (Penguin).

\* See review, *The Book Review*, Vol XLIV No 11, November 2020, Digital Edition only



## Amitabha Bhattacharya

### THE BOY WHO PLAYED WITH LIGHT: SATYAJIT RAY

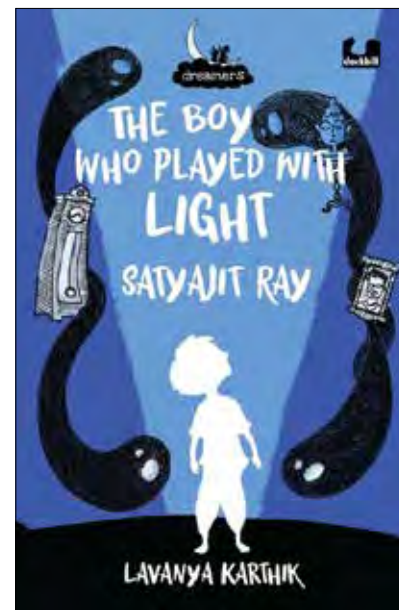
By Lavanya Karthik

Duckbill Books, 2021, pp. 43, ₹199.00

All children are born imaginative, some perhaps more than others. And imagination fosters creativity. Unfortunately, their curiosity to discover the world around often gets jaded over the years. What experience ignites a child’s imagination? What helps the child pursue the ideas formed during the growing years? As a child, Einstein was fascinated by a magnetic compass gifted by his father to play with, wondering why its needle always pointed to the north! Later, in his teens, he would marvel how it would be like if he

travelled so fast as to catch up with a beam of light!

Reviewing a slim book, sparsely worded but copiously illustrated, for ages 6 and up, would ordinarily be daunting. But this is no ordinary book. It shows how Manik (Satyajit’s nickname, meaning ‘jewel’), a lonely child who lost his illustrious father when he was less than three, used to be captivated by the play of light and shadows and how this experience left a deep impact on his impressionable mind. Written in a style that every child would adore.



Ray is known all over the world as an acclaimed film-maker. What is getting increasingly known, especially during this birth centenary year, is the other, equally creative side of the genius, as an illustrator and designer of typefaces, as a gifted musician, and more significantly as a writer of striking originality. Three generations of Rays, including his father Sukumar and grandfather Upendrakishore, spent much of their time enriching Bengali literature, especially for children of all ages. A recent book containing translations of some of their stories and poems titled *3 Rays: Stories From Satyajit Ray* (Penguin, 2021) provides a good glimpse.

Lavanya Karthik writes evocatively. With a delightful mix of words and images she seeks to recreate the world of wonder as revealed to the young Manik.

In his memoir titled *Childhood Days* (Penguin, 1992), translated by his wife from the original *Jakhon Choto Chilam* (Ananda Publishers, 1982), Satyajit writes of two playthings that moved him deeply, one was a stereoscope and the other a magic lantern. He has also recorded an experience at the residence of his maternal uncle, where he and his mother Suprabha shifted after his father’s untimely demise. During the hot summer afternoons of Calcutta when the doors and windows were kept shut, through small openings in the blinds, the inverted images of the road outside, of the moving vehicles and the passers-by, used to fall on the opposite wall of his dark bedroom. He lovingly reminisces the watching of such ‘free-bioscope’ day after day! The pin-hole camera effect amused the young mind. This observation has been lovingly expressed in Karthik’s book.

The magnificent world of Ray was shaped by many such childhood memories. His interest in photography and printing, magic, detective and ghost stories, science fiction, the world of rationality as also of the inexplicable, were all shaped during his growing years. He pursued most of such ideas to their logical conclusion.

This book is valuable for it provides some such insights into the making of Satyajit Ray. ‘When the time felt right, I turned to memories of those afternoons from my childhood...’. Karthik knows how to enchant children and has woven a story of intimacy between the young Manik and his surroundings, as if they were in constant engagement. The book would help children identify themselves with the young Manik in discovering this interplay and wonderment. Maybe some of them will grow equally inspired and creative. A Satyajit Ray or an Albert Einstein!





## Anita Bakshi

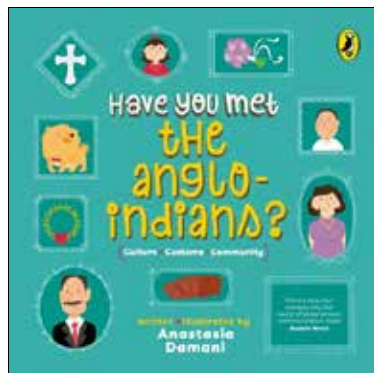
**HAVE YOU MET THE ANGLO INDIANS? CULTURE • CUSTOMS • COMMUNITY**

**HAVE YOU MET THE PARSIS? CULTURE • CUSTOMS • COMMUNITY**

Both written and Illustrated by Anastasia Damani

Puffin, Have You Met series, 2021, pp. 48, ₹199.00 each

Anastasia Damani's illustrated books are a pleasure to read. The world is becoming a smaller place every day. You can go off to London or to Europe for a holiday and you can also visit lesser known exotic places. But we have so many novel and beautiful things and people all around us and it is an amazing experience to learn about some of them. India



was ruled by the British for a long time and then in 1947 they left the country. But some of them, especially those belonging to mixed families, that is both Indian and British, loved the vibrant and warm culture of our country and so they stayed on. These are the Anglo-Indians and it is a pleasure to read about them in the first book with colourful, descriptive pictures. Here you will learn a little about British Architecture which though all around us, is something we don't recognize as we tend to take it all for granted. The descriptions are easy to understand and they will make you see some things in a new light.

The book features some 'hands on' exercises for children to try out, like different recipes. Written in a step-by-step manner and easy to follow even for the little ones. Different food, language and traditions are fun to learn about and are made very attractive.

Indian weddings are big and fancy affairs that we are all aware of. But did you know that a Christian wedding has more to it than just the bride in a beautiful gown and a groom all dressed up? There are some lovely customs and to understand them one should read this book. That way, the next time you attend a wedding or see one in a movie, you will know exactly what is going on. Reading about the way they celebrate their festivals and the special dances and dressing up is something which you will love and what better than to know more about the world around us.

The book is also interspersed with small moral lessons for children to understand and stimulate them.

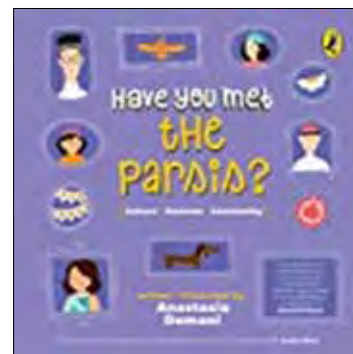
*Have You Met the Parsis?* by Anastasia is a little encyclopedia of information. I found it extremely informative and appealing. Knowledge is the shining beacon which can illuminate young minds and to be able to present this is an art. This book is simply written with quaint and appealing illustrations explaining some very complex concepts in a manner easy to relate to. Children today have vast exposure to a great deal of information and as such it is important for them to be able to deal with and process what they see. This book tells us of a different culture and customs in a manner designed not just for understanding but also aiming to create a feeling of harmony and a desire to know more. Did you know that several Parsi families, originally from Iran, sailed to India on large wooden boats? They landed in a town called Sanjan in Gujarat and blended in peacefully with the people. The names of the various customs given and also the short phrases quoted are a pleasure to read and an attempt to understand these would appeal to children.

There are simple recipes which children can try out with some

supervision from their parents and I am sure they will love to do it. Doing some exercises given here is an absolute delight.

Did you know that the Parsi wedding has so many different customs and they all have so much meaning? Read about them to learn more about it. Different names for customs and for the traditional clothes and for food too!

All in all, two good reads for the young.



## Rina Sen Goel

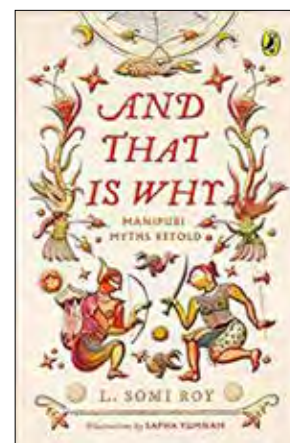
**AND THAT IS WHY: MANIPURI MYTHS RETOLD**

By L. Somi Roy. Illustrated by Sapha Yumnam

Puffin, 2021, pp. 97, ₹350.00

Just like the tales and legends of Iliad give a magical patina to the mystique of Greek of yore, this slim book *And That is Why* with enchanting myths and legends from Manipur, recreates a world that lends a strange yet acceptable dimension to our humdrum lives.

Well-known author and cultural maestro, L Somi Roy, may have retold the tales for a young audience, but such are the re-tellings that an adult is forgiven if charmed by them. As a cultural, literary and sport celebrity who is native to Manipur, Mr Roy has picked a collection of legends that tickles one's imagination and, at least to this writer, encourages lateral thinking.

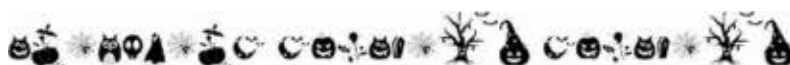


Indeed, why does the pied cuckoo drink only rainwater or the cat bury its poop? How much is fable, how much myth, how much just simply wonderful flights of imagination recounted while gathered around the village fire, one can only conjecture; but each story will transport one to a wonderful world where boundaries cease to exist and reason takes second place to pure ingenuity.

Manipur, even till today, evokes wonder, awe and a sense of magic. True, the land and its people have kept pace with the rest of the country, and yet, when you turn the first page, and step into that world, generous-minded monkeys and elephants, Burmese royalty skimming the fairy tale, hens and geese shaking hands on child management, the small cat marrying the tiger or the sacred Manipur pony bounding around, appear real and logical—close to one's touch and utterly believable!

This is great 're-story-telling'; there is care, love, passion, and above all, superb imagery in language and style. One can almost see the Eternal Creator, or Sky God 'Soaren', hovering above the pages, throwing magic dust. This is a rich, colourful journey, where dream and reality merge along with the absolutely top-notch illustrations by Sapha Yumnam.

*And That is Why* is a book of joy. You must own a copy!



## Annapurna Vancheswaran

### PS WHAT'S UP WITH THE CLIMATE?

By Bijal Vachharajani. Illustrated by Archana Sreenivasan  
Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 20, ₹65.00

### THE GRASS SEEKER

Text by Uddalak Gupta. Photographs by Ruhani Kaur  
Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 28, ₹65.00

**C**limatic change has become a global concern over the last few decades. It refers to the change in the environmental conditions of the earth. This happens due to many internal and external factors. Isn't it interesting that knowingly or unknowingly we observe various things such as trees, vehicles, garbage and so much more? What are all these things? They're nothing but a part of our environment. Bijal Vachharajani discusses climate through a series of letters from the animal kingdom and has interestingly and skilfully entwined two valuable learnings, one on the environment and the other of rekindling the lost art of letter writing. Adding a postscript to the title of the book *PS What's Up With the Climate?* and running it through the book in the letters is again both appealing and interesting. The book is appropriately placed in learning level 3, a right age to introduce intricate environmental issues such as climate change; provide the ability to appreciate its importance; and enable children to think and act in sync with nature.

You feel like immediately digging into the book and we start with the first letter from the Polar opposite Bear to his dear friend Penguin, clearly arousing the child's curiosity to learn about the North and South poles. The postscripts act as both teasers for more information and knowledge on some of the precious creatures whose existence is threatened. The book offers an easy narration of disruptive weather, of being too hot, cold, less snow, rainy. In addition, I must compliment the author for weaving in quite interestingly and effortlessly some of the less talked about and complex issues with respect to climate change such as atmospheric carbon, forest fires and pesticides that are upsetting the animals and further, Bijal ingeniously shares their discomfort, confusion, and fright.

The book brings alive thirteen animals through their letters sent to one another and in particular drawing attention to three of the animals that are endangered and are forced to move out of their habitat. This is depicted brilliantly through the undelivered letters and finally ending with a message to the chief contributor to all these environment problems—us human beings.



The illustrations by Archana Sreenivasan are extremely catchy and the detailing in each page of the letter captivating. Every page is filled with information that piques the interest of the reader. The splash of idioms, the letters laced with humour and sign off expressing the moods of the animals is a treat to the reader.

While I would admit that this book is not self-read category and will require parental support to fully enjoy the effort in the narrative, I would include *PS What's Up With the Climate?* in the must-read category as it develops curiosity; encourages natural interest and sensitises young minds to the animal world.



**T**he first thing that strikes you when you start reading Uddalak Gupta's *The Grass Seeker* is the tone and flow of the narrative and its apt illustrations which serve to capture the interest and attention of young and impressionable minds. This is the group which needs to understand the gravity of the situation that the world presently faces. The captivating story of Room Singh, the simple shepherd and his flock of sheep drives home the need for urgent and corrective action to reverse the damaging effects of climate change and global warming. This short and crisp book succeeds in succinctly highlighting the dangers that stare at us, disregarding race, regions, and geographies.

The words of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi that, 'There is enough in this world for everyone's need but not greed' get amply reinforced as one reads the story of Room Singh and his flock. The decline and disappearance of the nomadic way of life of generations of pastoral wanderers as described in the life of a Gaddi shepherd, points to the deep malaise that prevails in today's times of quenching one's greed for innumerable wants; all at the cost of nature and its fast-depleting bounties.

That climate change and the deep concerns surrounding its impact on the life of Room Singh is emotively described by the author, the struggle that he goes through to find green pastures for his flock and his desperation when he is unable to find fodder. Singh laments, 'When they go hungry, so do I.' This is reminiscent of the altruistic love of a mother for her kin. This situation of extreme helpless desperation of the protagonist is deepened by his reflection of the harsh times that loom ominously ahead: 'The wool no longer being what it used to be, selling the Gardu blankets and shawls is becoming more and more challenging.' As Room Singh treks his way along the 60-kilometre journey to Donspaan, his final camping ground, there is no grass, thanks to the incessant snowing of two days, an irregular weather pattern! The changes witnessed by Room Singh of the verdant land and bountiful greenery slowly getting eroded reminds us that climate change and erratic temperature rises are melting our precious glaciers at an alarmingly dangerous rate. Room Singh's thoughts that the days of the glorious past are drawing to a close resonate with those of concerned nature lovers that the danger is far more serious than imagined. Imminent action on arresting and quickly reversing this calamity is the need of the hour.

The illustrations captured naturally by Ruhani Kaur blend smoothly with the narrative. Yes, a bit more of coloured animated sketches could have added to the engagement of the young readers. The story of Room Singh is an urgent wake up call to all: Act now, responsibly, and collectively and preserve nature; create a better world for the next generation, else it would be too late.





## Deepa Ganesh

### HOW THE EARTH GOT ITS BEAUTY

By Sudha Murty. Illustrated by Priyanka Pachpande  
Puffin India, 2021, pp. 44, ₹199.00

**W**e live in a world that is messy and complicated.

Technology has escalated it. Are children untouched by it? Hardly. Their sense of good and bad, right and wrong are no longer simple. Ask a child if good begets good, and in all probability you will hear a 'no'!

*How Earth Got its Beauty* by Sudha Murty for children is a story that is from another time—innocent and uncomplicated.

This story of creation differs from that told by science and religion. It is born in imagination and fixes its lens on the main characters of the story, Mother Earth and the Three Sisters. Mother Earth who transforms herself into a little girl Devi and walks into her creation with the desire to take feedback from the protagonists, human beings. 'Are you happy?' she asks the sisters. Complaints flow, desire for a more exotic location rather than the plain and flat farmlands of their surroundings. Snow clad peaks, evergreen trees, rivers and fruit-filled trees, birds, animals and more. The list is endless.

At this point, Devi reveals her real self and says that there is a possibility of their desires coming true—she places the plan before them. The very prospect of this dream turning real transforms them into typical human beings—greedy, selfish and materialistic. Mother Earth angered by this, decides to take control, reverses her strategy and punishes the sisters. Nature is for all, and any assertion of power and manipulation will result in natural calamities, warns the writer. The floods, the rains, the earthquakes of the present times, happen because we have tampered with nature. The sisters apologize and promise to adhere. Beautifully illustrated by Priyanka Pachpande, this is a warm story of folly and remorse.



## Ranjana Kaul

### ADITI ADVENTURES 13: THE ANTARCTIC MISSION

By Suniti Namjoshi. Illustrated by Proiti Roy  
Tulika Books, 2020, pp. 81, ₹135.00

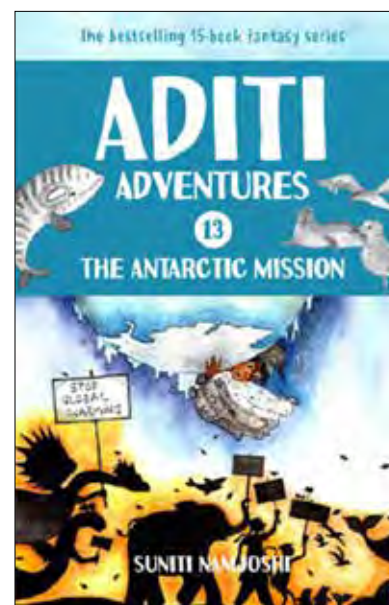
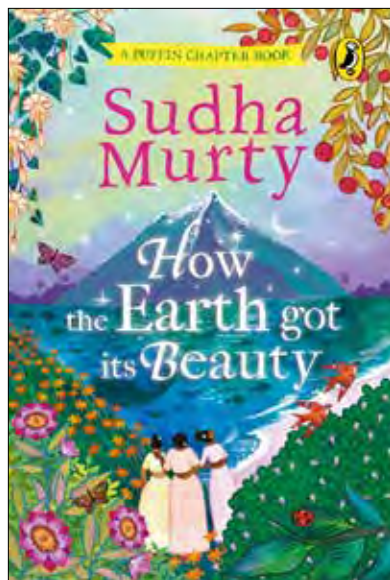
**T**he *Antarctic Mission* is the 13th book in the series Aditi Adventures by the well known feminist, fabulist and writer Suniti Namjoshi. Aditi is a young girl (inspired by Namjoshi's niece—her namesake) who sets out on the most amazing adventures across the world along with her three companions: a monkey, an ant, an elephant named Beautiful and sundry dragons. Originally published as a twelve book series dealing with diverse themes, the stories blend adventure and fantasy, the tech savvy world of today and the magical. The series include adventures, and has now expanded to 15 attesting to the enduring popularity of the heroine and her rollicking adventures. As they travel to far-flung places like London and the Great Barrier Reef, wander through the

British Museum library, or visit the Antarctic, Aditi and her companions learn about random but important issues such as protecting the environment, how pollution affects rivers like the Thames and why sharks need to be protected. Namjoshi acknowledges that, 'The fable, which is a form that comes easily to me, is a didactic form' but she also makes it clear that, while 'I don't necessarily want to tell people what to think, ... I do want them to think.' Despite this didactic underpinning, however, it is the adventures and the interweaving of the magical and the fantastic with reality that makes the books so popular.

The book takes Aditi and her friends, some rather reluctantly, to the snow-bound Continent to deal with the havoc being caused by the naughty hobgoblin Gobby who is destroying its pristine environment, turning white snow into black, colouring the hillsides green and pink and harassing the penguins by giving them spots and stripes!

As the friends prepare for their adventure they have to gather practical necessities such as jackets (Beautiful, the elephant's jacket fastens beneath her tummy!), gloves, boots, internet connectivity as well as other unusual ones which are equally essential such as turnabout creatures, magic potions and invisibility cloaks. While trying to bring the errant Gobby to heel they also learn about global warming, pollution and about how necessary it is for everyone to wake up and realize that these are problems that the whole world has to deal with. As the narrative crackles along at a fast pace the reader is introduced to the inhabitants of this remote icy Continent, the orcas, skuas, shags, Weddell seals and, of course, the penguins, all of whom become an intrinsic part of the story. Gobby the Hobgoblin has caused great consternation among the penguins by giving some of them spots and endowing the Gentoo penguins with zebra stripes. But the real concern is not cosmetic; Aditi and her companions soon realize that the most important problem is that Gobby is also damaging the pristine environment of one of the last places on earth which is relatively unaffected by pollution and human intervention.

Interspersing the do-gooding and magical adventures with simple explanations of global warming and what it means to the world and the people, the book makes the young reader confront issues like, 'What can be done to save the environment?', issues which they would perhaps tend to ignore or dismiss, thinking they are the domain of adult discussion and concern. There is a limit to what even Aditi and her friends can achieve but the point the book makes is that each of us can contribute in some way to tackle even big problems like global warming because all of us contain hidden things within us which make us capable of all sorts of achievements. The book ends on a rather didactic note but the lesson is connected with the story and therefore becomes easier to assimilate. Like the other books in the Aditi Adventures Series, the book under review is not only first and foremost a good read but it also engages with the here and now and with themes and ideas which have relevance today in a manner which never makes them preachy or boring.



## Manika Kukreja

### SNOW LEOPARD ADVENTURE

### LAKSHADWEEP ADVENTURE

Both by Deepak Dalal

Penguin, 2021 (first published 2000 & 1998), pp. 215 & pp. 217, ₹250.00 each

Through the two Vikram-Aditya stories, Deepak Dalal showed me a glimpse of the beauty of Snow Leopards of the Himalayas and the coral reefs near south Indian Islands. Vikram and Aditya are two adolescent friends, who find themselves in adventures dealing with men involved in illegal work during their trips away from their school in the Nilgiris. The travel adventure does more than just telling suspenseful tales. Though the books are committed to a nail-biting plot to hand over the criminal mastermind and bring them to justice, in doing so the author makes use of descriptions of the locations that takes the reader through the geography of the places. The two themes at work are intertwined with each other in depth through the narratives.

The readers are taken into the plot mostly through Vikram's perspective. Vikram has a special bond with his father. Even though his father never physically appears in the stories, he has a strong presence through Vikram's initial motivation for the two adventures. It is through his ideas and activities that Vikram and the reader embark upon the journeys.

Aditya is a confident and strong-minded army man's son. More often than not he is the one bending the rules. He brings force into the thoughts and ideas of the boys' adventures. His father's contacts help him bring about these resourceful actions in these two stories.

In the two stories, in addition to the scenic beauty, people who are native to the place have important roles in the adventure. A region specific innocent person is kidnapped by a powerful, evil, money-minded local person which brings in a next level of adventure to the two boys' trip. Along with the boys, the native people of Ladakh and Lakshadweep islands play crucial parts in helping to solve the problem. The Ladakhis' and islanders' lifestyles and outlook are illustrated through their characters. I could sense the polite and grounded behaviour of mountaineers in *Snow Leopard Adventure* and similarly felt unity and trust amongst the fellow islanders, their skills around different water conditions, finding directions based on stars being highlighted while reading *Lakshadweep Adventure*. The narrator's perspective in the stories is of an outsider and thus gives the readers a look into the life of mountain and island life from the outside.

The stories are gripping and intertwine the themes of travel and surfing through an adventure. They aren't intense and heavy but hopeful for a better tomorrow. In many respects it reminded me of the cartoon series Scooby-Doo. A group of morally sound youngsters who are goofy as well travelling to places and solving mysteries bringing peace and kindness back to the place by putting people who had turned evil behind bars. Vikram and Aditya along with the friends whom they meet locally explore the mountains and the reefs and help bring peace and kindness back to the place. Although the themes are mixed, yet something that slightly bothered me was

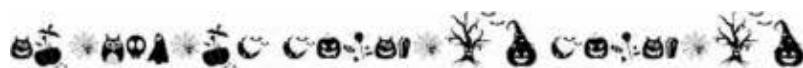


lack of flow within the stories. It felt uneven on the timeline. After a long span covered briefly, the characters go through a lot of action within the span of a night in *Snow Leopard Adventure*. *Lakshadweep Adventure* has a similar detailed writing about the setting and the events are covered over a few days.

Reading about volcanic islands and corals at the end of *Lakshadweep Adventure* gave me insights into the nature of a special water terrain. It gives crucial knowledge about the people living in a landlocked city, thus helps the reader understand the setting and context. Similarly, the beginning of *Snow Leopard Adventure* introduces the readers to the indigenous animal *Chiru*, a Tibetan antelope whose wool was much sought after in those days for weaving shahtoosh shawls. Ban on the said wool led to the poaching of the animals, even by bartering tiger bones for it. The story dwells further on this idea where Vikram and Aditya, on their camping trip in the Himalayas with a group, encounter the group behind this and other illegal activity for money. These pieces of information make the two places more than just tourist spots and bring forward a distinctive feature about the locations.

Overall, many important characters seem to get cut in the descriptions in the stories. They left me wanting to know more about some characters who played crucial roles. Vikram and Aditya have two distinct personalities and thus complement each other. This is very evident in *Lakshadweep Adventure*, but Aditya is missing emotionally from the *Snow Leopard Adventure*. Here a third character, Caroline, with a role which brings the arc to the story, helps the readers see the place through her eyes. At a point in the middle of the story she says to Vikram, 'At first all I noticed in Leh were the power failures, the crummy hotels, the lousy plumbing, and terrible food. Now I remember the smiles on people's faces, their warmth and their hospitality. The mountains appeared forbidding... I was frightened of them then. But the truth is that they are grand, and infinitely beautiful.'

I would recommend youngsters 12 years and above to give the series a read if fiction adventure tales are something they enjoy.



## Indira Bagchi

### NATURE SOCIETY SERIES

#### ODISHA

#### LAKSHADWEEP

Both by Yemuna Sunny. Designed and illustrated by Kanak Shashi and Triipurari Singh

Eklavya, 2021, pp. 8 and a map each, ₹80.00 each

Maps are very important tools of education. What is a map? The old idea of maps focuses on its utility, to locate places and determine directions. Political history has widened this core utility to include in it a powerful socializing device, to create territorial nation states in the young minds. Education submits to the mysterious power of the boundaries that maps display. Borders tend to make the earth less important than the inhabitants of each society and nation.

Nature's crisis and the state of tension between human relations, and nature and human relation with other humans become unreceptive





to education, including the best kind of education.

‘That is why’, says Krishna Kumar, ‘we must find ways to think afresh about maps. They must connect with social institutions because human beings from their childhood onwards are located in these institutions. Social location where an institution as basic as the family intersects with national and global institutions that govern economic, political and cultural life are far more important than the physical location in a space. Maps that visualize and discuss this intersection mark a new beginning.’

This series is a wonderful step to re-design the maps and thus educate the young to intersect with social institutions. If education engages with interdependence in the world, art, aesthetics, compassion and problem solving, then we need different types of maps. This should help us to look for solutions to: (1) destruction of forests, oceans, water sources and life forms and (2) creation of poverty and related problems in the society.

The booklet on Odisha with a detailed map inside is a trendsetter in making maps. Odisha, on the Eastern coast of India, is a land of forested hills, plateaus and fertile coastal plains, with several rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal. The plains of Odisha known as the Utkal Plain, has several deltas and fan-like river formations which contain fertile deposits of silt. A group of small trees and shrubs, called mangroves, which grow along the sea coast, have a complex root system which filters out the salt. Large varieties of animals, birds and salt water crocodiles live here. The largest coastal lagoon in India is the Chilka Lake which is an important feature on the coast of Odisha. Birds from Russia, Central Asia, China, Ladakh, the Himalayas and other parts of Asia come to the Chilka Lake during winters.

The new map indicates places which can help students to see the relationship in a complex landscape and ask questions. It shows concrete objects and themes like trains, forests, rivers, tourist spots and people on various tasks. They also acquire knowledge about marine fishing.

The art work on the map by Tripurari Singh is excellent and gives in detail all the above mentioned features. Temples, industries, dams, rivers, everything is clearly



marked on the map. The index given is also very helpful for students to trace that particular marking. On the whole the map shows a revolutionary change in making.



**L**akshadweep refers to a large number of islands in the Arabian Sea in the south west part of India.

Most of these islands are oriented in the north east to south west directions. These are coral islands.

Corals are very tiny animals in the sea. Some of them secrete calcium carbonate to form a hard skeleton. Such skeletons get deposited in the water and over time they form a wall-like reef which in turn supports a large number of life forms. Fish molluscs, sponges and many others live in the reefs forming an ecosystem. The reefs protect the islands.

The above knowledge along with a detailed beautiful map is something students will like and cherish. This small booklet contains all the necessary information about these islands. The artwork has been meticulously done and one look at the spread out map will give students a clear picture of Lakshadweep, the activities of the inhabitants, the natural features, wildlife and natural vegetation, cultivation, crafts and industries, tourism, monuments and art. The coloured pictures of corals are very tempting and kindle a desire to see them in real life.

The art work by Tripurari Singh is beautifully done. His illustrations give details of the activities of the people settled on the island. Fishing, growing coconut palm, boat-building are some of the main activities. Tourism is a significant industry. Ships carrying people and tourists to and from the islands and the mainland can be easily spotted on the map. Students can spot wild life, natural vegetation and the coral reef which protects the island. This information is extremely helpful to create awareness in the young about their own country.

On the whole these maps are a must for every student.



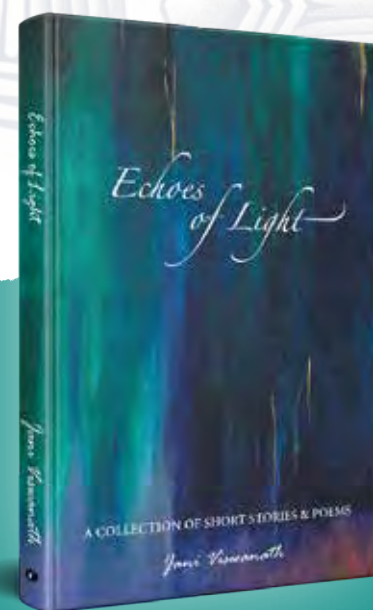
**Karthik Shenoy**  
Society of Autistics in India

# Echoes of Light

JANI VISWANATH

<b>HARDCOVER</b> ₹749.00	<b>SOFTCOVER</b> ₹350.00	<b>E-BOOK</b> ₹169.00
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PARTRIDGE

Shalini Sen

**A GERM OF AN IDEA: MICROBES, US AND THE MICROBES WITHIN US**

By Charudatta Navare. Illustrated by Reshma Barve  
Pratham, 2021, pp. 42, ₹95.00

They say never judge a book by its cover. Wise words but the title on the cover of a book definitely gives the reader a good reason to give it a second look...or not! And this title grabs attention immediately! The strength of this book is the choice of the topic. It is extremely relevant for people spanning a wide age group. It speaks of microbes coexisting with us, a fact that is certainly not new but it describes the width and depth of our interaction with microbes



which is not so well known to most people, barring the experts. The author ensures that the reader is well aware that microbes are omnipresent, are too small to be seen with the naked eye which is why their discovery awaited the invention of the earliest microscope. He stresses on the fact that they reside in overwhelming numbers in our bodies in various organs including our skin.

Terms like microbiota and microbiome find constant mention and deservedly so because on them rests the foundation of this narrative. The segment on the Hadza tribe is enlightening, the fact that the people of a tribe as yet untouched by civilization, have unique digestive abilities quite similar to those of ruminants, due to their solely plant based diet. Not many of us know that microbes are far more useful than they are harmful. The reader learns that the composition of the microbial community that resides in our gut decides many outcomes, for instance our response to medicines. What maybe a harmless over-the-counter drug for some people may well be dangerous for others. The composition of the gut microbiota can say a lot about a person: whether lean or fat, happy or sad! So what lives within our guts may well decide our health report card.

To study microbes closely they need to be grown under laboratory conditions but not all microbes are easy to culture. The author tells us about how metagenomics has come to the rescue and solved this problem. For what can't be cultured can be sequenced! He emphasizes on the fact that food bacteria are the teachers of gut bacteria and that horizontal transfer of genes among bacteria is common which can allow for a lot of cross-talk between different bacterial species.

There are several simple health-related messages in the book such as the advantage of keeping good hand hygiene, the qualities of breast milk, the perils of indiscriminate usage of antibiotics and also the significance of maintaining the delicate balance of microbes in the ecosystem. One cannot help acknowledging the choice of reference materials, mostly from peer reviewed articles in journals of international repute. The pictorial presentation makes for an easy read and should encourage an inquisitive mind from engaging with the contents.

What is lacking however, is a flowing narrative. For instance, why not start at the beginning and trace the ancestry of microbes? In each segment of the book there is a collection of very interesting facts but not necessarily showing a connection among themselves. So one jumps from topic to topic, each informative by itself but

not necessarily leading to the next. That tends to place the onus of reading the book from start to finish, entirely on the reader. If the endeavour is to write a simple yet exciting book that compels the reader not to put the book down until the end, then it cannot appear like a collection of chapters that is read one by one in a classroom. Also some analogies are not entirely convincing, for instance, a mention of the fact that lions hunt at night and that tracing their nocturnal activity has been made possible by using drones being compared with the fact that most microbes can't be cultured in laboratories however their DNA sequencing is possible. What really rankles (and that may well be because I am an academic) is the scientifically incorrect reason stating there is absorption of mostly green light by the chloroplast. Certainly not, because it absorbs light in the red and blue regions of the electromagnetic spectrum and reflects the remaining wavelengths. It is the reflected light that we perceive as green (true for a large majority of plants). Having appreciated the list of references and acknowledging that the information appears to have been sourced from reliable articles, most references either don't mention the year of publication and what does find mention is at least six years old or more. For a rapidly evolving area like Microbiology that means falling behind even if the book doesn't intend to be a text-book.

In a nutshell, *A Germ of an Idea* is a collection of very interesting facts and content about micro-organisms that should capture the interest of curious minds and plant the seed of learning more about the tiniest forms of life. However, it is not likely to excite the uninitiated mind as constant reference to related literature needs to be made.



Andal Jagannathan

**501 FACTS FACTORY: AMAZING PLANTS AND TREES OF THE WORLD**

By Amreen Toor. Illustrated by Mistunee Chowdhury  
Hachette India, 2021, pp. 170, ₹399.00

An orchid that grows underground, wasps that come to attack pests on a plant in response to a chemical signal sent by the plant, glue from the juice of flowers, a poisonous seed used to weigh precious metals...there's plenty of fascinating stuff happening in the plant world.

Amreen Toor has a captivating lineup of facts in *501 Facts Factory*. The book, all 170 pages of it, is packed with interesting information.

Gigantic pumpkins (68 kgs!), fruit salad trees that bear multiple types of fruits, a bonsai pine that survived the Hiroshima bombing—the list goes on! *501 Facts Factory* is a well-researched book with information packed in easy-to-digest, bite-sized blocks of text. Some of the information is supported by photographs, but black and white ones. Maybe the author intends to pique your curiosity enough to make you go out there and find these plants/trees to relish the sight in colour!





Maybe all of us should do that. How else would we keep a safe distance from Oleander, a common hedge plant with lovely pink flowers? It can cause a cardiac arrest when consumed! Did you know that Socrates’s death sentence involved drinking a poisonous brew made out of water hemlock? Socrates’s executioners knew their plants! Love rhubarb? Eat the stalk to your heart’s content but keep away from the leaves as they are loaded with kidney-damaging oxalic acid.

Don’t let all this scare you! The book has heart-warming information too. Read about the guitar-shaped forest in Argentina planted by a man in memory of his wife. You also learn about Shinrin-yoku or forest therapy—a Japanese practice guaranteed to reduce cortisol, a stress hormone.

While you will need to wait for the pandemic to go away to actually try Shinrin-yoku, *501 Facts Factory* can give you a virtual version of forest therapy!



## Shubhangi Pandit

### BECOME A JUNIOR ENTREPRENEUR

By Vrunda Bansode  
Puffin, 2020, pp. 158, ₹399.00

Simple and neat. The book is more like a guided journal with questionnaires, templates and exercises to think through interwoven with the theory.

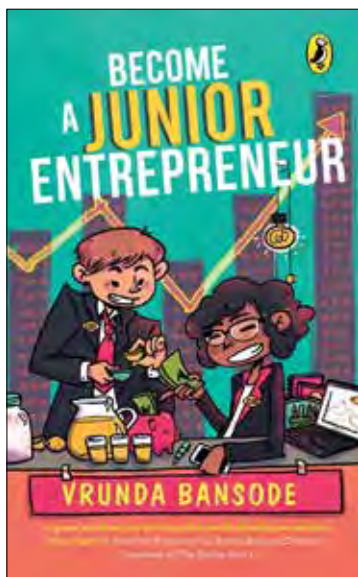
The entire content is spread across five sections. Each section covers basic concepts of business and economics in a succinct manner that can be grasped by not only pre-university students but also high school students having no orientation to the subject.

The first four sections are all about setting up a business—idea to execution. These sections include a good mix of brief real-life startup stories like Wildcraft, BookMyShow, etc., though juicy details are missed here. Running over a little on what goes wrong for start-ups and why without affecting the experience of positivity of the book could have been beneficial.

The fourth section talks about promoting business. It sticks to the expected format of advertisements and attempts to humbly cover basic aspects of online presence. A very mild warning on how to use social media as an effective tool without getting carried away is also given. The offline promotion discussion chooses to stay with SMS, phone calls, pamphlets, etc. One wonders why there is no bold emphasis on quality of the product or service itself as being the best promotion. Also, the power of word of mouth and the fact that many small businesses exist and flourish without advertising, simply because their product or service speaks for itself is not sufficiently highlighted.

The fifth section is about sustaining the running business. Here, pointers to thinking about the well-being of the environment, people etc., are a welcome addition.

Since this book is for young adults, focus on setting a ‘wrong’ right, bringing value to human existence, making our world a better



place and ethical business practices would have breathed a fresh fragrance into the learning.

The quality of pages is good. Illustrations are clear and simple. Some pull-out templates could have been very handy. The print size is inviting and the language straightforward and simple. A better book cover worthy of holding such good quality pages and larger dimensions, providing a flat journal-like look would have perhaps made better first impressions. Also, the cover art does not do enough justice to the content of the book.

Overall, the book attempts to present good direction and covers key concepts for anybody preparing to start something on their own.

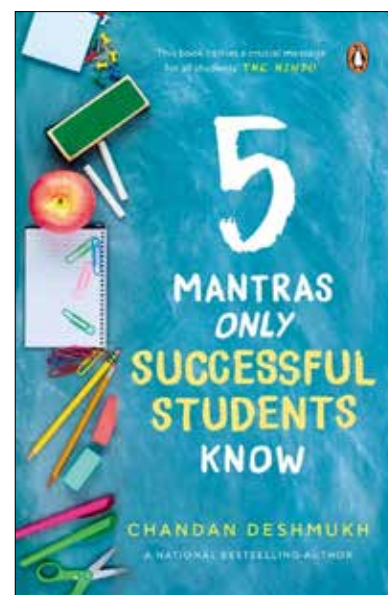


## Bharat Kidambi

### 5 MANTRAS ONLY SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS KNOW

By Chandan Deshmukh  
Penguin India, 2021, pp. 144, ₹199.00

Generation Y, commonly referred to as millennials, are those who were born between the early 80s and the early 2000s. This generation is typically highly aspirational, and tends to be self-absorbed. Often when the realization dawns, early in life, that reality is nowhere near their expectation, it leaves them disillusioned. Partly the fault lies, according to the author, with the parents of this generation, as they tend to raise their kids making them believe that they are special, by constantly reiterating that the world has unlimited opportunities for them. The moral is that youngsters need to stop worrying about how they appear to others and focus more on realizing their own potential. No one is born special, one has to work hard to make a successful life, and that instant gratification leads nowhere. Having set this tone at the start of the book, the author then goes on to lay down a path which can make students achieve their full potential.



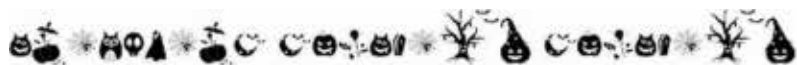
It is a common refrain among students who do badly in studies to blame their failures on their genes! Nothing can be further from the truth, according to the author; research has shown that no one is born a genius. To become a genius, however, research has shown that practice is what makes people perfect and achieves excellence. So mathematically speaking, research has shown that it takes 10,000 hours of focused practice to achieve excellence in any field. The brain when exposed to a new concept and when that concept is repeated often, develops a reflex reaction described by the author as automaticity. Repetition of information helps the brain assimilate and reproduce it faster. It is important that students fix issues they face in learning upfront, as this then creates a positive factor in learning and they don’t end up getting frustrated.

One thing students sorely miss at an early stage is a mentor or guide who helps them organize their study schedule and reinforces the concept of smart learning, which ensures a better pay off than merely hard work. The author lays down simple steps, which will

help students organize their efforts to ensure better efficiency, which can positively influence academic outcomes. From taking notes in a smart manner, to where one is seated, to creating an effective planner for studying, these techniques are useful for students to be more focused in the time that they are allotting for studying. Students also need to recognize that all subjects are different and offer different learning challenges based on the individual aptitude. Whether it is history or chemistry, students must find a way of overcoming their learning challenges and focus on how to get better at smartly retaining the information that they are learning.

Finally, given the amount of time that students need to spend studying, it does make sense if they can develop a positive approach and make the process enjoyable. This is the key to ensuring that they do not lose their concentration and perform well.

Overall, the book is a useful guide for students and parents alike. The language is simple and conversational. Jargons are broken down and explained in a simple fashion.

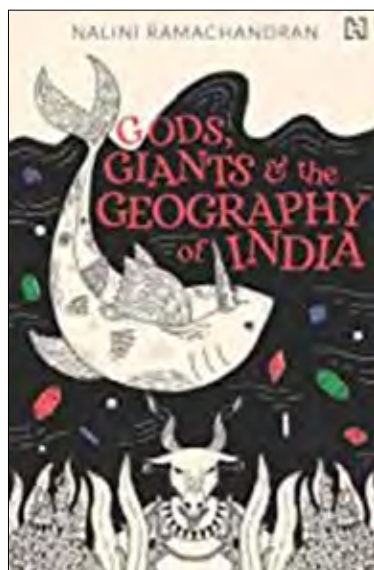


### TCA Avni

#### GODS, GIANTS & THE GEOGRAPHY OF INDIA

By Nalini Ramachandran. Illustrated by Sharanya Kunnath  
Hachette, 2021, pp. 270, ₹399.00

How do you describe the importance of fishing so as to not overfishing the rivers and seas? In communities living in wary coexistence with dangerous and deadly animals, whose livelihoods depend on harvesting forest produce, how do you convey the importance of ecological preservation? How do you impress upon the need for sustainable logging practices and forest management, to prevent the denudation of forests on the mountains from where rivers flow? In short, how do you convey the actionable ideas of science such that they dictate the behaviours of the community and the individual?



Through myths and legends, fables and folktales, stories have been important mediums used by ancient cultures to communicate complex ideas and scientific principles. As Nalini Ramachandran, in her book *Gods, Giants & the Geography of India*, writes, ‘there is a fair amount of scientific truth hidden in these tales...they describe how certain geographical events occurred years ago or how specific places came to exist.’ She picks myths and folktales from across the country to showcase its diverse landscape, cultural beliefs, and how the stories were used to convey important messages on creation, preservation and destruction. Each chapter begins with a rendition of a myth local to a community or region, which is followed by a section on ‘Connecting the dots’, where the messages of the story are contextualized to traditions, cultures and the language of modern science. In discussing the messages of these ancient tales, she also calls attention to issues the modern world faces such as environmental degradation and climate change. Communities would use stories and traditions tied to cultural norms and divine interventions to pass

messages of science, evolution, sustainable practices and conservation down generations. Reconnecting with these stories provides not just a way for young readers to engage with culture and history, but also a way to understand how communities have interacted with their environment.

The stories selected by the author in this volume are carefully curated to give a glimpse of legends and fables across the country. An interesting insight for readers of history and mythology is the regional interpretation, and to contrast how different regions and communities interact with the same stories. The author’s sections on ‘Connecting the Dots’ are particularly interesting, as they contextualize the story to science, history, regional traditions and practices, geography, etc. For example, in the chapter ‘The Cradle of Human Civilization’, the story is of Matsya and King Shradhadeva Manu, and how the seven sages, grains and wild life were gathered on a sturdy boat to ensure continuity in the face of a great flood. As the author points out, while many of today’s readers may identify this story with that of Noah’s Ark, the legend of a great flood and re-population of the world through the animals aboard a boat built by a hero is actually much older. Mythologies of ancient Greece and Mesopotamia have similar stories, where Deucalion and Gilgamesh play a similar role to King Shradhadeva Manu.

By contrast, the story in ‘Under the Serpent’s Gaze’, is about how humans settled in the land of Vasuki, the great serpent king. A condition which Vasuki laid before allowing humans to co-habit the Malabar Coast with the venomous serpents whose home it was, was that humanity would need to ensure the sanctity of the forests and venerate the snakes. The stress laid on veneration of dangerous wildlife and protection of sacred groves highlights a critical element of Hindu philosophy, of how veneration and divinity are used to guide behaviours to protect and conserve. The reverence of dangerous creatures is an important way to preclude harming them. Thus stories and legends emphasize how snakes, tigers, wild boars, elephants and other dangerous wildlife are associated with divinity, and how they are to be respected.

I could go on, for each story highlights both a unique regional variant of stories many of us may have heard or read, and its cultural significance. The book is a fascinating read and is ably supported by the beautiful illustrations. Drawn in styles reminiscent of tribal art, they visualize scenes from the story, create page breaks, and highlight box elements throughout the book. While marketed for children, the stories and their explanations would be an engaging read for adults as well.



### Jayant Maini

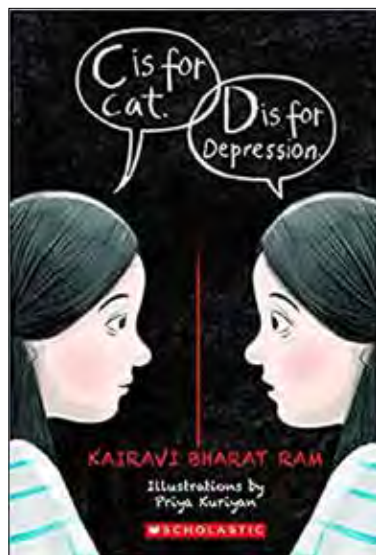
#### C IS FOR CAT, D IS FOR DEPRESSION

By Kairavi Bharat Ram. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Scholastic India, 2020, pp. 64, ₹495.00

Depression, there I said it too....! Was that such a big deal...? Wasn’t that difficult, was it? No! It’s just a word but when you say it out loud, it seems like half the battle is won; when you acknowledge it, its existence, you know, it’s no longer an unbeatable monster that you thought it was. It’s only a monster if it is hidden, if it is out of sight. And perhaps if you push further and make an honest attempt to understand it, preferably without mocking it, then you realize that this so called ‘monster’ is just a burden many of the unfortunates carry, a monster that can be destroyed. But out



of our ignorance and continued denial the monster, the burden, the enemy, increases in power, claiming lives. This is exactly what Kairavi Bharat Ram is attempting (a very admirable yet bold attempt) to explain, in her impressive yet heart-breaking book, *C is for Cat, D is for Depression*. Although this book caters to young adults (teenagers mainly), it is universal in its approach. With this book, Kairavi Bharat Ram is not only trying to make sense of the world surrounding the people struggling with depression but also of the darkness within, and is further giving them hope, in the form of light at the end of the tunnel. As depicted and beautifully illustrated in the book, when one suffers from depression, one's entire existence comes under scrutiny, everything becomes useless and every solution becomes a question, our beliefs and ambitions and our talents become pointless, life becomes purposeless, and it is perhaps at this lowest of the low, when people around you need to make an effort to reach out to you and you, most of all, need to strive out of this unending darkness.



Even to this day, parents, siblings, relatives refuse to give it a name; especially, if one of their own is suffering, anything but the word, that word. And this inhibition, this denial, is the product of an insensitive, inconsiderate society that has labelled it with multiple derogatory names. This word that means multiple things to multiple people has become a social stigma. This book is thus a beacon of hope since it describes the conditions associated with depression as humanely as possible and in doing so making it conquerable, making the beast tameable.

The hauntingly beautiful, sometimes heart-rending and sometimes mesmerizing illustrations by Priya Kuriyan, give wings to the words, weight to the emotions and gravity to situations. These illustrations are moving and depict both what is seen or visible and what is unseen but must be brought to light.

This book, according to me should be a mandatory read for people from all walks of lives and all ages. It wouldn't be wrong if I say that this book is that 'soft warm light at the end of the tunnel' and makes a whole lot of sense without making it obvious.



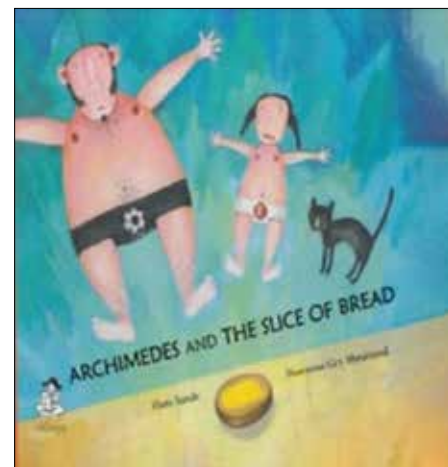
## Swaha Sahoo

### ARCHIMEDES AND THE SLICE OF BREAD

By Hans Sande. Translated by Marietta Taralrud Maddrel. Illustrated by Gry Moursund  
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 36, ₹399.00

**A***rchimedes and the Slice of Bread*—the title piques your interest and you dive right in. The book is about a father who is trying hard to invent something, and his daughter Eureka and her cat Archimedes. Eureka feels sorry for Papa, who has never invented anything in his life, except for trying to invent a square soap bubble that burst before he was successful. The only thing he has invented is a strange name for her.

Archimedes loved to lick butter off Eureka's slice of bread. Once when Archimedes tries to lick the caviar off Papa's slice of bread, he lifts him and throws him away from the table. The cat lands on all fours and the slice lands with the buttered side down. The cat always lands on its feet. A slice of bread always lands with the buttered side down, Papa tells Eureka. It's the law of nature.



Eureka is puzzled and tries hard to make sense of the two laws of nature that Papa has discovered. She squints hard at Papa, lying in his bathtub. 'Don't squint Eureka,' shouts Papa. 'The wind might change and then you will stay like that.'

All day long Papa's laws of nature whirl around in Eureka's mind. She has to test it to believe it! So Eureka cuts a thick slice of bread, butters it and ties it to Archimedes' back. Then she takes her cat and drops him into thin air right out of the open window.

The cat and the slice of bread hang still, vibrating. Then they begin rising up! Eureka is thrilled! Papa was right. The cat couldn't land on its back. The slice of bread couldn't land buttered side up! The cat and the slice of bread rise higher and higher until a flock of crows eat all the bread. The cat starts to fall! Archimedes falls faster and faster. Just then Papa squints upwards, trying to see what the commotion is all about. The wind changes, the cat comes flying straight into Papa and lands on all four! The first two laws of nature had added up. But Papa was not his usual self, because the wind had changed. The third law of nature had also added up.

Papa is dismayed and tries hard to become normal. Poor Papa! Eureka has to do something, discover a new law of nature or make the wind change. She had to become an inventor! She thinks hard and then eureka! She knows what she has to invent—a cat who can walk on water! Does she manage to get Papa's squint back to normal?

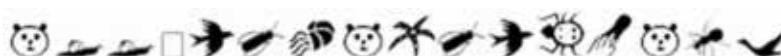
I smiled all through the story. *Archimedes and the Slice of Bread* is larger than life. It enables imagination through an unexpected and amazing storyline, and successfully straddles the real and unreal. The language is playful.

Author Hans Sande has created three unforgettable characters that connect with you. The father who named his daughter after a famous Greek mathematician and physicist; the daughter who lives up to her name; and the cat who is unfazed amid all the madness.

I loved the illustrations by Norwegian illustrator Gry Moursund. The rectangular faces of Papa and Eureka, the pot bellies and body hair, and the squinting faces are lovable and memorable. The story also spends a lot of time in a bathroom setting, and the way that Moursund illustrates this is delightful.

*Archimedes and the Slice of Bread* grows on you. The language is layered. The more you read the book the more you like it. The story is simple but opens up many ideas and thoughts.

Being curious is a natural state for children and when my daughter read the book she had many questions. She went back to the book multiple times. And of course she wanted to test 'the laws of nature'. She tried the bread experiment, was scared of the squint (what if the wind changed!) and we do not have a cat. If you do, well, you know what's coming next!

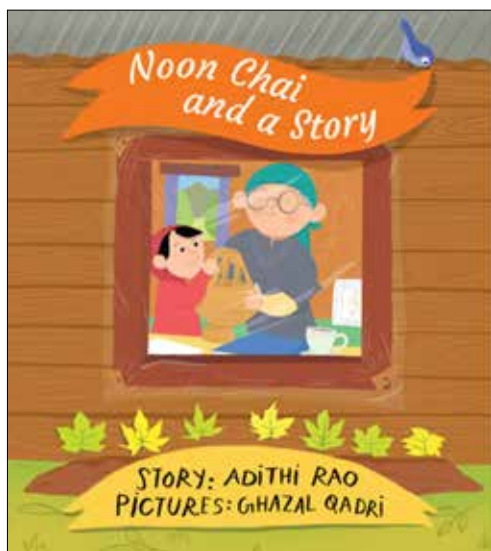


## Ranjana Kaul

### NOON CHAI AND A STORY

By Adithi Rao. Illustrated by Ghazal Qadri  
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2021, pp. 22, ₹175.00

**N**oon Chai and a Story is a slim little book, beautifully illustrated which gently draws the young reader’s attention to what books mean to those who are deprived of them. But while the story is about books it is also about the world in which the young protagonist lives with her parents, her sister and her beloved grandmother, Deidi. Looking at life through the eyes of a little girl living in the remote area of Gurez, the book gives an authentic representation of life in this beautiful but little known corner of India. It engages the interest of the young reader and opens his or her eyes to different ways of living and to other realities they may not be familiar with. Right from the beginning, the reader is absorbed by this short but multi-layered story about a young girl’s innovative ideas about creating a library, about her grandmother’s secret and also about *noon chai* and how it is an intrinsic part of their life.



The project of creating a library presents an interesting problem to be solved but it is also a subtle reminder to children who have a plethora of them about how lucky they are to have access to as many books as they want. So how can children who cannot buy books put together a library, where can they get books from? It is Deidi who suggests a simple and innovative way of dealing with this problem. Books are not only for reading, she suggests, but also to store memories. Memories can, however, be stored in different ways. Tangibly in the form of pressed flowers as Deidi keeps them, or as stories. The story of Deidi and Aamir reveals facts which she has never shared with the children earlier, about her first marriage to her cousin Aamir and how they were abruptly torn apart by the Partition while he was away in Gilgit. And this is the story which becomes the second book in the library which the children are trying to build.

While the language is simple and easy to follow, words from the Shina language, like *noon Chai* (salt tea), *phul* (cooking soda), *dastarkhwan* (cloth on which food is served), are incorporated into the text with word balloons which reveal their meaning to the young reader without interfering with the narrative. The book captures the flavour of the life of people living on the borders of the country where the long, snowy winters are the best time for children to collect stories over cups of *noon chai* in the afternoon. It also reminds us that stories don’t always have to be full of magical, unusual events; they can also grow from ordinary lives and everyday events and objects like Ammi’s pheran and Dado’s walking stick. In a brief narrative with the minimum of words this book brings alive the difficult but joyous life of a child, a life very different from that of many of its readers.

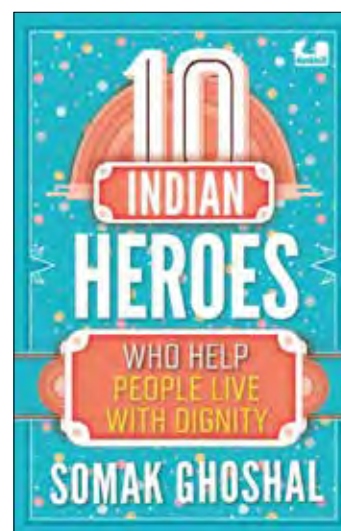


## Deepa Ganesh

### 10 INDIAN HEROES WHO HELP PEOPLE LIVE WITH DIGNITY

By Somak Ghoshal  
Duckbill, 2021, pp. 104, ₹199.00

**S**omak Ghoshal’s *10 Indian Heroes* is an important book. The Constitution of India is easily invoked as part of conversations, but do we live it? ‘The idea of dignity is at the core of our identity as Indians. In 1949, when the Constitution was adopted under the leadership of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the word was introduced into the Preamble’, writes Somak in his introduction. ‘But what does dignity really mean? How do you experience it in your daily life? And, more importantly, what does it look like in practice, as opposed to simply being an idea in our minds?’ he poses.



Heroes, as most middle-class parents tell their children, are those who are successful in life. Success translates to fame and money—most sermons or conversations are inhabited by the net worth of Sundar Pichai, Bill Gates, Virat Kohli, Steve Jobs and such. Ideas like fellow citizenry, coexistence, equality and equity are hardly fashionable; at best relegated to FB posturing.

Somak’s heroes are different, it is a different journey for every child who embarks on it. They are about people who fought big battles alone, spoke truth to power, and with enormous courage and conviction carried on unrelentingly, for years. They put on the altar their personal happiness. In a world where people’s identities are formed by what they possess, Somak takes his readers into the world of people who chose to dispossess. There is a lawyer, a doctor, engineer turned volunteer, activist, disabled person and more who have brought change into this world. These changemakers, with their determination, decided to change things for whom society and its systems were unfair, however not always were they met with success.

While the intention of the book is noble, it could have been told differently. Since it is for young readers, it would have helped to have written it in a more conversational style. But I do hope that it inspires many and the second volume of this book will have many more heroes.



## Madhurima Kahali

### A JOURNEY TO MARS: MANGALYAAN

By Nikhil Gulati. Illustrated by Nikhil Gulati  
Pratham Books, 2019, pp 16, ₹55

**B**eing a mother to two young kids, one being a bit young for stories, I am always on the lookout for good books that I could read along with them. My five-year-old daughter is always fascinated by topics like space, planets,





and astronauts. Her young, creative mind goes for a spin every time she is made aware of the possibilities. So, when I received the options for books to review, I was quick to select *A Journey to Mars: Mangalyaan* by Nikhil Gulati. I am extremely glad that I made that choice. The book succinctly describes India's Mars mission to young readers. Illustrations by Ashwitha Jayakumar add to the beauty. It is ideally suited for 6–10-year-old children who can read independently.

It is a well-written book, introducing curious minds to Earth's neighbour Mars. The language used is simple and lucid. The book is so well presented that at some points it feels like you are watching a video, and not reading a book. Some parts, especially, things about the design of the Mangalyaan may be a bit complex for children, but this is where a parent could intervene and explain the concept. I had fun reading this out to my 5-year-old daughter and explaining certain concepts like that of the slingshot. The attractive illustrations make the book more exciting for young readers. Although my daughter can't read independently too well, she was able to appreciate the ambitious mission undertaken by India, with the help of the illustrations. I especially liked the use of a woman in salwar kameez as the scientist, instead of the routinely used white lab-coat clad, bespectacled man. My daughter aspires to be an astronaut (among other things), and this book strengthened her belief a bit more. She has this book at her bedside and we have read it about ten times already. I would recommend the book for readers who want to know about space and planets.

## Aakriti Mahajan

### HOPE: STORIES FOR A HEALTHY MIND

By Pragati Sureka. Illustrated by Nina Sud  
Scholastic India, 2021, pp. 56, ₹295.00

**H**ope: *Stories for a Healthy Mind* by Pragati Sureka is an anthology of short stories of three children dealing with different psychological challenges. These stories are named after the young protagonists; Ryan, Kabir and Shoma.

The first story is of a young boy named Ryan. The story unfolds with the emotional turmoil faced by him due to the quarrel between his parents. He is unable to concentrate on his studies and withdraws himself from participating in school activities. His class teacher notices this change in his behaviour and decides to speak to him. He shares his feelings with her and she, in turn helps him and his parents to seek a counsellor to resolve the matter.

The second story is of Kabir. This story narrates the experiences of Kabir in understanding his father's depression. His mother explains to him about his father's mood swings. The use of analogy of see-saw with mood swings emulates the feelings of Kabir's father. She explains to him that one must share their feelings and seek professional help for a healthy mind and better life.

The final story is that of Shoma, who is a diligent student but becomes upset and restless if she sees clutter in any form around her. Due to this behaviour, she is often late and misses her school bus. The story explains her struggle with overthinking and worry about these minute details. Her parents are shown to be very calm and seek the help of school counsellor, Mrs. Dheer. With her regular sessions with Mrs. Dheer, Shoma is now able to control her compulsive behaviour and manages her time well.

All three stories have been well narrated. The stories are beautifully illustrated by Nina Sud. The common theme these stories narrate is the significance of mental and cognitive well-being for both children and adults alike. Even though this is conceptualized as a children's book, it provides a good guide for parents to introduce their children to conversations pertaining to mental health. After the stories the book has a separate section as a note to parents to help them develop and focus on the emotional quotient of their children.

It is noteworthy to mention that these stories explain the problems faced by the protagonists and how they seek help to overcome these hurdles. The stories end on a positive note that one must hold on to hope, no matter how tough and fragile life becomes.

In this pandemic where there is gloom and uncertainty everywhere, hope is the only thing keeping most of us alive. This book captures the very essence of hope: it provides us with resilience against stress, disorders, anxiety and depression.



### YOUR BODY IS YOURS

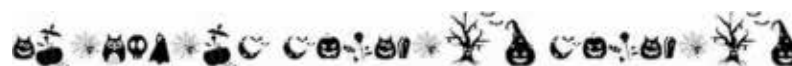
By Yamini Vijayan. Illustrated by Aindri C  
Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 16, ₹50



**I**ntroduced my daughter to topics such as body safety, consent, and body image, around the age of three.

I think it is a good age to start talking about the body. I referred to several YouTube videos and books, to choose simple enough words and images, appropriate for a preschooler. While there is no dearth of books covering this sensitive subject, there is a pressing need and growing awareness among parents and teachers about the introduction of these topics to young children. Despite having read many such books, I was curious to see how the book *Your Body is Yours* tackles this subject and what novelty it brings to the table.

The book takes upon several related topics like positive body image, body changes with age, and briefly talks about each of them. I loved how simply the book talks about positive body image; it tells the young readers that it is fine to be unique in the way you look. It is important for children to be accepting of how their body looks. In fact, these foundational years shape up the way they think and see things. The book introduces young readers to the concept of consent and sets forth the message without using too many words, I loved how concise it is. The illustrations are simple, age-appropriate, and especially helpful for children who have just started to read independently. While most books talk about how to be safe from ill-intentioned touch, this book prepares the reader on how to respect the boundaries set by others, too. The book can be read out to children as young as 3 years of age. For independent readers, the ideal group would be 5-8 years.



## Emotional Content in Picture Books

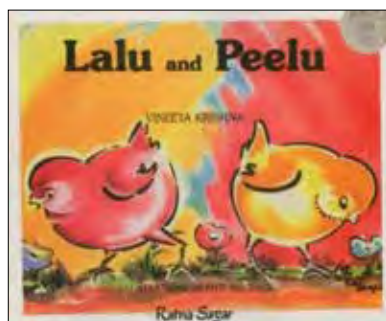
By Ira Saxena

The awareness towards the growth of child-centric literature brought into focus the magnitude of picture-books as a tool in the learning process for children. As soon as the child steps into the social realm, picture books offer easy-to-learn medium for the child. The familiarity with words, language and speech through reading the pictures and text for communication are all packed in a small bundle in a picture book. Picture books are profusely illustrated simple stories and information to aid the learning process and enhance social skills.

Needless to mention, cognitive psychology recognizes picture books as a potential tool for visual literacy amongst pre-schoolers and beginner readers. They actually give direction to emotional literacy and learning about present emotions. Like all fiction, picture books represent emotions of the fictional characters' as well as their interpretation of each other's emotions. However, unlike novels, picture books evoke our emotional engagement through images as well as words and, moreover, through amplification of words by the images.

When a child is born, pain and pleasure essentially regulate the responses of the child, until the emergence of the self paves the way for socialization in the maturation time-line. Around the age of four, basic emotions like, anger, love, fear, jealousy, and sadness manifest themselves in children's behaviour, just when the charm of picture-book stories decode the emotional states to help kids think deeply about feelings. Some enchanting, illustrated non-fiction publications portray lovely images of feelings in child's daily experiences. On the left page illustration of a worried child hiding behind the sofa raises a question about 'feeling insecure' and the answer on the right page explains meaningfully—'when Mom and Dad exchange loud words in a quarrel'. Insecurity as such is a complex emotion involving sadness, loneliness, misery, etc. For a beginner reader it may be difficult to comprehend whereas images of motherly love dominated by pleasure, comfort and being wanted, are within grasp, being a part of the child's experience. Contrastingly there is no place for hatred in the child's world, it being an acquired complex emotion.

Usually the themes flowing through picture-books for the young emphasize pleasant stories highlighting the fondness of parental love and security in family situation. *Mother is Mother* written by Shankar fits the slot perfectly, reinforcing the overwhelming feelings of attachment between a mother and son—an emotional treatise splashed effectively in intense illustrations and brief text. This emotion has been explored by writers and artists depicting the relationships of elders and children with ultimate reward of love and adoration in people and animals. *Lalu and Peelu* (Vinita



Krishna), *Gabbu's Trunk* (Ira Saxena), are some that come to my mind.

Restoring pleasant feelings through comforting images, play, and conflict resolution in stories, travels, challenges and adventurous stories have been created in many popular picture books placating basic needs of the child. Just happy stories and fun books pamper the innate requirement of delight and fulfilment.

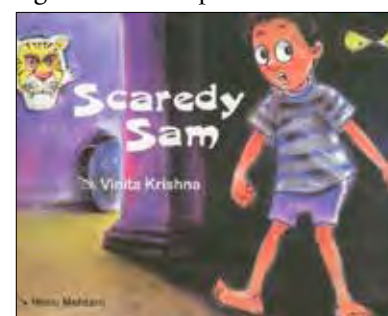
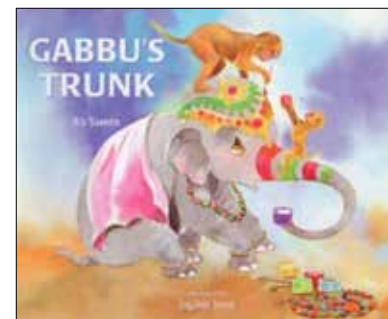
Empathy, that is the ability to understand other people's emotions, is arguably, the most important capacity that distinguishes human beings from other creatures. Empathy is also an essential social skill. Picture books help to foster empathy among children. Like all fiction, picture books represent emotions of fictional characters as well as interpretation of each other's emotions. The images as well as words evoke emotional engagement. Reading picture books prepares children in dealing with empathy and mind-reading in real life, in other words, recognizing the emotional state of others in real life. The simulated dimension in picture books offers vicarious experience since young children possess limited life experience.

At this juncture I am unable to resist mentioning the much talked about picture book *Where Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. Here on the canvas of a fantasy tale the author-artist paints a visual imagery of a delectable adventure into the land of the 'wild things', smoothing out the protagonist's demands, anger confronting hidden fears and grief as he cries out, '...let the wild rumpus begin' on the double spread finally returning to the security of his bed and Mum.

The story provides for a whole range of emotional experience—anger, disgust, curiosity, fear, more fear, thrill and relief. The child learns the feeling of joy in smiling faces, bright sunshine on the landscape or a cute animal, or fear associated with the dark woods, 'outside over there', wolves or dinosaurs, scary monsters; the monster on the pages is not similar to the imagined one but provides an added capacity of dealing with abstractions within the framework of their small world.

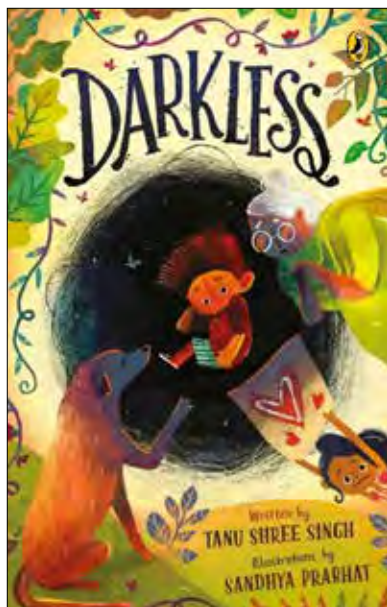
Picture books offer a platform to experience the emotions that the characters are experiencing in real terms and once having gone through the encounter the child relinquishes the resulting fear on the pages. In the practice of reading stories a child is able to understand that the character is sad without being distressed and also, predict that sadness will be eventually replaced by joy. In *Scaredy Sam*, Vinita Krishna deals with a common feature among children—being scared of the dark. The protagonist avoids dark corners, lonely passages but impersonating a tiger, he suddenly feels great strength within himself. Wearing the mask of a tiger he conquers his fears stressing the fact that fear has to be confronted to get rid of.

A vast number of picture books are centred on the basic emotions. One of the recent popular books, *Darkless* written by a young writer





Tanu Shree Singh comes to my mind, effectively playing up many emotions simultaneously in a sensitive story that addresses the modern child. It tells a simple story of a boy, sad and forlorn, surrounded by darkness (gloom) all around. Classmates in school, even the trip to the park with 'Nani', cease to amuse him. At the sight of the car in the driveway he rushes inside straight into the warm hug of his mother, apparently returning from the hospital after treatment. A closer look at his mother reveals her bare scalp but her presence is what mattered, its absence making his world without light—darkless.



Once the entire canvas is spread out, the story motivates one to envisage a gamut of emotions by returning back to the entire sequence of events step by step, experiencing the whole range of feelings in the events bygone—sadness, depression, gloom, then thrill, warmth, love and security enabling better understanding of the situation. Although glum and unhappy to begin with, the sensitive story correlates the distinction between the state of happiness and melancholy through adverse circumstances and experience, introducing readers to the realities of life.

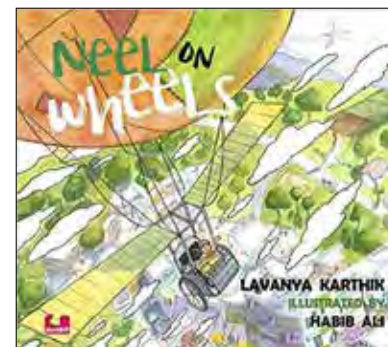
Emotions are by definition non-verbal, those which language cannot convey efficiently. Words and pictures together convey the story as a complete emotional experience. The verbal statements and the images could be mutually complimentary even enhancing, since emotionally charged images and matching text lead to clarity of the depicted emotional state. The role of illustrations cannot be inconspicuous. As in the popular emojis, happiness and sadness are denoted by the lines of the mouth, it is usually eyes and the mouth, the universal features aiding the recognition of the emotion. Uprturned mouth is happy, downcast one unhappy, raised eyebrow angry, drooping eyes weepy. Facial expressions accompanied with posture and stance communicate the emotional state. The scenery, all other big and small objects, particularly the splash of colours enable the powerful portrayal of an emotional situation in picture-books. Little readers read the details of the picture before they create a mental imagery attributing the emotions to the story and characters in the process of learning about feelings and emotions in real life. The interaction of word and image connects the emotional experience and its verbal description.



In the process of acquiring meaning to emotions the concept of social emotions such as guilt, love, shame, pride, envy and jealousy are not innate that emphasize involvement of more than one in social interaction. In this respect the story of the picture book assumes significance in the understanding of emotions. The social situations and interplay of characters carry the heaviest load in directly connecting with reality. All shades of joy, sadness, anger are working simultaneously. I am reminded of a much talked about and Neev Award winner publication, *Machher Jhol* by a young writer, Richa Jha. The story runs in a real-life situation on the streets of Calcutta, amidst busy

market-place selling fish, twisting and rising towards an emotional outburst of event overflowing with a range of fulfilling emotional experience by the end. The story offers a composite emotional experience emphasizing heroism and subtle empathy.

Following the same thread, *Neel on Wheels* and *Pahiyon ka Jadu* tell the tale of a disabled child in wheelchair awakening empathy and glorifying the disabled protagonist through his demeanour. Most picture books are eighty-five percent colour and illustrations that complement the story, churn up the feelings hidden in the pictures, stirring abstract excitements plain to young learners. Tulika Publishers and Karadi Tales colour box of picture books in English for children open up a storehouse of enchanting tales for emotional literacy.



While turning the pages they absorb the story and practice reading the images, even sufficiently intangible artistic expressions. Through the picture book tales the joys of love, contentment of friendship, cheer of victory, slip inside the heart as do the dejection of loss and pain of failure find a reasoning in actual relations.

Young readers growing up with picture books and stories gradually begin to understand what characters think and feel, attributing the knowledge to predicting and anticipating actions in real life and understanding their feelings. Visual images and engaging with texts are a powerful source to train readers in empathy and emotional development of the mind reaching beyond the reading matter especially for the emergent readers. The first step towards emotional intelligence, the presentation of emotions in picture book stories enables communication and improved learning more about oneself and other people. A great example of a heart-warming story in picture book packed with emotions on every page and in every image taking off from loss, misery to courage and soft feelings of love and caring ripples through sensibilities to solace and security. The text of *Cock + Hen* by Manorama Jafa revolves around a tsunami like disaster at sea.



A thunderous wave sweeps away the eggs laid by the hen sinking the couple into depression. When the water recedes they find many eggs scattered all over the shore posing the problem of identifying their own. The matter is resolved with the hen taking all of them under her wings as both happily adopt a variety of other animals. The brush-strokes of Suvidha Mistry capture the moments in the illustrations. It livens the sentiments on surface in the eyes, beaks and feathers of the animal characters leading on an emotional journey of rescue and relief.



## Nilima Sinha

### MATKE ME CHAND

By Gopini Karunakar. Translated from the English (original in Telugu) by Lokesh Malti Prakash. Illustrated by Nilima Sheikh  
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2020, pp. 30, ₹100.00

This book is part of a collection of books brought out by Anveshi, in its attempt to present stories from regional languages and other cultures before readers. The targeted age is not mentioned but the long, rambling tale will be better appreciated by older children.



Though published in picture book form, the language, as well as the small print size confirm the assumption that older kids would enjoy the book better.

Old Guravva weaves fantasy stories around the sun, the moon, and the stars. Her stories are enjoyed by the little group of children who listen to her with wide-eyed interest. The mud pot hanging on the roof above contains the moon, she tells them. When she takes out the moon and hangs it up in the sky, the area is filled with silvery moonlight. The stars flickering amongst the leaves on the palash tree outside are tiny particles of moondust fallen from the moon as it rubs against the sky, she says, to explain the presence of fireflies. The young narrator of the story, a schoolboy, longs to hold the moon in his hands. Guravva promises to give him the moon, but keeps postponing it, to the frustration of the narrator.

The weaver of the wonderful tales has had a sad life. Abandoned by her husband at a young age, she had wandered about, trying to earn a living, until she was rehabilitated by the boy's father. She was given a place to stay and began to sell handmade sweets and laddus outside the school. She finds joy in the company of the children who adore her in return.

The stories continue—about the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, Shiva and Parvati. There are stories within stories in this long story. The basic tale of the boy wanting to hold the moon in his hands is also there in the background. In the end he gets his wish, but what happens then? The answer is left for the reader to imagine.

A very unusual book, it is in picture book form. The illustrations by Nilima Sheikh have an ethereal appeal, delicately etched as they are on pages that are in the pale blue, green, pink and orange colours of the sky.

A good attempt to bring stories from other cultures before those who have little or no contact with them.

books, keeping up with classmates who can well afford every luxury, efforts to walk all the way to reach schools located in neighbouring villages, and the discrimination faced on religion and caste grounds.

The first story relates the story of a child trying to find a good bargain while buying second-hand textbooks for class 8. Since new books are beyond the pockets of the boy whose father is a laborer, he has to make the most of the used books available at reduced prices. There are three categories from which he must choose—the well-maintained ones sold by a class 9 boy at three-fourths the original price; the worn-out books with over-writing on the pages being sold at half price, and the third, no longer worth-buying category of books that only deserve to be thrown away. To buy the best-maintained text-books at the lowest price is the aim of the boy. He finally manages to succeed in this aim. Buying notebooks is another hurdle for the thrifty boy. Very cleverly he succeeds in getting the notebooks at zero cost!

The sketches by Suresh BV add charm to the story.

The second story is about a village boy, Saheer, who must walk three kilometers to reach his school in the next village. He has had to wait long before he was old enough to go to school and is very excited and happy when he joins it at last. His own village is far away, and life is difficult for the boy. He must wake up early to attend the 'madarsa' where he learns Arabic letters, Quran recital and 'namaz'. After the 'madarsa', he leaves for school, tiffin box and books in bag. He has to run to reach in time and is punished when late. Life becomes a race from 'madarsa' to school. At home his grandmother sings songs and tells him tales of Mohiuddin Sheikh and other heroes.

It is all so different at school. The names mentioned in stories are different, and the children in class too have different names. When he writes down the name 'Rasheed' in answer to a question in his text-book the teacher gets very angry, as there was no such name in the book. 'Are you talking communalism?', he asks. Saheer, who does not know the meaning of the word, just then hears the lunch bell. Relieved, he runs out of the class.

The story presents a good picture of the sad situation when two communities living side by side have hardly any contact with each other. Not only this, one community remains totally unrepresented and is not even mentioned in schoolbooks. The minority child studying in school is bound to feel neglected.

The illustrations by Chithra KS of the school, boys, village, and the stuff the boys must carry as they walk to school, are colourful and striking.

The third story is about caste discrimination. Two girls—Sreelatha, from a poor background, and Suvarna from a better off family—walk together to the neighbouring village school and become good friends. On a special day when the flag is to be hoisted at school, Sreelatha has only her old, worn out dress to wear, while Suvarna can boast of three new school dresses. Feeling sorry for her friend, Suvarna lends her new dress to her. Later, her mother finds the dress in her bag and asks Suvarna to explain why it was there. When informed that it had been worn by Sreelatha her mother is shocked. Furious to learn that the dress had been touched by a girl



### UNTOLD SCHOOL STORIES: THREE FOURTHS, HALF PRICE, BAJJI BAJJI

By Mohammad Khadeer Babu. Illustrated by Suresh BV; **TEXTBOOKS** by Nuaiman. Illustrated by Chithra KS; **FRIENDS IN SCHOOL** by Joopaka Subhadra. Illustrated by Saumya Ananthakrishna  
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2021, pp. 56, ₹200.00

The three stories in this book effectively present the lives of children from marginal and underprivileged families that struggle to provide for their school-going children. The stories reflect everyday problems like lack of money to buy text-





from the lower caste she is about to set fire to it. But her daughter Suvarna snatches the dress from her and rushes to hand it over to her dear friend.

The story brings out the triumph of friendship over age-old beliefs. It is the older generation that still believes in caste discrimination while the younger ones have no such prejudices.

This story is accompanied by photos by Soumya Ananthakrishnan, which give a touch of reality to the scenes.

The three stories together present real life as it is, specially in the underprivileged sections of our country. At the same time, they show the colours and cultures of the different areas the stories are set in. Valuable lessons can be drawn by children from well-to-do families through these tales of the deprived classes.

#### WHO'S NEXT

By Mini Srinivasan. Illustrated by Priya Kuriyan  
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2021, pp. 22, ₹350.00

A simple story, whose title itself excites curiosity, and colourful eye-catching illustrations in an unusually large-sized picture-book—what more does a beginning reader need to get attracted?

The very size of the book catches attention. The two little girls aged five and six years, whom I teach as they are homebound due to the Corona epidemic, fight to grab the book. It is spread out on the table and they both bend over it, the younger concentrating on the pictures while the elder tries to read the text. Big words, difficult for the under-privileged kid to read, and I have to help her at first. But as the words get repeated, slowly she is able to recognize them.

Indian weddings, with people in colourful dresses, singing, music and bands are fun for children. The arrival of the groom on his horse adds to the excitement. The author has chosen an exciting subject for little kids, for whom a wedding means fun and frolic.

While the elder tries to read, the younger laughs at the various figures such as the band-wallah, the uncles and aunts, the cousins, the drum-player and, finally, the groom himself! Priya Kuriyan, the illustrator, has done a great job by providing lots of colourful and delightfully humorous sketches of the procession and the shops along its way to the wedding.

We all enjoy discussing the story and the illustrations. And thus begins the two children's love for books and reading!

Kudos to the team which has produced this attractive picture book for the young, beginning reader.

#### AGLA KAUN?

Based on story by Mini Srinivasan. Translated from the original English by Sonya Bhagat

Eklavya, Bhopal, 2020, ₹260.00

This is the Hindi translation of the English book *Who's Next* reviewed above. Needless to say, the Hindi version is easier to read by above-mentioned students from the underprivileged class. They enjoyed the book, eagerly turning the pages to read till the end. The pictures are the same as in the English version, the story is the same, well translated by Sonya Bhagat, and the sentences easily understood by the Hindi speaking child.

Quickly, the elder child goes through the text and returns to the beginning. The younger succeeds in reading a few words and looks

up triumphantly. The two go back to the English version and try to read again. More fun for the youngsters!

It was helpful to present both the English and the Hindi text to the beginning readers.

#### HINA PURANI DILLI ME

By Samina Mishra. Translated from the original English to Hindi by Tultul Biswas

Photographs by Samina Mishra. Jayashri Shukla, Benedict Martin  
Eklavya, Bhopal, 2021, pp. 59, ₹125.00

This book is not just about ten-year old Hina who lives in Old Delhi; rather, through her, it tells the story of the historic, crowded city of Dilli. Hina lives in the heart of the city. Her 'haveli' is a big, spread-out building belonging to a Muslim family that chose to remain in India instead of fleeing to Pakistan during Partition. As the family grows larger the place gets divided into separate homes for the various descendants and their families. Hina's home is just a small corner of the large 'haveli', now occupied by several branches of the family.

Along with the detailed descriptions of different areas in the old city, the life of Hina and her family is also related. Her parents are skilled in the art of 'zardosi', or fine embroidery using silver and gold thread, that helps them earn their living. There are other skilled workers in old Delhi, such as kite-makers, sandalwood carvers, and others. They try to pass on their skills to their children, though it is now becoming difficult to earn enough through these earlier occupations. Hina is sent to a teacher to learn 'zardosi', but she also attends school like other children, who aspire to become doctors or teachers or lawyers.

The history of the seven cities that were built by various rulers, beginning with Indraprastha and finally ending with the Civil Lines built by the British after the 1857 Uprising and New Delhi in 1931, continues at the same time as Hina's.

The illustrations are in the form of actual photos, not only of Hina and other characters, but also of places, streets, shops and monuments.

Altogether the book is a rich collection of facts and stories about Delhi and its people. For younger kids the book may be a little complicated and difficult because of the two strands that run through

#### Nita Berry

##### 100 GREATEST STORIES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Cover Illustration and design by Chaaya Prabhat

Hachette India Children's Books, 2020, pp. 550, ₹599.00

Here is a treasure trove of some of the most well-loved stories from all over the world for children in the 5-8 age group—all within one colourful cover! It's an interesting mix of *Aesop's Fables* retold simply with their eternal lessons, ancient Indian mythology and classics taken from the *Panchatantra*, *Jataka*, *Kathasaritsagar* and Mahabharata, well-loved fairy tales, abridged classics, folktales and legends, and even old favourites by Enid Blyton! *Winnie the Pooh*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Snow White*, *Aladdin*, *Puss in Boots*, *Pinocchio*, *Thumbelina* and *Rapunzel* are all here, weaving their magic as they have done down the generations. There are also excerpts from eternal classics like *Black Beauty* and *Heidi* which are a great introduction to world class literature and writing. One is happy to see Oscar Wilde's beautiful story of *The Selfish Giant* here too, along with other writers of renown like Grimm and Andersen,

Rudyard Kipling and even Shakespeare retold!

The selection is a bonanza of stories that are funny, clever, witty and sad. There are stories of kings and princesses, gods and goddesses, beautiful maidens and handsome princes under spells. Anecdotes of Akbar and Birbal, and Tenali Raman add to the variety of stories from all over the world. It is also gratifying to see a good sprinkling of tales from Indian mythology and classics. Well-known writers like RK Narayan, Sukumar Ray and Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury who is translated by Swapna Dutta, make their appearance here. They give kids a glimpse of our ancient stories and epics, and will awaken their interest to read more.



Some excerpts would encourage children to read the entire book, like *Alice in Wonderland*, but others make little sense by themselves. In E Nesbit's *The Railway Children* for example, we don't really understand the calamity that befalls the family. The 100th and last story in this diverse collection is an excerpt from *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, and is as hard as it sounds! There's to be nothing fanciful anywhere in the hard, factual world advocated. One does wish that the book ended on a happier note!

The stories in this collection are definitely graded as far as language and comprehension go. A story towards the end like *The Remarkable Rocket* by Oscar Wilde is more for an older age group than say *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* or *The Dog and His Reflection*. The collection also includes a story-poem, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* by Robert Browning which is excerpted from the original. Its language would surely be for an older age group. However, my feeling is that the stories should not be read at one go—or even two or three, but be limited to just a few a day. The young reader can then savour the individual stories while picking up on reading skills and comprehension along the way.

This cross-section of world literature is alive with colour and diversity. Parents and even grandparents will enjoy revisiting many old favourites by well-known writers. As for the enthusiastic little reader, *yeh dil mange more* we bet!

The colourful collage on the cover and a sprinkling of small pen sketches through the pages, although not for all the 100 stories, add to the interest. Good production along with a hard cover makes this book by Hachette an attractive buy, even at Rs 599!



## Vaibhav Parel

### TATAKI WINS AGAIN & BRAVEHEART BADEYYA

By Gogu Shyamala. Translated from Telugu by A Suneetha. Illustrated by Puja Vaish and Rashmi Mala  
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 46, ₹160.00



### KITNA SARA KAAM!

Written and illustrated by Madhuri Purandare. Translated from the original English by Seema  
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 14, ₹45.00



### AARAV KA CHHATA

By Madhuri Purandare. Translated from the original English by Satija Nayar

Eklavya, 2021 (first published 2018), pp. 10, ₹45.00

### TITLI: KHILE HAWA KE PHOOL

By Kanchan Shine. Translated from the original English by Sushil Shukla. Illustrated by Radhika Tipnis  
Eklavya, 2021 (first published 2018), pp. 20, ₹75.00



### ANDE DI GAL

By Kanchan Shine. Translated from the original English by Sushil Shukla. Illustrations by Radhika Tipnis  
Eklavya, 2021 (first published 2018), pp. 24, ₹80.00



### LADDUS FOR RAKHI

By Muskaan Pandey. Illustrations by Sagar Kolwankar  
Eklavya, 2020, pp. 14, ₹50.00



### KASHTI

Written and illustrated by Nishith Mehta  
Eklavya, 2020, pp.14, ₹55.00

### BAITHA AAS LAGAYE JALDI SAAL POORA HO JAYE

By Rani Ahire. Illustrated by Shilpa Rande  
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 24, ₹175.00

### SHALJAM: A FOLKTALE (EK LOK KATHA)

Illustrated by Niharika Shenoy  
Eklavya, 2020, pp. 16, ₹225.00

These books are a fascinating example of the kind of good that a regional publisher publishing in a regional language can do for children to develop critical thinking skills, a scientific outlook, pique their curiosity about natural phenomena or sensitize them to the gradient of social difference and inequality that is often actively and conveniently ignored in school syllabi or made invisible in social discourse. Stories for children have been used to instruct and entertain, but these books are special not only because they take their inspiration from the world around them where the context, art and language are familiar and relatable, but also because their printing and pricing makes them attractive and accessible.

One crucial feature of most of these books is that they are translations from English, Malayalam and Telugu into Hindi. The publisher—Eklavya—based in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) publishes educational material which includes three different magazines: one, *Chakmak*—a monthly magazine of stories and poems for children; two, *Sandarbh*—a pedagogic resource for teachers; and three, *Srote*—a monthly magazine which features independent articles on the latest in the world of science and technology to foster a scientific temperament among students and teachers alike. All these publications are in Hindi. This is indeed a praiseworthy enterprise to shape the minds of children in social, political and cultural circumstances which, even without the pandemic, make early-school education a very challenging field. These books and resources if used well by parents, teachers and school administrators can potentially supplement the classroom to leave a marked developmental change in attitudes and thought processes for those encouraged to read them.

Let me start by mentioning *Laddus for Rakhi* by Muskaan Pandey, a twelve-year-old girl, who wrote the story for a competition but was then displaced from Depot *basti* where she lived. Her story was published as this bilingual book, but she could not be located to be informed about this wonderful achievement. Her personal circumstances reflect the importance of ventures like these which have the potential to ignite hope and foster talent among children whose lives are rendered unstable by impersonal forces of development



and progress. Her story revolves around a central irony. She reaches home from school to find no food in the house, while her mother cooks food in other people's houses. She steals the laddus and is afraid of her mother's reaction. But on hearing her honest admission her mother forgives her. Then she, her two sisters and her mother share the remaining laddus.

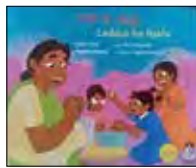
*Aarav ka Chhatha* by Madhuri Purandare is about how an umbrella which is gifted to Aarav is imaginatively transformed into a walking stick, a parachute, a tent, and a tree but not used to protect him from the rain when it finally pours. The joys of imaginative multiplicity—without the restrictions of singularity and functionality that adults often impose on the world around them—are reminiscent of the White Knight in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Through the Looking Glass*. *Kitna Saara Kaam*, also by Purandare, is translated from English. Here Aarav is bored since his mother is taking an afternoon nap. So, he decides to clean her almirah, which as one can imagine, results in everything being littered on the floor in a gigantic mess. His mother does not admonish him. This is an important message for children. To challenge strait-jacketed thought and encourage multilateral thinking without fear of chastisement are the first steps in the development of a questioning mind, and these books help lay the foundation for this process.

*Baitha Aas Lagaye Jaldi Saal Poora ho Jaye* by Deepak Mehta is a quick read with large illustrations and little text. Meant for 7- to 8-year-olds, this is a simple story of a boy who has to wait for more than two years to get his first bicycle. What endears us to him is not just his patience but the fact that he has to learn cycling by himself, and when he admits to being afraid of falling, his mother asks him to attempt it on his own. He not only overcomes his fear of falling but also learns to ride successfully.

*Ande di Gal* and *Titli* by Kanchan Shine are illustrated by Radhika Tipnis. These books mark a change in genre—they are poems enacting out the life cycles of a hen and a butterfly. As translations from English (first published by Jyotsna Prakashan in 2018) into Hindi, they are remarkable for the textual and paratextual tools through which they encourage scientific curiosity and make technical details—like the function and texture of a caterpillar's cocoon—easy to understand while retaining the interest of their young readers. Both books end with a picture exercise for children to organize the lifecycles as a game and a challenge to test their understanding.

*Kashiti* by Nishith Mehta manages to tell a story only through art. This was a surprising book for the way it chose not to use words, but still managed to create a web of interest around the fortunes of a paper boat. The boat traverses a multitude of harsh and hostile environmental settings: the sea, a storm, the desert and finally the river. The tropes of journey and resilience stand out to convey important lessons for young readers. When read alongside *Shaljam: A Folktale*, illustrated by Niharika Shenoy, we realize the potential of an engrossing tale when well-illustrated. The art work in both *Kashiti* and *Shaljam* deserves praise for its vibrant and textured use of colour which vitally enhances meaning and grips our attention.

The two books which are the most striking are *Tataki Wins Again* and *Braveheart Badeyya*. These books are part of a single volume. Translated from the Telugu, they tell the story of two children from the Madiga caste. In *Braveheart Badeyya*, Badeyya's father makes and



mends slippers for a living. When his mother goes to the forest to collect firewood, he accompanies her. On seeing an upper caste man approach, his mother quickly removes her slippers as a sign of respect. To make matters worse, the slipper is chewed by a dog, and the mother has to walk back home barefoot, and severely injures her foot in the process. Badeyya spends the entire night making a rudimentary pair of slippers for his mother based on what he has seen his father doing over the years. He is discriminated against in school where he is made to sit at the back despite being among the most industrious students in the class. This is a bold and much-needed story which brings alive the harassment, discrimination, poverty and helplessness of the lower castes from a boy's perspective by showcasing reality in all their rawness.

*Tataki Wins Again*, in a similar vein, narrates the multi-layered story of Balamma, a hardworking girl from the Madiga caste whose father owns a small plot of land. This plot needs to be watered by the stream and Balamma beats the upper caste landlord's worker to water her plots. This becomes an excuse for the landlord to avenge his larger grouse about the land he lost because of the Land Ceiling Act, despite his desperate overt and covert attempts to get his land back. The landlord has a history of sexual assault. When he sees that his patch of land has not received as much water as it should have, he attacks Tataki and attempts to molest her. She fights back and kicks him in the groin. The book ends with the women giggling as they share in the victory of Tataki over the landlord. The illustrations in this volume by Puja Vaish and Rashmi Mala allow abstract art to complement the written word and add layers of meaning to the text and deserve accolades for this singular achievement. As part of the 'Different Tales' series which focuses on stories from regional languages, these books bring alive the life-worlds of communities that are rarely seen in children's books. Though meant for older children, they do stellar service in introducing children to the forms of marginalization that often go unnoticed and are rarely spoken about. Taken together, these are books which deserve a wider readership, and a series which school and community libraries should invest in.



## Swaha Sahoo

ANDE MEIN KUCCH KALA HAI

NONA AUR SEB KA PED

By Kanchan Sharma. Illustrated by Radhika Tipnis. Translated by Sushil Shukl Eklavya, Bhopal, 2021, pp. 24, ₹80.00 each

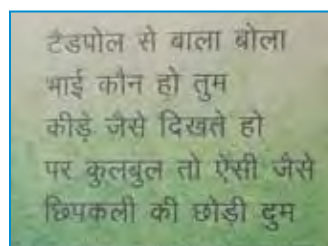
Great nonfiction in Indian children's literature is hard to come by, especially picture books for young children. I was pleasantly surprised to get a set of non-fiction books translated into Hindi by Eklavya. These have been translated from English by the eclectic Sushil Shukl. The first one, *Ande Mein Kucch Kala Hai* is about the life cycle of frogs. *Nona aur Seb ka Ped* is about the journey of an apple tree from a seed to a full grown tree.



Both the books are written by Kanchan Sharma and illustrated by Radhika Tipnis. The rhythmic text brings in a fresh flavour to the stories and are unlike any non-fiction book I have read in Hindi. The language is fun, enjoyable and invites you in, each line flowing into the other. The writing piqued my interest to read the original

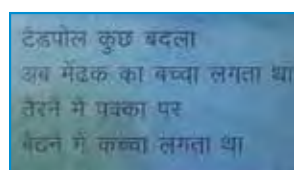
text because it does not read like a translation at all.

In *Ande Mein Kucch Kala Hai* the tadpoles come alive through the language, seeming almost human. The interaction between Bala, who watches the eggs hatch into tadpoles and grow into frogs is fun. He observes them from far, conscious not to scare them, and talks to them.



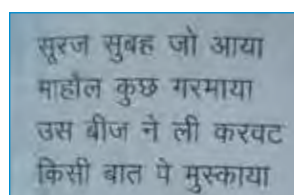
The way the tadpoles change shape, grow strong, become active and attract mates is captured well. The poetic take on the text during the Hindi translation will keep young children hooked. Adults will enjoy it equally.

The soft pastels of green, blue and brown are warm and the expressions give the tadpoles energy.



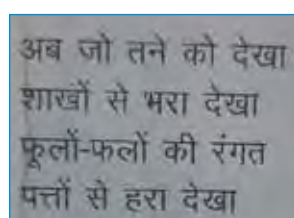
*Nona aur Seb ka Ped* addresses the age old theme of how a seed travels organically and finds its place, pushed by different factors to grow. Once Nona spits out the apple seeds on the street outside her window, it is up to the street dog to take

the seeds into a garden. Buried in the wet soil, the seed sleeps, and is nurtured by the sun and rain.



Each page captures the seemingly everyday event of a seed sprouting, spreading its roots underneath and rising up towards the sun, becoming stronger each day, the coming of leaves and blossoming of flowers.

The double spread vertical illustration of the whole tree brings the pages together, complemented by the text.



The illustrations use earthy browns, reds, greens and blue. The white geometrical designs give a distinct feel to the pages.

In both the books, the first page is also the last, thus completing the life cycle and indicating that the end is also the beginning. Each page ends with a small activity to identify the different stages of the life cycle. Both books lend themselves to be read aloud to children, who will enjoy the rhythm and the rich language. They provide scope for imagination and rich discussion and are a must for libraries.



## Rekha Bhimani

### AST-VYAST MAST

By Richa Jha. Illustrated by Mithila Anant. Translated from the original English by Sushil Joshi  
Eklavya, 2021, pp. 16, ₹105.00

**T**ruly, an offering for a world increasingly dominated by the digital media. A short little story for kids as young as 3 years to as old. For, let us face it, whether we like it or not a mobile phone has become a favourite 'toy' for the young and old alike.

To add to this bane of device obsession, we now have online classrooms! The die is cast. What began as a guilty diversion has now

become a necessary evil.

Richa Jha in her delightful book *Ast-Vyast Mast* addresses this issue without making it preachy for the young reader. In fact, she turns the tables, depicting a scenario where the internet is down and it is the child that pulls her parents away from their respective devices to enjoy a fun-filled family time outdoors. After an exhilarating time in the park the family returns home where we have a twist in the tail. Our online student is frustrated at not being able to access her school results as internet is still down. A reality check!



Another interesting aspect of this book is Mithila Anant's simple, humorous illustrations. Richa Jha's crisp, short text is supported by Mithila's clever detailing of characters which recounts a 'story' of its own, breaking all stereotypes. The father dons the apron as he struggles to follow an online recipe while the mother lounges on a sofa, snacking as she watches TV. Not to mention the grandma doing a head-stand in a corner and later riding a two-wheeler.

The writer-illustrator synergy is truly remarkable.

And lastly a word about the playfully creative title of this lovely Eklavya presentation—*Ast-Vyast Mast*, which is at once intriguing and inviting.

### BASTI ME CHOR (A THIEF IN THE BASTI)

By Sonam, Ritik, Vikram and Ajay. Translated from the original Hindi by Rinchin. Illustrated by Ubitha, Leela and Unni  
Eklavya, 2020, pp. 16, ₹50.00

**A** little story book from the Muskaan Series of Eklavya. It tells a simple story that would appeal to a small child, who does not yet read by herself, but enjoys listening to a story.



However, the text of this book does not lend itself to an interesting read-aloud experience. The sweet little story is actually written jointly by four Agariya kids, Sonam, Ritik, Vikram and Ajay, with some assistance from their school teacher. Although originally written in Hindi, the syntax and choice of words sound somewhat stilted, akin to a literal Hindi translation of an original English text.

As for Ubitha, Leela and Unni's illustrations, both the choice of drawing style, as well as her preference for dark, sombre colours seems somewhat out of place. Agreed, the story is about the mystery of disappearing footwear. But the illustrations make it look almost like a cloak-and-dagger narrative. An element of wit and humour, both in text and illustrations, would have helped the story go a long way.

### CHIKNIK CHOON

By Sushil Shukl. Illustrated by Atanu Roy  
Eklavya, 2020, pp. 16, ₹165.00

A picture book with minimal text from Eklavya.

This album-size book with large bold illustrations is perfect as a child's FIRST book. Here, the element of story is irrelevant, almost redundant.





It is all about familiar colourful images that inhabit a child's universe—water, fish, frog, buffalo and so forth. It does not have to tell much beyond mundane things like a buffalo's horns, its tail, and of course the delicious joys of hush-hush words like su-su and poo-poo, that are so much a part of the early years.

The short little rhymes have a repetitive refrain 'chiknik choon' that works very well as a mnemonic device for a child just beginning to develop language skills.

However, 3 grammatical errors—though negligible—in a 78-word text, is not expected of Eklavya.

In 'Bhains ke Sir ka Joo' the gender of the louse (joo) is by default feminine. In 'paani mein dikhta hai kyun' since it refers to the buffalo, (bhains) it needs to be feminine.

In 'Bhains ne kari zor se poo', the colloquialism 'kari' restricted to a specific region could have been avoided.

Having said that, a book in this genre proves to be very much a favourite with pre-nursery and nursery kids.

## Tultul Biswas

### I WISH, मेरी आरजू

By Bandna Devi, Kunal Rajpurohit, Deepak, Radhika, V Shivya, Kajal Kumari, Keerthika, Sagar Lohawe, Aryan G Pawane, Lakshya, Gauri Rachalwar, Riya, Sharwari Sonawani, Dhawan Chaudhary, Aravind Karthik

Foreword by Esther Duflo and Rukmini Banerji

Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe, Manjari Chakravarti, Anjali Noronha, Habib Ali, Nancy Raj, Lavanya Naidu, Niloufer Wadia, Gitanjali Iyer, Roshni Vyam, Proiti Roy, Priya Kurien, Jayesh Sivan, Nidhin Shobhana, Somesh Kumar, Kanak Shashi, Canato Jimo

Pratham Books, 2021, pp. 40, ₹70.00

Here is a bilingual book written by 16 children coming from different parts of India and different walks of life. They speak their heart out—they tell us in clear, bold, straightforward words what they wish for. Their dreams, wishes, aspirations, hopes—is what is the core of this book. And adults, elders, parents and teachers—may as well listen.

As India inches towards the 75th anniversary of its hard-earned freedom in 2022—this illustrated book is a reminder to us adults as to what we have not been able to give to our children in so many years, and pay attention to what they yearn for. The wishes start from simple ones like—to be free to sit among flowers in a garden, eat chocolate, play in the rain and enjoy the rainbow, dance and go on to rather serious matters like—be as free as the brother, be free to speak, learn, make one's own identity, ensure equality, respect and freedom for all beings on earth, have no wars and only peace within. These amazing, thinking children have squarely placed what needs to be the agenda of all governments, all committees, all powers that be. Then, as if they are certain that we adults may not be able to LISTEN to them and UNDERSTAND them, one child even wishes that 'the development of the world (or universe) to be in the hands of small kids.'

Here is a book that speaks volumes about the way we adults have set about (mis)managing the affairs of the world, of every country, of every city, village and *mohalla*—in so few words. Are we listening?

At times I wonder if this book should be seen only as a part of children's literature? To me it is more the honest expressions of children that we adults need to read and reflect upon. Every parent, every teacher needs to read and reflect on it.

The illustrations in the book are amazing too. Each artist has her/his own style and has done justice to the children's words gorgeously. The full spread illustrations on pages 10-11, 12-13, 16-17, 18-19,

24-25 and 30-31 double up as rich sources of Picture Reading that can be an engaging activity with those who are still in the process of mastering the skill of reading. The softness of style on pages 18-19 (Gitanjali Iyer), the soft and swaying style on pages 32-33 (Kanak Shashi) and 34-35 (Canato Jimo) are very soothing to both the eye and the heart. On the other hand, the bold styles on pages 4-5 (Rajiv Eipe), 20-21 (Roshni Vyam) and 28-29 (Nidhin Shobhana)—lend a super strong voice to the words of the author children.

The foreword by Esther Duflo and Rukmini Banerji place the book in the context of today's time and space, and also emphasize the role books play in our lives as we grow. To add to this, the book is also very reasonably priced! It is so reasonably priced, I am gifting it to every young parent I know.

I do have one complaint though—four pages at the end of the book are devoted to introductions of the illustrators. This is not the complaint! The lack of any such introduction of the author children is what I am missing sorely. This has been attended to cursorily—by thanking and acknowledging the teachers of these children who helped the publishers connect with the author children. But, as a reader, I would definitely want to know more about the authors, their lives, likes and dislikes and whatever they would want to share.

I wish that the second edition of this book includes a few pages introducing the young authors.



### AMMU AND THE SPARROWS

Written by Vinitha. Illustrated by Jayesh Sivan  
Pratham Books, 2020, pp. 16, ₹50.00

*Ammu and the Sparrows* is a sensitively written story dealing with the curiosity and questions and long wait of a child—for his parents. The book has been categorized in the green coloured Level 3 book—those books that are meant for children who are ready to read on their own.

Ammu spends his days on his Ammamma's terrace, looking out and waiting. Is he waiting for Amma and Accha sparrows to come or is he waiting for someone else? Is this wait going to get over any time soon? The open-ended story leaves the reader with many questions like these. And the best part is that the story does not give us ready-made answers, but allows the readers to imagine and construct the answers themselves.

The story is quite layered and poignant. It conveys the complex emotions that go through Ammu's mind as he deals with his parents' absence. We love how the loving grandmother, while talking to the two little brown birds, gently helps him deal with his feelings.

Dealing with difficult emotions like sadness, guilt and anger are best done by first accepting them and then figuring out how one can



express these emotions. And the first step of acceptance is the most difficult. *Ammu and the Sparrows* is a step forward in helping children accept their emotions when feeling lonely and left out.

Jayesh Sivan's illustrations are vivid and lend a context to Ammu and his life. They mostly illustrate what is given in the text, but on certain pages you will find small additions that add a lot of meaning to the story, for e.g., a family photograph. This image gives us a sneak-peek into Ammu's mind and how he longs to have his Accha (father) and Amma (mother) back.



## Dipavali Sen

### I AM A PUPPET

Written by Anurupa Roy. Illustrated by Adrija Ghosh  
Pratham Books, Bengaluru, 2019, pp. 16, ₹50.00

This book is an effort in reading promotion among children that Pratham Books stands for.

It is a 'Learning to Read' book or 'Level 2' book. The previous (Level 1) is 'Beginning to Read/Read Aloud'. The next two levels (Levels 3 and 4) are 'Reading Independently' and 'Reading Proficiently'.

As the inside back cover tells us, author Anurupa Roy is a puppeteer, puppet theatre director and puppet designer. She is the founder-managing trustee of the Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, Delhi. She has directed many puppet performances and undertaken international tours with her puppet group. Illustrator Adrija Ghosh is Kolkata-based and loves to work with children's literature. This 'picture book' is a blend of the talents of both.

Before animated cartoons came on the scene, puppet shows were popular as the closest to live shows. Even adults clustered around them. Next to dolls and toys, the puppets were what captured attention everywhere.

This is why there are numerous types of puppets in the world.

It is to this multiplicity that *I am a Puppet* introduces tiny toddlers, opening their eyes to its rich variety of puppetry.

It depicts, in bright colours and bold brush strokes, Karagozy shadow puppet from Turkey, Bangarakka leather shadow puppet from Karnataka, Pulcinella glove puppet from Italy, and Mr. Punch from England (pp. 8-9), Kalasutri Bahuliyes string puppet from Maharashtra, Opera dei Pupi string puppet from Italy, Yakshagana Gombeyatta, string puppet from Karnataka, Tarer Putul, string puppet from West Bengal (pp. 10-11), Wayang Kulit, shadow puppet from Indonesia, Pavakathakali glove puppet from Kerala, Bunraku rod puppet from Japan (pp. 12-13), Magarina, a muppet from a puppet theatre group in Delhi, again Tarer Putul from West Bengal, Petroushka clown puppet from Russia, Kathputli, string puppet from Rajasthan, and a life-size puppet again from a Delhi theatre group (pp. 14-15).

The puppet in the book thus makes the point that it has brothers and sisters, friends and cousins. It is not an alien or a piece of pre-historic art. Each puppet is part of a global family and imbued with life.

Puppetry is becoming a lost art with the advance of technology.

Children have their 'games' right on their smartphones, ipads or tabs. The control over one's fingers which is the essence of puppetry is hardly needed. The sense of wonder at tiny figures moving at the puppeteer's command is gone. This book may help in recreating or preserving that art by introducing children to puppets at an early age.

However, as Manorama Jafa, the eminent author noted for her picture books says, writing for early readers requires 'the ability to think visually...' ('Writing A Picture Book Story,' p. 1, *Writer and Illustrator*, Vol. 39, No 3&4, Vol 49 Nos. 1&2). The too-fine black lettering on the pages, especially on the red ones, do not make much of a visual impact. The names and other details have been put all together in a corner below—instead of putting it by the side of the puppet concerned. But how many of even the adults go in for footnotes? As for the first six pages, why should small children confuse puppets with astronauts floating in space or stiff figures drawn by cavemen on their walls? Even the very young readers today are aware and informed about that. Those pages could have been used to incorporate other varieties such as say, Tholu Bommalata and Origami finger puppets.

But the book is relevant. For it is important to tell children what puppets are—before they become puppets in the hands of parents, teachers, the examination system and the socio-economic set-up in general—or, in their own frustration, try to make puppets of others when they grow up.

*Per se*, a puppet is an inanimate object dancing to the moves of the puppeteer's fingers. To make puppets dance at will gives the puppeteer a sense of power.

It is when the puppet moves towards the right values that it comes to life, becomes human. This is the theme of *Pinochio*, the Italian masterpiece for children by Carlo Collodi in 1883 that has become a world classic, popularized by translation and animation. The wooden marionette Pinocchio had to undergo a lot of trials before he could become a real creature, a human being—but he did it.

*I am a Puppet* can be a toddling step towards this development.



## Sumitra Kannan

### BOBO AND THE WORMS

By Abolkali Jimomi. Illustrated by Canato Jimo  
Pratham Books, Bengaluru, 2019, pp. 13, ₹45.00

*Bobo and the Worms* is by Abokali Jimomi of Nagaland. Any book for early readers must be accompanied by illustrations that fire imagination. Canato Jimo's illustrations perfectly accompany this simple but prettily told story.

Which child does not like visiting her grandma? Grandparents are special people in any child's life. There is a warmth to them that cannot be replicated.

Grandparents are not difficult or demanding like parents. Neither are they rough and unruly like one's own playmates. They can get down on their knees and play with you or open their knees wide and rock you when you need comforting. Most importantly, they teach you life's lessons without letting on that something of utter importance has been communicated and understood.

Bobo loves visiting her grandma or Apüza as she is called. Apüza





is an avid gardener. She grows beans and yam, chives and perilla, mustard and chilies and cherry tomatoes. Of course Bobo loves to visit her. There is so much joy in green things growing all around you. And the additional bonus to a child, of being able to muck around in dirt and feeling virtuous about it. A child can give itself up so completely to anything that has caught its attention. This is how Bobo helping Apüza in the garden notices the lovely star-shaped holes in the leaves in the garden. Apüza is however less delighted. Bobo understands that Apüza neither approves of, nor wants such starry leaves however pleasing they may be. Apüza explains gently to Bobo that such holes would mean a loss to the garden. When the bounty of the garden or the lack of it is placed in direct correlation to the star-shaped holes, Bobo makes a leap of understanding. There is no dithering. She clearly understands what needs to be saved and what needs to go. Fired up by her understanding, Bobo enthusiastically does what any logical person would expect to do. Apüza with her experience in long years of gardening and with the wisdom of her years, brings home an important ecological lesson to Bobo. For Nature is never only this or that. Nature is both this and that, and the art lies in discerning how much of what and where.

The best of children's books holds a lesson for adults too, and so it is with *Bobo and the Worms*.

With the rage of organic farming sweeping through the country, it is good to remember how Nature cleverly balances herself. Observing, understanding and learning is all we are called upon to do, like Bobo. Abokali Jimomi, who loves rain and forests and clouds and mountains, and is passionate about organic farming has communicated her love with ease. It is a perfect little book for a little gardener.

If the conclusion about vermicomposting had been communicated like the rest of the book, causing wonder in Bobo, it would have made it absolutely perfect. Instead, the information in staid tones causes a slightly jarring effect.

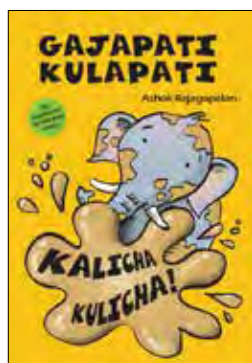
Canato Jimo, the illustrator also from Nagaland, perfectly captures the expressions of a child, the loving relationship between Bobo and her Apüza, and the beauty of Nagaland. It makes one want to pack one's bags and head towards Nagaland.



**GAJAPATI KULAPATI: KALICHA KULICHA!**

By Ashok Rajagopal  
Tulika Publishers, 2020, ₹160.00

The book dedicated to 'All mothers—the best storytellers in the world', is all about a naughty elephant frolicking with the children, muddied and resisting a bath, chased by the teacher, grandmother and banana seller. Does he finally get clean? To be found through colourful large pictures by the little ones.



**ANIMAL ALPHABET**

By Manjula Padmanabhan  
Tulika Publishers, 2020, ₹225.00



The alphabets are introduced to the youngsters in a frenzy of colours. The teeny-tiny ants, the fitty-witty bats, inky-winky clever crow and heehaw donkey march through the book in alphabetical order. We have the elegant elephant, the jackal and the lizard described in 'sprightly-animal rhyme'. Yaks, X-ray fishes and Sea Urchins join the fun.

Lovely book to hold and behold.



## Deepali Shukla

### 50 GREATEST STORIES FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Hachette India, 2021, pp. 576, ₹599.00

A collection of 50 stories! Stories that have been read and known worldwide. They take readers on a journey into the time that's part of history. Through the book, we meet characters from history and mythology, encounter stories from various older generations and also get a sense of how the then human relationships and society would have been like, across different parts of the world.

This collection consists of renowned stories by some eminent litterateurs such as Leo Tolstoy, William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Anton Chekhov, Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand and Sukumar Ray.

I started with '*Idgah*'. I had read it as a text-book chapter, back in school. In the following years, I also had a chance to read and listen to many of its renditions. To talk of this one, which is translated by Sara Rai, has kept the original feel of language intact. As I read, some of the incidents literally came alive before my eyes. Be it Hamid's visit to the fair in '*Idgah*' or when he justifies why the tongs he had bought were best of all, or how he constantly thought about his Ammi and Abbu; the then social setup conveyed through Hamid's story does prod the readers into some thinking. Even those who may have read an abridged version of this story before, can still discover new takeaways while reading the original version.

I had read the Happy Prince's story long back and had a chance to read it again. Ababil comes and sits on the Prince's statue and from there begins an extraordinary story of pure, selfless friendship. Being friends with Ababil dissipates the Happy Prince's loneliness. The story reflects a rather peculiar approach to empathy towards humans.

The story by Upendra Kishor Roy Chaudhuri has been taken from his book *Ramayana for Young Readers*, which is based on the mythological tale of Sugriva and Bali. It seems that such stories have been deliberately included to ensure exposure to a wide variety of genres to the young adults.

'The Pumpkin Idiot' has been taken from the series *Keral ki Kahaniyan* (Stories from Kerala). It has a flavour of folklore. Be it Kochachuraman's decision to learn the cure for snakebite as a means of making fast money, his departure as soon as he gets a hunch that he has learnt it all, how he ends up saving the king's life or be it when he reveals what 'chant' he 'exactly' learnt from the Guru; to me, this story looks like a perfect blend of fantasy and reality, a common feature of folktales. They just take the readers along. Moral teaching is another common feature of this genre. Although I must admit that along with fun and joy, this story also left me with a few questions.

Sukumar Ray's 'The Cure for Temper' is another funny story. Kedar Babu with his relentless (and humorous) efforts for anger management seems like someone familiar and close.

Another interesting thing about the collection is especially in the case of stories originally written in Indian languages and set in the Indian context, that some of the words from the original languages have been retained and a footnote has been added to explain their meanings. It is another to retain and let the readers enjoy a little bit of the original flavour.



Anton Chekhov's 'The Bet' narrates a story of two persons and how a simple bet changes their lives. Books can change our lives; the change that can never be bought by money; even piles of it. The lawyer's early release costs the banker his own freedom. The story has a lot in common with today's world, especially in terms of the dynamics of power and control.

Then there's a version of Shakespeare's 'King Lear' by E Nesbit that brings to light human tendencies of jealousy and ego and the intricacies of human relationships.

There's so much already written and talked about Tagore's '*Kabuliwala*' that anything I say might just be repeating bits of what's already there. But it felt great to see this story in the collection.

These stories are deeply rooted in the respective times and social-cultural contexts that they were written in. There are quite a few incidents involving violence. Along with letting us peep into the past, these stories are a great opportunity to have a look at those times, settings and situations in the light of today's world and perspectives.

I feel that along with the young readers, even the parents, teachers and librarians should give this book a read. When both the readers and the adult facilitators are familiar with the stories, meaningful, deeper and relevant conversations can be taken up on issues raised and reflected in these stories.



## Sucharita Sengupta

### SMASH IT, BUTTERFINGERS!

By Khyrunnisa A

Puffin, 2021, pp. 214, ₹250.00

*Smash It, Butterfingers!* by Khyrunnisa A is the latest addition to the *Butterfingers* series of books meant for the reading pleasure of folks in their early teens. Sports is the main theme of all the books set in the backdrop of the fictitious Green Park School. In the book under review, students of the school have an adventure that involves badminton, and a cat named Ozymandias.

The hero of the tale, Amar, is affectionately called Butterfingers, because well, he is one. He has a talent for dropping things, bumping and crashing into objects and people, injuring himself and his friends and family, and generally emerging from such misadventures unscathed and victorious. Apart from him, the story is populated by his classmates, mostly boys, but also two girls. All the kids have unique personalities and are exactly the kind of delightful class that the reader would have been part of at their own school. The Principal, affectionately called Princi, same as in every other school in the country, is a crucial character, and so are the office staff, other teachers, school patrons, and of course, Amar's parents.

In the present offering, the need for money to stock the library with books is occupying the minds of the Principal. An eccentric school patron, a certain Mr. Brijesh Singh, makes a serendipitous offer. He wishes the students to learn about the irrationality of superstitions, and decides to sponsor a badminton match between 13 year old boys on the 13th of the month. The prize money is to be used to buy books, since Mr. Singh believes that reading good books





is the only cure for superstition. In the meantime, Amar has had a fall after tripping over a new badminton racquet and is very disappointed that instead of breaking his bones, he merely has a bad sprain. With this injured arm, he is selected to be part of the badminton team.

When the boys go to practice at an abandoned badminton court on the premises of the hospital where Amar was being treated for his injury, a crazy adventure involving his doctor and some fishy financial deals begins. The unearthing of the mystery involves more funny accidents, cats chasing dogs, lost whistles, forgotten crumpled papers, false suspects, and finally the unearthing of a crime. Amar and his classmates are the mischievous heroes of this tale.

The book is teeming with characters, making it a bustling and lively read. Even characters that appear for a short while add to the milieu of a believable school life. The adventures take older readers back to the world of Enid Blyton's school series, other than the fact that this is an updated version full of boys instead of girls. It is quite curious, and heartening, to see boys not glued to computers and mobile phones, except when it becomes really important to use the internet. It may be wishful thinking to have fewer devices in a teen story set in 2021, but hey, that's the fun of fiction. Clearly, the adventure is fabulous because it does not occur in the virtual world. Full of puns and beautiful illustrations by Abhijeet Kini, the book is an energetic read that will be enjoyed not just by teens, but by older readers too.



## Indira Bagchi

### ALL-TIME FAVOURITES (FOR CHILDREN)

By Ruskin Bond. Illustrated by Kashmir Sarode  
Penguin India, 2021, pp. 215, ₹250.00

**A**ll Time Favourites (For Children) celebrates Ruskin Bond's writing with stories that are always loved equally by children and adults and can now be enjoyed in a single collectible volume consisting of 25 enjoyable stories. Curated by India's most loved children's writer, this collection brings together some of the most evocative episodes from the author's life. Heart-warming, funny and spirited, this is a must have on every bookshelf.

'Goldfish Don't Bark' is a delightful story of Koki and the goldfish, which is kept in a glass jar and is constantly admired by the little girl who is visiting her grandmother, living on the other side of the hill. She is happy to notice that the goldfish do not make noises like dogs, donkeys or the birds. They communicate with each other silently and also behave in a civil manner by not bumping into each other.

Ruskin's description of granny and Koki is very realistic. The occasional coming of different birds to the window-sill and their names give children some knowledge about different birds. But the visit by the black cat was not welcome. One day the cat overturns the glass case and two of the fish die. Granny buys two more and one of them becomes Koki's favourite.

The arrival of the monsoon on the hillside presents a beautiful picture for the readers. 'The grass on the hillside was transformed from a dull brown to a lush green. Tiny streams became torrents of

rushing water. The insect world came to life.'

Ruskin uses very simple language. While reading the story the incidents, characters and the ambience seem to float in front of the reader's eyes. Human emotions are matched with the emotions of the animal, 'Then she put her face against the glass case of the gold fish tank and said goodbye to all her pretty silent friends. The little pink fish, Koki's favourite, glided up to the edge of the tank and pressed her face against the glass, right up against Koki's gentle face. Was it saying goodbye?'

'Boy Scouts Forever' is a funny and spirited story of Ruskin as a boy scout. The motto of the Boy Scout was 'Be Prepared'. Ruskin was never prepared for anything. In order to justify the rumour that he was a good cook (although he had never cooked anything in life), he was given a cookery badge and made in charge of his troops' supply of ration.

During the summer break his troops are taken to Shimla for a camp and Ruskin is told to cook a dish for the whole battalion. Not knowing any cooking he tells the other boys to put whatever vegetables, spices and sauces were there, in the dish, 'put half a tin of ghee, salt, one bottle of tomato sauce, one cup of vinegar, a bottle of gooseberry jam', and in the end the dish turned out to be a big success. It was called 'Bond Bhujji'.

The next day the boys are supposed to follow Mr Oliver on a tracking lesson but they find a pool of water and jump into it. Mr Oliver waits for them desperately and then returns and loses his own track. He is rescued by the villagers. He is very angry with the boys. But then Bond pacifies him by making an omelette for him. Next morning they are leaving the camp but a bear enters the tent of Mr Oliver and comes out entangled in Mr Oliver's dressing gown. 'A bear in a dressing gown was a comical sight.' This is an insight into Ruskin's sense of humour.

Another interesting story is 'The Black Cat'. The author picks up an attractive looking broomstick from a junk shop for cleaning the house. One day a black cat comes and sits on the garden wall and miaows until Bond gives him some milk and the cat becomes completely at home in his house. The cat is very much interested in the broomstick and would dance and skitter around the broom whenever Bond cleaned the room. When it was parked against the wall, the cat would sidle up to it, rubbing against the handle and purring loudly. Bond found the 'combination of the cat and the broomstick, quite suggestive and full of possibilities, as the cottage was very old.' But so far he had not encountered any ghosts or spirits.

And one day an old lady Miss Bellows, the oldest resident of the hill station, comes to see Bond and tells him that he had her cat. Bond goes to look for the missing cat and when he cannot find him, he comes back to find the cat sitting in the lady's lap. Bond offers tea to the old lady but she asks for hot water and makes a fizzy purple and crimson drink with the boiling water and gulps it down. Then she bids goodbye and leaves. Bond comes back to his room and finds the broom-stick missing. He dashes out and in the growing darkness looks up and sees the old lady and the cat riding away on Bond's broomstick. This story reflects Ruskin Bond's indulgence in fantasy.

Ruskin's 'Grandfather's Fight with an Ostrich' is a very amusing story described in a hilarious manner. In grandfather's words, 'the bird began to turn, or rather waltz, moving round and round so quickly that my feet were soon swinging horizontally.' The scene floats in front of our eyes.

'The Black Cat' and 'The Haunted Bicycle' are mystery stories related by Bond in a gripping manner. Bond escapes a murder attempt by some miscreants due to the black dog which proves to be his 'guardian spirit' by saving him from them. The dog does not belong to Ruskin and disappears after taking him home safely. In



'The Haunted Bicycle', when Bond falls from the cycle and looks around for the two boys who were riding with him, he cannot see them, instead he sees, 'two small black buffaloes gazing at me from the muddy moonlit water.'

Ruskin is a lover of nature. Having lived in the hills for most of his life his writings are full of descriptions of birds, trees, animals and forests. Behaviour of birds, squirrels, monkeys and even tigers, have always found space in his stories. Moonlit nights and the sounds coming from the breeze blowing through the trees have always attracted him. At the same time he deals with the exchange of human emotions with animals like in 'Timothy', and 'The Goldfish Does not Bark'. 'The Woman on Platform 8' is again a very emotional and touching story. His language is simple and keeps the reader hooked to the stories.

A few of the stories are excerpts from his earlier published articles and are good narratives.



## G Anuradha

### I HATE MY CURLY HAIR

By Divya Anand. Illustrated by Rujuta Thakurdesai  
Puffin, Gurugram, 2020, pp. 40, ₹250.00

Childhood, that precious time of intense loves and hates and hopes and disappointments, has been marvellously captured by Divya Anand in her story for children *I Hate my Curly Hair*, a story, beautifully illustrated by Rujuta Thakurdesai, that is reminiscent of the illustrated stories by that wonderful writer for children, Dr Seuss.



The primary objective of any literature be it for children or adults is to entertain and give pleasure. *I Hate my Curly Hair* does this amply by using a rhyme pattern that would delight any young reader by the way it trips and slips off one's tongue with its tizzy and frizzy and giggles and squiggles.

Then, of course, it fulfils the role that literature has, which is to act as a catharsis in allowing the readers to live out their own dilemmas but at second-hand, providing them a safe way of dealing with them.

Misfortune comes in all shapes and sizes and this little child is mortified by her hair.

*I hate my hair  
It coils and curls  
It twists and twirls.*

*It's so unfair  
Why must I have curly hair?*

So begins the tale of the little girl with hair that people laugh at, her family, friends and foes, especially the big bully! By the way, we are told in the information on the writer that Divya Anand too has curly hair too (and was often teased as being 'baal ki dukaan') and that she accepted that curly hair was ok only when she turned twenty!

Young readers dealing with their own pudgy noses, flappy feet, buttery fingers or Dumbo ears will immediately find a kindred soul in her. Surely there must be some way to redeem a situation that is clearly unfair and undeserved?

The world is still all so new to children that they have a touching openness and sensitivity to it. By the same token they also have the brutal sense to finding fault in their peers and making fun without the slightest compunction. This is part of the process of growing up through which they learn that it is only human to be bruised and blemished. This is a craggy, cliffy path and one squirms in discomfort waiting in childish impatience for it to be over soon and for the delight and fun to begin.

At the heart of affliction, however, lies a chance, like a seed waiting to sprout. Sometimes it needs a lick of fire to prod it into life, sometimes it is just a gentle, magical touch of rain for it to burst into bloom. Acceptance and friendship come bringing their healing touch with them, showing what looks like dross is really gold. What was once the reason for despair turns into an asset as the child here sees her hair becoming the necessary barrier between the teacher and her friends ('They hide my friends from my teacher's glare'), a shield between the adult world and reality.

With self-acceptance comes peer-acceptance and a marvellous opportunity to recalibrate one's understanding of the world but more importantly of oneself:

*Why worry if your hair is unruly?*

...

*I now accept my hair fully*

*And so does my new friend, the bully!*

*I love my curly hair!*

This is a lesson that not just children but even adults need to be reminded of. Divya Anand's use of language has a musicality that makes it a wonderful read as a bedtime story, or an anytime story, or a play with parents and children taking turns to read it to each other and making memories of a book! What can be better than life lessons learnt with a feathery touch and no moralizing?

Rujuta Thakurdesai's illustrations are vivid and stimulating in each page and bring to life a tale of acceptance of one's body image. They tickle a funny bone and they do a good job enriching the text.

This book is certainly an interesting read. Go grab a copy as soon as you can, for any child you know (and one for the child in you!).



## Ruchi Shevade

### IT HAS NO NAME

By Payal Dhar  
Red Panda, 2021, pp. 343, ₹399.00

Sami is a young adult; a 'girl' who felt more at ease in carrying herself in a way that's conventionally attributed to 'boys' only. This was often met with a wide range of inconsiderate, harassing (and vulgar) remarks and humiliating questions... *Are you a boy or a girl?* Her parents were thoughtful and sensitive enough, but that did not mean an escape from the occasional, *You know you're not a boy, right? Why don't you make an effort to look more like the other girls?*

Sami soon discovers that she is gay and seems to be accepting and willing to explore her sexuality. As she is about to start exploring this newfound realization, a major shift comes in; she has to move to Chandsarai with her mother, a small village in the hills. Being away from her father, Nisha (her best friend) and the place she felt so connected to wasn't easy.





But, as it turns out, life in Chandsarai is not as quiet and dull as she had thought too. Her new school seems to be 'cooler' and after initial curiosity, her classmates are indifferent to what the blurb describes as her 'severe buzzcut'. Soon Sami seems to have her plate full; with the new school, cricket practice, studies, new friends, Serena and Bernie, and Gaybee, an anonymous friend she met online.

Like a vivid multi-coloured scarf, Payal has woven different threads of plots into what I call a potential post-OTT piece of fiction; sensational and conspicuous. As I

read, it felt as if I was 'reading' a Netflix series. The style of narration and overall format of the novel had that 'vibe' and striking similarities to the genre. Starting on a slow pace, soon the story unfolds into a wide range of happenings; ranging from extremely relatable day-to-day dilemmas and struggles, love interests, some family drama, friendships, media and a mystery-filled and worrying adventurous track. There's a lot to pay attention to, a lot to take in and a lot... to be squeezed into a page-long review!

Payal's knack of storytelling is commendable; so is her fabulous command on gen-z's lingo and sensational interests. Where representations of characters have been highly susceptible to stereotypes for a prolonged duration in literature, the novel's protagonist group reflecting diverse sexual orientations does not seem like an afterthought. For example, it was for the time that I encountered an asexual teen character in Indian literature. The mention and realities of their sexualities have been effortlessly entwined into respective subplots. Without much celebration, they appear to just flow naturally in the story. It successfully suspended my disbelief as I read through, but as I set out to unfold more layers of the story, more thoughts and questions started coming in.

For a non-queer, there will be only a tip that I may be able to comment on, hence I am holding back on analysing the characters or the journey of a gay teen, often misgendered, who seems to have been portrayed as an androgynous person. For those interested in exploring insights on that aspect, consider giving a read to Prerna Vij's piece on scroll.in,<sup>1</sup> another review of the novel.

What Vij (2021) stated as a strong possibility, I pose as a question. Does the story and struggle of a young gay adult as portrayed here run a high risk of oversimplifying things at points? As I reflected upon it, perhaps owing to the way of weaving the story, it appeared to be a bit romanticized too. And why does a marginalized protagonist need to demonstrate some heroic bravery or an out-of-the-way smartness? Particularly, in the context of portraying characters that brings the previously unacknowledged, but prevalent diversity, this question becomes crucial to consider.

In spite of all the concerns that I may have about the novel, I must admit that it had one quite perceptive takeaway to offer. What stayed with me in particular was that while on one hand, it brings out the struggles of a conventionally non-feminine, gay 'girl' teen, it also offers a brief perspective on another related trend of looking down upon femininity and chaffing the 'girly girls';

*'...Because you think you are tough and I am girlish? Doing my nails and putting lipstick has got nothing to do with being tough and strong. And guess what, it has nothing to do with being good human being either.'*

*An irresistible coming-of-age story of a gay teen in modern India. Says the blurb.*

*A must-read for the newbies in queer literature like me. Says me.*



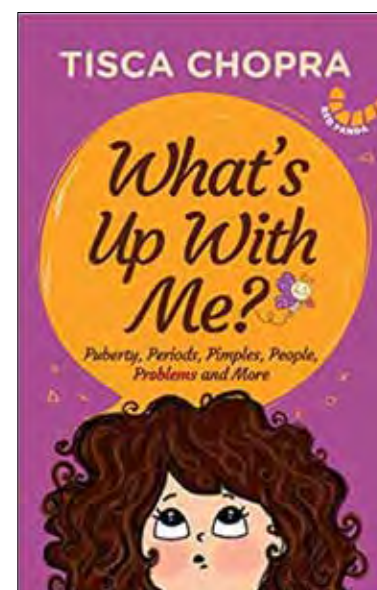
## Rafia Reshi

### WHAT'S UP WITH ME? PUBERTY, PERIODS, PIMPLES, PEOPLE, PROBLEMS AND MORE

By Tisca Chopra

Red Panda, an imprint of Westland Publications Private Limited, 2021, pp. 85, ₹350.00

The book under review comprises twelve chapters, with eye catching illustrations, and easy to relate style of prose, that act as nothing less than a Bible for young adolescent girls. It beautifully explains the transition from hoops of puberty to fabulous adulthood. Young girls often tend to become self-conscious owing to the changes that occur during puberty. A proper guide, the right information and knowledge is what is needed to battle the dilemmas of adolescence like: their first period, picking up their first bra, encountering pubic hair, relationships, boys, developing pimples, gaining weight, periods hacks, menstrual hygiene, etc. This book is a good pick for that.



The book deals well with the anxieties of young girls and the changes they experience on the onset of puberty. It takes an individual on the quest of self-exploration and helps boost self-confidence. This book helps reaffirm self-esteem and confidence of many young women who experience self-doubt and leads them to believe that while they are amazing exactly the way they are, change is something that is to be embraced and not feared. Each chapter has a powerful lesson to take from it.

This book leads by example, by breaking away from traditional approaches to puberty and assisting young women in exploring their own bodies and debunking cultural taboos and myths. The best part is that the content of this book is overseen by two specialists, Dr. Mala Arora and Malvika Verma who advise at the end of each chapter. The later part of the book has an articulate explanation on the dangers of cyber crime and ways to deal with them.

There is much to take away and learn for young girls. The preconceptions and stereotypes about the female body are sternly debunked in this book. Highly recommend for young teenage girls so that they grow into stronger women.



1. Full piece can be accessed at <https://scroll.in/article/1003410/payal-dhars-ya-novel-with-a-queer-theme-runs-the-risk-of-over-simplifying-the-complexities>

## Anju Virmani

### BHAI TU AISI KAVITA KYON KARTA HAI

By Sushil Shukl. Illustrated by Vandana Bist  
Ektara, 2020, pp. 42, ₹130.00



In March 2020, the world was told to shut themselves in. The much-condemned mobile phone became the center of our lives. Children who till February 2020 were told by WHO that screen time was evil and they should play vigorously outdoors at least 60 minutes every day, were forced to stare at screens for study, and stopped from playing outside. In short, everything turned upside down, or rather, to make a bad pun, outside in. They do say, though, that every cloud has a silver lining. Well, this little book is part of the silver lining. I have carefully mentioned the cover pages, because the front cover sets the tone, while the inside front cover and the back cover also have little gems tucked into them.

What does the front cover say, which forces you to pick the book up? 'Aam ka patta, aam se jharta hai; jaam ka patta, jam se jharta hai', so naturally you too would ask: 'Bhai Tu Aisi Kavita Kyon Karta Hai?'. And immediately reach out and tell yourself this one simply has to be read! Before we delve into the book, though, I must add that the illustrations are absolutely essential to the charm of the book. The cover illustration is so comprehensively apt a summary for the year 2020, that it's almost not funny. A befuddled cat, hanging upside down, clutching precariously at a branch of said mango tree. What did I tell you? No exaggerations here!

Now let's open the book. I've mentioned that there is a nugget on the inside front cover, I won't tell you what it or the first one are. The second one: 'Kisse badal ke, patang se sunte hain, hum sapne bunte hain, toh tare sunte hain'. The lovely facing page has a little girl on the verge of flying herself, as she watches clouds, kites and other little flying girls share the night sky. We meander past *dhoop, chaav, parinde, hawa*, to 'ek boond aai, aankh moond aai, usse dhoondne phir, boond boond aai?'. The art work? Dark clouds pour over houses and fields, the upturned umbrella and abandoned pink rubber chappal telling you to immediately visualize the little girl prancing in the rain as the water gets into her eyes and makes her hair stick to her face. Now add *champa, dhaan* in the *khet*, to this gem. 'Ammi kehti hain ki baitha hai, par Rashid, is baat par adaa hai, ki kauva khada hai'. Two crows looking askance, while Rashid and Ammi's hands clearly indicate how fierce the argument is. We don't stop at crows, of course, we travel with the *gilehri's teen bacche*, to the *makri, do mendak*, finally to *mere papa ka kitchen, saanp, mushroom, gadhe aur ghode*, to *ek choti si kahani* on the last page, and more crazily whimsical sketches on the back cover.

Who is this delightful duo? Sunil Shukl is editor of *Cycle* and *Pluto* and director of Ektara. Vandana Bist is an award-winning illustrator who most enjoys illustrating for haikus. So it is understandable that these haiku like *kavitas* have brought out the best in her, including exhausted ants, an exuberant aunty, a happy elephant doing an impossible balancing act, while a dragon, just escaped from a snake charmer's basket, looks worriedly at this.

So what are you waiting for? Order a copy immediately. Pull it out when the world is driving you crazy. After all, 'makri jaala bunti hai, kahan kisi ki sunti hai', as a whole bunch of insects look on. Then you will know the book is weaving a magic spell on you again, *bina kisi ki sune*.



## Nidhi Gaur

### BRINGING BACK GRANDPA

By Madhuri Kamat  
Duckbill, 2021, pp. 112, ₹250.00

**B**ringing Back Grandpa by Madhuri Kamat, a sequel to *Flying with Grandpa* is a realistic portrayal of the life of a single child in an urban, middle class Indian family of today. The child's character is coloured with loneliness and control. This review begins with a brief summary of the story, which is followed by some observational comments. Finally, the reviewer poses a few questions on the current state of childhood in India and what role children's literature can play to address children's needs.



The story appears as a page from the life of a single, privileged male child, Xerxes. He is quite close to his grandpa, who is his only friend and also his saviour. All of a sudden his grandpa falls ill. Before Xerxes could make sense of the situation at home, he finds himself being bullied by his classmates. Adding to his isolation is the concealment of his grandpa's illness by his parents. With no one to reach out for support, friendless Xerxes is all alone in a difficult situation.

Madhuri Kamat has intricately woven a world that is seemingly perfect for a child. A boy seems to be growing up amidst loving, caring and protective adults. He goes to a school where his teachers are reasonable and the Principal is quite accessible. Yet the child gets lonely and feels isolated. He has no friends. A single child in a nuclear family tends to feel this way in comparison to children growing up with more than two siblings or cousins. Besides fighting with each other, these children have the chance to come together to strategize, confide in each other, and also fight for themselves. They have a life of their own, outside of adult influence. Knowing that their child has company, adults also feel more secure about the child's wellbeing. But Xerxes's life is surrounded by adults, who infantilize him. Their concern for him becomes so interfering that the little things in which Xerxes could rejoice and claim as his achievements are also credited to adults. For instance, in one scene Xerxes is shown proudly informing his mother about receiving a prefect's badge at school. But his mother claims he received the badge only because she insisted the badge be awarded to Xerxes. The writer uses the word 'deflated' to describe Xerxes's state of mind at this moment. The whole arouses a feeling of empathy for Xerxes.

Kamat's remarkably real portrayal of such a childhood leaves the adult reader with many questions. One such question that remains with the reader till the last page of the book is: What will Xerxes do? She hopes for a twist or a turn that would energize Xerxes, and give him confidence.

However, being a good boy, Xerxes's life is restricted to adult approved actions. Therefore, none of the child's impulses of exploration, questioning, an urge to express and to construct are found in the boy's character. But he observes and tries to do whatever he can in the space he is provided with. For instance, he disapproves of the prevalent class-based hierarchy in his school. He expresses himself in the Principal's office by trying to get the peon to sit for a cup of tea, but his voice in the adult world remains inconsequential.



The adults' interfering and authoritative presence in every moment of the child's life is very striking. It makes the reader wonder if there is any space for the child in the adult-centric world. What kind of childhood is this where he cannot even move around without an adult's permission? Further, his mother's caring but dominating presence in the child's life further restricts the child.

The presence of gadgets and COVID-19 lockdowns has worsened the situation for children. This novel helped me identify with my eight-year-old neighbour, who is helplessly hanging around in the balcony for the past two years. Her friends are the children of her mother's friends. They can meet only when their mothers have time. So, many of our children are going through this phase of inactivity and impossibility of having a life of their own and a private space outside of adult influence.

The novel raised many questions for me to reflect on, such as can novels like *Bringing Back Grandpa* alleviate our children's suffering? Will they be able to identify with Xerxes's character? Even if momentarily, would this identification make them feel understood, heard, and also not alone in the world? For which age-group would it be possible to identify with Xerxes's character? Can a child of eight years be able to relate to him? Probably not, but an older child may relive his childhood through Xerxes and find a companion in him.

## Manyata Makkar

### MIRROR, MIRROR

By Andaleeb Wajid

Duckbill, 2021, pp. 280, ₹250.00

‘Everyone is a work in progress.’ Go back and read that sentence, again and again. Andaleeb Wajid focuses on teaching us how to love ourselves while dealing with many problems in and around us. Although *Mirror, Mirror* is a young adult book, anyone can read it. It may seem like a young romance novel, but it is so much more than that. It deals with issues like fat-shaming, adult pregnancy, societal expectations, and first loves.

Most importantly, it raises the issue that most teenagers face, ‘choosing the subjects/stream for their future’ and ‘deciding what they want to do in life.’ Through the characters of Raghu and Ananya, the author beautifully lays down the words, ‘it's okay not to have a plan.’ ‘Better things are on their way and will come to you in their own time,’ people who can understand this and work towards their goals will be very successful, both in their professional and personal lives. Like Raghu, Ananya decides to take a break after school to figure out what she wants to do in life, and much to her surprise, her parents support her decision; after all, they want what is best for her.

Being an overweight person all my life, I can relate to what Ananya is going through in the book. When people fat shame or body shame others, they can see what is visible on the outside. But no one can see the battles going on inside that person. No one knows if the person cannot lose weight because of a genetic disorder, eating disorder, or as a side effect of taking medications for some other disease. Andaleeb Wajid does not promote being unhealthy and overweight, but she also does not promote that one should either



starve or try fad diets to reach a certain number. Everyone wants to wear fashionable clothes, look a specific size, and have more curves, but that should only be achieved in a healthy way; otherwise, it is not effective in the long term. Ananya's Aunt and Raghu's Mother—Aunty V, explains this to Ananya by sending links to various online articles. Ananya, hesitant at first, goes through them and then understands how important it is to eat healthily and not starve oneself.

Ananya helps her friends realize their feelings for each other but cannot do the same for herself. The author makes everyone realize the importance of having good friends, friends who only want the best for you and would do anything to reach your goals. Ananya thinks that Raghu may not like her as more than a friend because for how she looks, but she doesn't realize that Raghu has always liked Ananya for what she is from the inside and not how she looks. He makes this very clear to her when he takes a stand for her and asks his colleague to apologize for body-shaming Ananya. This act morally boosts her confidence and makes her realize that people can see the good inside of her. And this is what the author has tried to tell us all through this book.

Ananya being a 17-year-old single child is not able to deal with the fact that she would no longer be a single child. She starts hating her sibling, who is not even born yet. And this is where her best friend help her realize how this issue is not about her but about her parents, who always wanted to have another child but had suffered miscarriages. Even though Ananya realizes the pain and happiness of her parents a little late, she does her best to cover up for lost time and takes excellent care of her mother.

Overall, the book beautifully deals with all the issues that a teenager faces and provides mindful solutions.



## Vinatha Viswanathan

### LITTLE AMERICA

By Zain Saeed

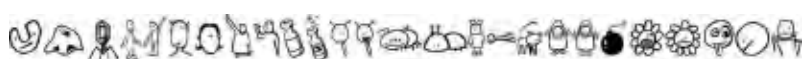
Penguin/Random House India, 2021, pp. 320, ₹599.00

*Little America* is the story of Sharif Barkati, a boy from the slums of Karachi who aspires for more—he wants love, he wants to be free. He achieves this by creating his own little haven of ‘freedom’, first in his school, then in his father's car and then in a few ramshackle buildings with his friend in the city. He himself does not indulge in any of the freedoms he offers others—a space to drink, smoke, dress, speak and love as they want to; his exhilaration comes from their joy at expressing themselves unrestrained by society outside. And the space he creates is for everybody. His own plans to move to the land of the free having failed, he dreams of creating a Little America right there in Karachi. He puts his plans down on paper and leaves copies around in the restaurant he works in, in the hope that a kindred spirit will find them. And that miracle does happen.

The partnership between Sharif Barkati and his funder TJ results in their building a little city within the city of Karachi. A walled



paradise where you can do what you want, especially what you can't do outside—read controversial literature, speak in protest, drink, kiss, wear as little as you want, dance... all in public. In the beginning it's for everyone, but slowly Sharif loses say in how things are run. TJ makes Little America exclusive, moves out of the four walls, enrages a conservative public and writes a book in which any wrongdoing is Sharif's. Sharif is himself enraged as he never intended to force Little America on those in society who saw it as evil. He tries to leave it all, and when his attempt to do so is foiled, he bombs his own dream. At his trial his supporters help him escape but the deaths of his friend and his friend's lover by the bomb he set off will always hang over him.



### Aditya Karnik

#### MANN MEIN KHUSHI PAIDA KARNE WALE RANG

By Teji Grover. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnoo Prakashan, 2020, pp. 64, ₹200.00

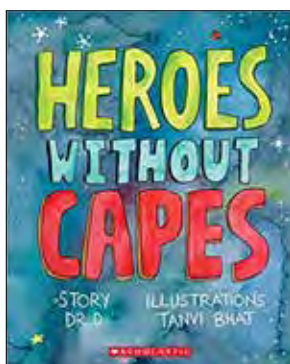
A well-written book with extensive vocabulary, Teji Grover's *Mann Mein Khushi Paida Karne Wale Rang* is full of memories, stories, haikus and appealing art. Divided into fourteen chapters, the author reminisces about some of her childhood memories and describes them in detail. Each of the fourteen chapters tells a different story. Readers are able to vividly imagine the incidents, some of which include the rescue of a cat on Deepavali, the life story of the author's friend Alan or the recollection of her visits to countries. She also writes about the art she made in her childhood, the use of natural colours and their importance. In the last chapter, Teji discusses her friend Sanju Jain's artwork and the joy her technique brings. Teji uses words which are not commonly used in Hindi but are expressive. She also occasionally includes haikus. The artwork done by Taposhi Ghoshal enriches the text and brings the book to life. The beautiful illustrations make the book attractive. The book enhances readers' Hindi vocabulary and is interesting to read. All age groups can read it. It is a must read.



#### HEROES WITHOUT CAPES

By Dr D. Illustrated by Tanvi Bhat  
Scholastic India, 2020, pp. 28, ₹295.00

'Real heroes are around us and uncelebrated.' The aforementioned book is based on the significance of common people in the world. The author Dr. D says that there are heroes but they don't wear costumes or capes. They are not the superheroes of the movies but common people around us. From a botanist to an aunt, all of these people are heroes in their own ways. This children's book spreads a great message to its readers. Every character in the book fulfills his/her role and shows that if everybody does their bit, the world will be a better place. These acts inspire readers to become



heroes themselves in their own ways. The illustrations drawn by Tanvi Bhat are also captivating. However, the book lacks a climax which is one of its only downsides. I would recommend this book to children under eight.



### Sangeeta Subuddhi

#### OONGA

By Devashish Makhija  
Tulika Books, 2020, pp. 300, ₹295.00

This is the first time I have encountered a movie adapted to a book. It is based on an adivasi boy called Oonga and his story. The author has created a brilliant atmosphere around the whole plot. The book is an eyeopener for me. The words come alive right from the first few lines. The characters in the story are also so unique, they are brought to life in the story. The story woven is realistically displayed with all the flaws in life, in the system, in different people.



I can't help but feel the pain of the different people being displaced from their lands in the name of development and feel the shame of various atrocities by people in power. This has been powerfully shown in the story. The author has revealed many secrets of the system. By this story the author has definitely created an awareness of what is happening around us and to take a stand on it.

It is obvious that there has been a huge amount of research in the ways of the tribals and their culture. I really enjoyed the concept of different languages used with the change in font as described, it enhances the words in the mind! I only wish there were more pictures in the book which would have enhanced the story further like the cover page.



### Rohini Rangachari Karnik

#### UNCLE PAI: THE MAN BEHIND THE ICONIC AMAR CHITRA KATHA

By Rajessh M. Iyer  
Fingerprint Publishing, 2021, pp. 344, ₹699.00

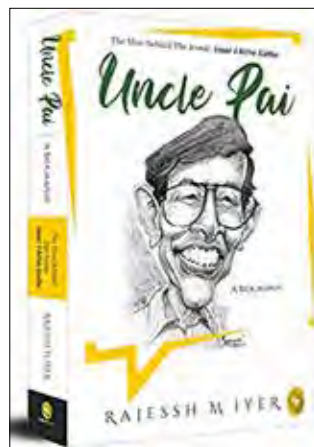
*'If the children of India dream, let them dream of India.'*  
Anant Pai

On Anant Pai's 90th birth anniversary, it is fitting for Rajessh M Iyer to have penned a homage to the life and work of the father of Indian comics in his biography *Uncle Pai: The Man Behind the Iconic Amar Chitra Katha*. From the Author's Note to the Epilogue, the biography pays glowing tributes to Anant Pai, his vision and dream, in such a way that some readers may even term it a hagiography.

In terms of including criticism of Pai's work, there do exist fleeting indications of 'baseless criticism' (p. 316), a passing reference



to Pai's anger and a brief section entitled 'Objections' describing Valmiki Sabha's objection to Valmiki being portrayed as a thief, leading to Pai's effigies being burnt. Iyer also mentions that school principals in Chennai felt that *ACK* was too traditional and Brahmanical in the way it approached its art, especially when portraying the good as fair-skinned and the evil characters as dark-skinned (p. 231). He devotes half a page to noting serious objections by women's groups against the portrayal of sati, and to the way *ACK* was written, illustrated and its overall presentation (p. 268).



Even so, Rajesh Iyer chiefly eulogizes the master storyteller and notes that Pai knew the criticisms were 'inadvertent since he was only following the traditional art forms, where the depictions were similar' (p. 231) and concludes with sadness that 'successive governments have failed to honour the man who helped revive Indian heritage like perhaps no one else ever did' (p. 333).

As a narrative, the book unfolds with *ACK* and Anant Pai facing a setback, a fire that engulfs its office in Mumbai in August 1994, causing many to wonder whether this signals a beginning of the end. The chapter concludes with a box entitled 'Test of Character' that discusses Pai's determination to 'push on despite all the obstacles he faces' (p. 20). The theme of perseverance and determination in Pai's personality is pervasive throughout the book. Rajesh Iyer continues to chronologically follow Anant Pai's life events from his birth on 17 September 1929, the death of his parents at the tender age of two, his brilliant student life, his reluctance to take up engineering, his marriage to Lalita Goklani on 3 July 1960 to his shift to publishing, first with the *Times of India*, where he published comic books, to his move to India Book House where he would begin publishing the iconic *Amar Chitra Katha* with the backing of GL Mirchandani and later, *Tinkle*.

Rajesh Iyer recounts that Pai was enamoured of stories from the Puranas narrated by his grandmother (p. 44) and further on how 'this exposure to legends, epics, and visual art were instrumental in shaping most things that Pai did in his life' (p. 123). Though Rajesh Iyer mentions that, at the time of conceiving *ACK*, the Silver age of comics had gained a foothold in the West, he notes that a conservative society with traditional values, the backbone of the Indian middle class, formed the core of the readership base of *ACK* (p. 122). Raja Ravi Varma is also acknowledged to have prominently influenced Pai's conception of the art style of *ACK* as did *Kalakacharya Kathanaka*, an epic Jain story from the medieval period. Readers are, however, left wondering whether Pai had influences other than a conservative background, ancient stories and Raja Ravi Varma. For example, in the next chapter Iyer describes how Pai 'followed Phantom's style of simple panels rather than stylized panels that he felt would be difficult to follow for their little readers' (p. 175). Including tid bits like stylization influences in the chapter entitled 'The Illustration Styles & Pai's Background' would be of interest to readers closely following Anant Pai's work.

The book touches upon issues of team building, distribution and *ACK*'s success with children's education with the Great *ACK* challenge labelling *ACK* as 'educational comic books' (p. 209). Iyer notes that plans to boost *ACK* readership included the idea of 'Reading Week' which took off with a fancy-dress competition based on characters developed in *ACK*, the adoption of different mediums such as video films and the launch of a new magazine, *Partha*. Iyer

then returns to criticisms of Pai towards the end of the book, while discussing staff exits from *ACK* with rumours of Pai's 'dictatorial attitude', 'limelight hogging', and 'not sharing credits with others publicly' (p. 297).

Though researched, the book does not enable readers to check facts and theories about Pai and his work as Iyer has not included any footnotes, endnotes or works cited page. For verification and building credibility, it is recommended that a subsequent edition includes citations and references. The many text boxes at the end of each chapter may also need expansion in the chapters of the book for a more in-depth treatment.



## Asfia Jamal

### THE CENTIPEDES

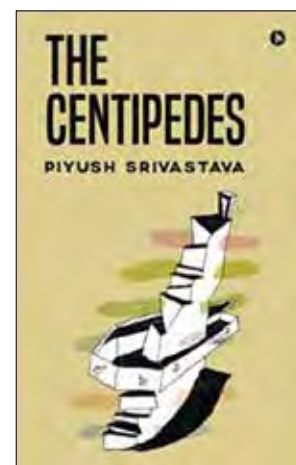
By Piyush Srivastava. Illustrated by Mukesh Sah  
Notion Press, 2021, pp. 126, ₹150.00

After all, a story survives only a few minutes... Who doesn't know that most newspapers are waste in the afternoon?

This is Ramayan Prasad, a journalist, working for one of the leading national newspapers in India. For past many years, he has swiftly and skillfully worked on some really troublesome reports; he follows the cases, files his copies and moves on. But something has changed since he started working on a case of a gang rape in the national capital. A young woman was raped and murdered brutally, while she was returning from a late-night movie with her boyfriend. Everyone is talking about the incident, human rights defenders have denied to put down their candles, politicians are just all over the place, and the journalists from around the world have gathered at the home of the victim. Why can't a journalist write his piece when there is so much out there? And, particularly when he has met the father of the victim, been to her home village, and met the single most important witness of the case, the boyfriend?

*The Centipedes* does not give simple answers. It will probably make the readers question some of the vital aspects of 'reality'. Do things in reality are what they seem to be? This post-truth narrative leads towards the mysterious side of reality behind our newspapers and television sets. The one who narrates this story with all his courage, reporter Prasad, the protagonist, is ultimately consumed by the realness of it. At times, the line between fiction and reality might blur and the readers may find themselves caught in between. It is highly likely to find some resemblance to a few real life people to the fictional characters of the story. But, one is never sure.

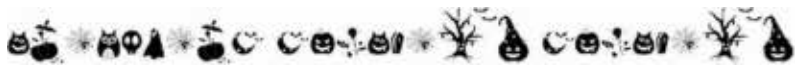
This book is a fiction debut of a journalist, Piyush Srivastava, who has worked with some of the most prominent print media houses for more than a decade. His writing is gripping and reflective of his nuanced experiences in the print media. Though his writing is simple, his metaphoric adoption of the centipedes is intriguing. Just like the story, the illustration on the cover of the book is quite enthralling. It is an abstract image by Mukesh Sah, which seems to



be well connected to the story. Spending some time with it will bring out reader's interpretation and its placement in the story.

Recommended for the readers who enjoy the dance of democracy in the Indian context, and are willing to dwell in the layers of post-truth era.

Happy Reading!



## Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

### THE BOY IN THE DARK HOLE

By Vaishali Shroff. Illustrated by Samidha Gunjal  
Eklavya, 2020, pp. 60, ₹110.00

Usruta Patil is just another kid—but not quite so. He loves sketching, but is terrible at football. He is a great friend, but suffers at the hands of bullies. He loves poetry, but cannot punctuate. His name does not make it any easier, especially when he wets his bed!

SP, as his friend Lobo calls him, sinks into the deep hole of depression. He feels the world is against him, and that he cannot catch a break. However, Lobo, and Kuhu, the best footballer around, help him see better. He opens up and shares his world with them, and suddenly the hole isn't so deep and dark after all.

*The Boy in the Dark Hole* acts as an introduction to depression, and how opening up to the people close to you can help you. It also shows us how all that is needed to get out of the hole is support from friends.

The best of us fall into the hole, and often it feels like there's no way out. Vaishali Shroff captures the emotions realistically—especially the feeling that there's no bottom to the endless hole. Events one after the other make SP feel lonelier and lonelier and he falls deeper and deeper, till he finds redemption.

SP isn't the only one to face the bullying—Lobo is teased for his weight, while Kuhu is questioned if she is girly enough. Both show SP how to stand up to bullies in their own way, and come to his rescue.

The writing is simple, yet changes with the mood of the characters and the situation. SP's voice resonates in its yearning, hopelessness, and finally happiness when he finds that he needn't shut himself off completely from his friends and the world.

The illustrations by Samidha Gunjal flow with the book, and act as SP's impressions, much like how the narrative is his voice.

*The Boy in the Dark Hole* is an engaging read. It is different from most children's books as it acts as a good introduction to mental health. Suitable for readers nine years and above, it could also be used as a part of an academic syllabus to discuss mental health with young students such as the factors that contribute to it, how to seek help, and understanding it without stigma.



## Deepa Agarwal

### THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS: WE CAN STAY SAFE

By Sanjana Kapur, Bijal Vachharajani, Maegan Dobson Sippy, Rajiv Eipe, Meera Ganapathi, Nimmy Chacko, and Deepa Balsavar. Illustrated by Deepa Balsavar, Jayesh Sivan, Lavanya Naidu, Priya Kuriyan, Rajiv Eipe, Renuka Rajiv, Sheena Deviah, and Sunaina Coelho  
Pratham Books, 2020, pp. 12, ₹45.00

There is a nightmare haunting each and every one of us—young and old—the fear of contracting the dreaded Coronavirus. Life has turned upside down ever since the pandemic made its presence felt, and the struggle to embrace 'the new normal' has taken a terrible toll on us. The risk of contracting the disease is grave indeed, but equally alarming are the mental health issues that are spreading as rapidly as the virus itself. Children have been severely impacted by this situation. With their regular routine completely disrupted, and talk of the dreaded virus blasting them from all corners, they feel bewildered and insecure, many are quite traumatized. Their need for assurance and understanding from the adults in their lives has grown immensely during the pandemic. This is one reason why children's books about COVID-19 have acquired great importance and this particular picture book is most timely.



In *The Novel Coronavirus: We Can Stay Safe*, seven different authors have contributed one or two pages of information about the virus succinctly, in a manner with which children can connect with ease, along with tips for staying safe. Accompanied by vivid and lively illustrations by seven artists, this book communicates COVID-19 facts to the young in a direct and friendly way.

'Why is Neema singing happy Birthday Today?' written by Bijal Vachharajani and illustrated by Priya Kurian, conveys the important message about washing your hands for 20 seconds lucidly and effectively. Then, in his delightful, self illustrated story 'Ammachi's Amazing Advice', Rajiv Eipe makes excellent use of his popular character Ammachi to stress the importance of staying home to stay safe and consulting the doctor if you feel unwell. The virus is an enemy, no doubt and we need to be careful not to infect others. 'Uma Versus the Virus', a catchy rhyme by Meera Ganapati, illustrated by Renuka Rajiv, informs children about the necessity of covering their faces when they sneeze, to avoid spreading the virus. 'Farida Plans Not to Touch her Face' by Maegan Dobson Sippy, with illustrations by Jayesh Sivan, delivers another essential message—about being careful not to touch your face to avoid the risk of the virus entering your body. COVID may have taken the joy out of our lives, but can't we fight back? 'Who Returned Bhaiya's Smile' by Sanjana Kapur, illustrated by Sunaina Coelho, is about dealing with COVID fears, particularly the gloom of isolation both children and adults have experienced during the course of the pandemic. There is so much necessary COVID protocol to observe and Nimmy Chacko's story 'Meera and Ameera Keep a Safe Distance', which Lavanya Naidu has illustrated, emphasizes the need for another precaution—social distancing. Again, 'Stay Home, Stay Safe,' is a warning constantly dinned into our heads. Deepa Balsavar shares this advice through a delightful verse, 'Nani's Staying Inside her House' which she has illustrated herself. She also gently reminds us about helping people in need.



When parents try to educate children about essential safeguards against COVID, they are often resistant and rebellious, because the whole scenario is confusing for them. Therefore this book has immense value, because it addresses the issue in a straightforward manner, with animated and humorous illustrations that drive the message home effectively.

#### THE GREAT BIG LION

Written and illustrated by Chryseis Knight  
Penguin Random House, 2021, pp. 26, ₹299.00

Books written by seven- or eight-year-olds are heard of now and then. I have even participated in a couple of such book launches and been deeply impressed by the drive and perseverance these young geniuses displayed. But Chryseis Knight seems to be the mother of all prodigies. This is the first time I have encountered a book by a three-year-old writer. We are told that Chryseis Knight learned to read at the age of one and was inducted into Mensa at the age of two for her linguistic talents. Incredible indeed!



Chryseis began to write *The Great Big Lion* when she was three-years-old for her younger brother (who absolutely loved it) and was motivated to illustrate it as well. The result is a delightful board book, perfect for reading aloud as well as for a beginner reader to enjoy.

A heartwarming story about the universal need for love and friendship, it is also about not taking people at face value. At another level one can even interpret it as a metaphor for cultural misunderstanding.

The Great Big Lion lives in the forest, but he wants to make some friends so he enters a village and as is the way of lions, he ROARS! But what happens? Quite naturally, the terrified people cannot relate to this overture and run away and hide. All except two brave kids, Tom and Lily. They are curious about the lion and actually love to hear him roar. Then one day, the lion fails to appear. Tom and Lily get worried and begin to search high and low but cannot find him anywhere. Gloomily, they sit down under a tree and begin to wish they had tried to make friends with him. What could they do now? Was it too late? And then, they see a long tail. Of course, it's the lion! The lion sadly tells them that all he wanted to do was make friends but the villagers did not like him. Tom and Lily tell him that they missed him and would like to be friends with him. The lion lets out a happy roar and all ends well.

This simple tale is just right for a kid who is learning to find pleasure in stories. Coming from a child, it also provides us with important insights into the kind of stories children are drawn to. Attractively designed, the dramatic illustrations are very eye catching and expressive. Young Chryseis is immensely talented and will prove

#### Shiv Narayan Gour

##### A PINCH OF MAGIC

By Asha Nehemiah  
Duckbill (An Imprint of Penguin/Random House), 2021, pp. 65, ₹175.00

*A Pinch of Magic* by Asha Nehemiah is a story about a girl named Veena and her aunty Malu. Aunt Malu makes herbal medicines. She is known for her herbal medicines that she learned from her Guru. One of the tools that Aunt Malu uses to

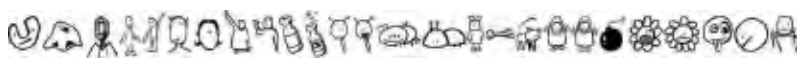
make her medicines breaks and the story revolves around Veena and Aunt Malu looking for that pinching spoon that is required for making medicines.

The story throws light on some very important issues and breaks stereotypes while sticking to the narrative. The role of women is a major part of the story. Aunt Malu and Veena go to Harrabharrapazham in order to look for the Guru. Initially, they are disappointed because they are not able to find the Guru. But later in the story we see that they find the Guru and she turns out to be a woman, when they were expecting a man. The author builds this mystery by not mentioning the identity of the Guru earlier in the story. Later, when we learn Guru Kalyani's reasons behind hiding her identity, we understand the condition of our society, especially for women. But Guru Kalyani does what she wanted to do even when no one believed that she could. This also shows how sometimes one needs to break certain societal norms and stereotypes in order to do something one like.

The author also focuses on the changes that happen with development. One example of this is evident in the story when we get to know that they cut the trees on which the Guru used to sit and teach her students. This conventional idea of development has a different impact on people, and the writer talked about it.

Most part of the story has good pacing with interesting twists. However, it feels like some events did not require much attention in the story. The story felt complete when Aunt Malu and Veena find the Guru. Guru Kalyani's character is in the story for a short period, but it is strong and her character growth is evident in her flashback story of her journey to being a Guru. Veena does not lose hope even when Aunt Malu is not very hopeful of finding the Guru.

Priyankar Gupta's illustrations definitely add charm to the story and make it more fun for young readers. The book is a part of the Hole Book series of Duckbill. The concept of Hole books is equally interesting and can attract young readers. The story is exciting and fun for readers. It will not only entertain them, but at the same time it will tell them about how the world is and how one can change it.



#### Semeen Ali

##### THE BHYABACHYAKA AND OTHER WILD POEMS

By Sampurna Chattarji and Eurig Salisburly  
Scholastic India, 2019, pp. 100, ₹295.00

*You've no clue what Ffrwchmedd is!*  
*Ffrwchmedd is a frazzle,*  
*The kind that hits you in the gut*  
*When you're too dull to dazzle.....*

My first introduction to the nonsense verse was a book gifted to me on my ninth birthday—Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*. Growing up around that timeline on a diet of Enid Blyton's works, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys and Norton Juster's works—this book deviated from the usual parameters that writers normally take into account when writing for children or young adults.



The artwork in this work were exaggerated faces and as shocking/surprising as the images were; they were absolutely delightful. Later on, I searched for works in this genre in the Indian context that had for their audience children and adults as well and came across an anthology of translated works published in 2007 where I first read Sampurna Chattarji's lovely translations of various writers from the Bengali language as well as her own writings in the English language. I suppose the language barrier might have prevented me from discovering similar works in regional languages. But on coming across a book like *The Bhyabachyaka and Other Wild Poems* makes it seem that my search can now be put to rest. The book is a collaboration of two distinct and powerful voices—Sampurna Chattarji and Eurig Salisbury. In the book, language functions less as a signifier, rather it turns into more of a raw material.

*'She's dangerous!' the elders brayed,  
And to their eyes their great hall swayed  
And creaked and cracked as if a storm  
Had swelled inside as she performed.*

*They all rushed out and, as they did,  
In came the people riveted.  
'Listen, listen,' they said, 'this bird  
Sings the loveliest song we've heard.'*

Nonsense as a genre of writing has been considered as a literary oddity. It is a genre where images play an important role in setting off the imagination of its readers. This form of writing invites people to pause and look around them rather than be swept away by the realities that words have the power to create. It makes one stand for some time outside the constructed selves that have been created or we have created for ourselves, and make one question even themselves.

*... Often, it takes a long, long time  
for a word to make some kind of sense*

*Till then, a word is empty  
as is any empty, unfelt act,...*

But what are words? If one looks at the definition by David Kaplan then what he has tried to show is that 'words could not be identified with either spellings, that is, with strings of letters, or pronunciations. Strings of letters and pronunciations are the shape-like features of words against which we measure perceived inscriptions and utterances in order to make out what words are presented. But shapes could not be what words are, they must be something more abstract, something that has spellings and pronunciations...' Words bring along with them a baggage of culture, traditions, ideas and a specific set of thoughts that are attuned with the people and the place from where they emerge. What are words exactly without meanings attributed to them? Nonsense gives the words the power to morph in an endless manner. It operates by subverting the definitions and the roles that have been fixed for words.

*'The Mishmishey,' he said at last,  
'Was once endangered in the wild,  
But now the wild's in danger, well,  
It's far better off inside.'*

The book takes on a more serious tone as one reads on and it brings up an important point about how when reading works in an Indian setting, one tends to gravitate to a serious tone and a formal, traditional approach towards texts. For an Indian audience, the world of nonsense can be found more in the world of folk tradition and one has to look at the history of folk tales tailored for children and adults

as well to look at how strong an influence it has had on the formation of literary nonsense.

*... If words have gone off their  
rockers, why not knock them  
off their designated pegs?*

The linguistic techniques that have been used in the book amongst many—one being an invention of new words or neologism and the other is the technique that involves switching two words to create a third one—entirely nonsensical. One cannot overlook the joy that these words evoke; a sense of musicality that follows as one reads the work. In English, writers like Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear were often accused of writing for adults under the garb of writing for children using the technique of nonsense. But one cannot undermine the intelligence/observation skills of children who can read between the lines and thoroughly enjoy this genre of writing. *The Bhyabachyaka and Other Wild Poems* is not just for children; as an adult reading, this book made so much sense to me in a world that remains quite a nonsensical one!

*Two floating swans  
swimming towards a fleet of thought  
shipshape as scrubbed decks  
Intertwining graceful necks*

As Edward Gorey has said, 'If you're doing nonsense it has to be rather awful, because there'd be no point. I'm trying to think if there is sunny nonsense. Sunny, funny nonsense for children—oh, how boring, boring, boring. As Schubert said, there is no happy music. And that's true, there really isn't. And there's probably no happy nonsense either.'

*Three things that make a poet  
Content (and I don't know it):  
A crowd, a poem on a page  
And one big stage to show it.*



## Anju Virmani

### BIG MISTAKE: AN ANTHOLOGY ON GROWING UP AND OTHER TOUGH STUFF

Foreword by Shaheen Bhatt

Penguin, 2021, pp. 235, ₹250.00

In all good Hindi movies, after a lot of trials and tribulations, the hero would come in and save the day. After all the trials and tribulations COVID brought upon us, it looks like the hero is ancient Indian traditions, which would sweep in and save the day. From doing namaste instead of shaking hands and exchanging viruses, to realizing that humble *kaarhas* worked better than unnecessary remdesivir. So maybe even for fighting the current ongoing epidemic of non-communicable diseases, worsened by COVID, the hero will be the same ancient traditions: food practices and exercise, based on sound scientific principles, which will sweep in and save all of us. Ayurveda recommends that meals should have something of all the six flavours: sweet, sour, salt, spicy, bitter and astringent.





Well, here is such a book. *Big Mistake* describes itself as an ‘anthology on growing up and other tough stuff’, and ‘a label defying collection for every young adult’. Well, I am not young any more, but I decided to read it anyway: I had a deadline I was trying to pretend didn’t exist. And it was worth sneaking out for. It’s a fun collection: a combination of autobiographical pieces with fiction, and a poem thrown in for masala: a book which is thought provoking, funny, cute, frightening, worrying, all the flavours, in short.

So let’s get started. Parvati Sharma’s ‘DJ Darshan’ captures the disjointed phases of adolescence effectively in a series of ‘word pictures’. Making friends, discovering them, being ghosted, discovering oneself, with the cameos of two contrasting teachers thrown in. The casual philosopher and the casual assaulter. Teachers leave such an imprint on us that years later those memories linger. A little later, ‘A Bird called Freedom’ by Hannah Lallahnpuii has similarly disjointed images of an adolescent’s memories, but the MNF insurgency/freedom struggle in the background makes for a complete contrast with this mundane collection. Gentle strokes, hinting at mayhem, used to convey messages of young children coping with uncertainty and death.

‘The Rumour about Mona’ by Neha Singh should be essential reading for all parents whose kids are entering their teens. Maybe schools should take her permission and send it to parents when their child leaves junior school and comes to class 6. I am sure Baskin Robbins would be happy to sponsor the tale of a 15 year old young lady who goes on a dream date (including the ice cream), and ends up discovering herself, and forging a new relationship with her parents. Essential reading because all adults—parents, teachers, principals—need to be constantly reminded how fragile adolescence is, and in need of protection and acceptance. Sadly, fragility does not always get protected. Nandana Dev Sen’s ‘Happy New Year’ oh-so-gently unfolds a story of middle class patriarchy, just tiny hints at domestic violence, female foeticide, finally murder, all brushed under the carpet of respectability. The next piece is a complete contrast—as black and white, in-your-face as Nandana’s story is sepia-toned and retiring. Nikhil Taneja has managed to move out of his assigned role of ‘*Sharma ji ka macho, spoilt engineer beta*’ and his essay spells out the ‘7 lies we tell boys for them to become “Men”’: To all the boys we’ve failed before.’ He bluntly gives his own example of how boys are expected to behave, growing up, and why toxic masculinity is completely wrong.

A very similar essay, ‘An Accidental Ambition’ by Japleen Pasricha traces her life from being Miss-Average to topper in German language, to founder—CEO of FII—Feminism in India. Her life changed with what happened to Nirbhaya, and as she says, she ‘switched from German to \*drum roll\* Gender’. And an essay by Anusha Mishra who ‘describes herself as “queer, chaotic and disabled”’, conjuring up the issues the disabled face daily in ‘The Crip Gang’.

‘Daddy’s Girl’ is at the other end: a straightforward family who wants their child to succeed. This unvarnished and therefore all the more effective account by Saina Nehwal, then becomes extraordinary, when she talks of the enormous sacrifices her family made for this to happen. Very simply written, but one can read between the lines how difficult it would have been—a mother accompanying her for practice, for matches, everywhere, with home routines disrupted; an elder sister always willing to pull in the slack yet stay in the background; and a father who spent the huge sums needed by her by borrowing from his provident fund, without ever making her realize the problems. She sums up equally simply the important principles for success in life. More contrasts, with Sonaksha Iyengar’s poignant poetic rebellion against society’s condemnation of her obesity, closing

with the declaration: ‘a fat body is a body; a fat body is somebody; this fat body is *my* body.’

Jane De Suza’s ‘You have 1 Follower’ is poignant too, with a little twist at the end. An ‘invisible’ adolescent finds that a stalker does her the favour of making sure her busy parents and more attractive schoolmates stop ignoring her. Finally, the last piece is a hybrid: Kautuk Srivastava is a Mumbai-based writer and comedian writing the story of Udayan Sinha, a Bihari settled in Mumbai and aiming to do comedy shows, in which he takes on the Shiv Sena.

So if you are a young adult, and even if you aren’t, this book is worth buying. Don’t make the mistake of missing it.



## Aakangshita Datta

### KIKI KALLIRA BREAKS A KINGDOM

By Sangu Mandanna

Hodder Children’s Books, 2021, pp. 352, ₹445.00

There used to be a time, long ago in most of our childhoods possibly, when we would have real, vivid and intense dreams, dreams within dreams, where we would experience physically acts of falling from a height, slipping, running and even as we awoke, our hearts would continue to race. Sangu Mandanna’s ninth adventure fantasy novel is a quick paced, vividly descriptive work of art and imagination.

Kiki Kallira is the protagonist, recounting her life in the first person. She loves sketching and draws up characters from the Indian folklore of Mysore. Even as these characters come alive, threaten to destroy the real world, there is a parallel narrative of great courage and bravery displayed by Kiki—alluding to an aspect of herself that remains mostly hidden.

The novel is full of nuggets of precious wisdom, for instance, when Kiki says she never believed her silly ideas and sketches would actually ever matter—what Kiki ends up sketching is a whole parallel world populated with colourful characters, including a Lion that can talk, protects the Crows Rebel Gang against the Asuras, and sips Tea and all her drawings are alive, including the looming peril of Mahishasura who is looking for a crack to get into the real world and occupy it.

The book includes themes of being brave, never being terrified and taking control over one’s fears. In fact the entire mythical universe sketched by Kiki to come alive, where she gets to steer the end, exemplifies Kiki’s hidden ability to be the hero in her own story in reality.

Each character within the novel has been given specific descriptions, to provide them with a dimension of intrigue as well as association and relatability. Elements of changing mazes, the room without any doors within the Mysore palace, the hanging gardens, the Crow House of the Crows Rebellion provide a depth to the adventure story.

Mahishasura represents a visual encapsulation of all things that Kiki fears—evil strength, arrogance in his powers, pride and conceit which finally becomes the very cause for his entrapment. The theme, ‘I am the master of my fate, I am the Captain of my soul’



runs persistently through the book and is indeed a good one to be reinforced to all children and adults reading this anywhere.

Pip created by Kiki was her companion from the days when she was even younger still. The first meeting with Pip brings back all the happy memories from Kiki's childhood.

The Ganderbarunda, the great golden bird, the protector of Mysore in the novel is a gateway to our real world. Through the novel we see Kiki making mistakes, learning to take responsibility for her work/her art and eventually doing the right thing—choosing not to snatch out the eye of the Ganderbarunda and instead braving and fighting Mahishasura. It is indeed a fascinating journey that she charts.

*Kiki Kallira* is an extraordinarily visual novel and possibly a graphic rendering of this novel would have further enriched the readers' experience of this magical, fantasy world.



## Bhavini Pant

**HUNTED BY THE SKY (THE WRATH OF AMBAR #1)**

**RISING LIKE A STORM (THE WRATH OF AMBAR #2)**

Both by Tanaz Bhathena

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020 & 2021, pp. 384 & pp. 424, ₹399.00 each

Fantasy is a tricky genre. It plays right at the heart of why many of us read: to escape, to find refuge. After the success of Harry Potter, publishers around the world flooded readers with YA fantasies, so much so that the genre became saturated with numerous worlds, each with their elaborate rules and patchwork characters. And while Tanaz Bhathena's duology, *Wrath of Ambar* is based on one of the oldest tropes in storytelling, a hero, her destiny and the quest she embarks upon, the result is a refreshingly absurd world which attempts to hold up a mirror to the one we inhabit and create every day.

In an interview, the writer said that she wrote the series to explore what Hindustan could have been if we hadn't been ruled by the British. This is a tantalizing question for most people of Indian origin: impossible to truly answer yet brimming with possibilities. Fusing myths from medieval Hindu and Persian traditions, Tanaz Bhathena weaves a cinematic tale of two teenagers, Gul and Cavas who discover that they are complements: beings whose individual strengths are magnified when they perform magic together. They live under the brutal reign of Raja Lohar, the tyrannical ruler of the kingdom of Ambar who is plagued by a prophecy declaring his downfall at the hands of a girl with a birthmark: the Star Warrior. For years, girls with birthmarks have been hunted down by the State of Ambar, so Gul, who has a star-shaped birthmark lives her life at the edge of a knife: always in hiding, always running. There comes a point when her parents cannot hide her any longer and she is forced



to join a group of renegade women training to fight under the Star Warrior, biding their time.

On the other hand is Cavas, raised as a non-magi who lives in the Tenements: a massive ghetto for others like him who don't have magic in their blood and are therefore treated like filth. Cavas works in Raja Lohar's stables, but runs espionage errands at the royal palace for Latif (a spectre who used to work in the palace gardens) in exchange for illegal herbs which keep his terminally ill father alive. Spectres are spirits which live on after death because of a deep, unfulfilled wish and are instrumental in the way the plot unfolds in both books.

While the first book establishes the plot and reveals an emerging tapestry of the relationships that bind Gul, Cavas and other characters, the second book, *Rising Like a Storm* gallops ahead at a pace reminiscent of a full-length film. There is a great deal of action not just in the plot but also in the personal growth of Gul and Cavas. Gul comes to terms with her immense magical powers and grows from an awkward teenager seething with rage and anxiety into a young woman who finds strength in self-acceptance, facing her worst fears and *samarpan* as she embraces her destiny and forges solidarity with other marked women.

It's harder to talk about Cavas. In the second part he moves from being a quiet, cautious young son driven by his determination to save his dying father towards different experiences: revenge for his father's death, jealousy at Gul's admirers, extreme fear and desperation at the hands of palace torturers. And while the plot suggests that this is a story of two heroes, the writer seems to eventually fall back on the western model of a lone hero on a quest. Events happen to Cavas as they do to Gul, but he isn't given the space, silence or conflict to emerge from them a changed person. In an otherwise compelling story, Cavas appears to be a weak link.

Stark differences in the way magi (magical beings) and non-magi are treated by the state and its citizens are a clear reference to the caste system. Marriages are forbidden between the two and non-magi have been forced to live in ghettos where they eke out a substandard life. And while the writer does an admirable job of holding up a mirror to the society we have created, her decision to endow Cavas with magical powers of his own feels like a cop-out. As complements, Gul acts, Cavas inhibits. Ultimately, the story's characters are defined by qualities they were born with and subsequently, by their location among the haves and have-nots. Could Gul have triumphed with a non-magi partner? Would she have even seen him as an equal warrior in the fight to end injustice, or as someone in need of a saviour? In this aspect, the story fails to live up to the promise offered by fantasy as a genre.



## Simran Sadh

**JHILMIL PRADESH**

By Nabneeta Deshmukh. Translated by Kusumlata Sing. Illustrated by Subir Rai

Children's Book Trust, 2020, pp. 32, ₹80.00

The story revolves around two princesses created by the fairy queen Sheera to deal with her boredom. One of the princesses is sent to the kingdom of darkness and is to be protected from the sun while the other is sent to the prosperous kingdom of the

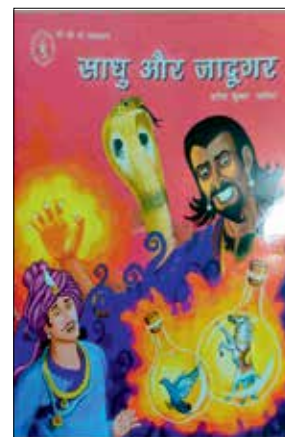


light and is to be protected from the night. Sheera keeps adding up complexities to their lives as the plot progresses until they both finally meet each other and help each other's kingdoms.

The story has three female characters as protagonists and all three of them are appreciated for their beauty first and other characteristics later. The adjectives used for the females are only focusing upon their physical attributes which follows the standard beauty norms. The story follows a third person narration style while at the same time, Sheera is portrayed as someone who is manipulating the lives of both the princesses using magic, for no reason other than for her entertainment. This ends up making Sheera another character in the story, a mere medium for the resolution of the conflict in the story. She is said to be the most powerful being of the skies but her illustrations depict her as a monotonous character, almost obsessively overlooking the two kingdoms and nothing beyond. The other female characters, Laali and Kalima are depicted in traditional ways many-a-times and have an authoritarian upbringing, with only the male sets of parents being involved and the mothers are merely given a glimpse of. The princesses are shown as fragile beauties who need to be protected at the cost of their agency and independence.



The prince's facial expressions and features in the illustrations seem to lack continuity and could have been more refined to help the readers establish a correlation between the written text and its illustrations. The author has assumed that the reader will be aware about the meanings of terms and will navigate the story on her own. This actually shifts the focus away from the storyline.



Animals are recurring elements in the story and are mostly depicted as humans being given punishment or as serving means to an end. The story concludes abruptly. The voice of a female character in the story is completely missing except the character of a fairy who helps the prince without any motives and appears out of nowhere, just so that the story progresses towards its end.



**MAMMO AUR BAUNA JADUGAR**

By Manjri Shukla. Illustrated by Ankur Mitra  
Children's Book Trust, 2021, pp. 32, ₹80.00

The author and the translator have tried to give the story a fairytale dream-like flow, wherein all the elements of nature come forward to engulf the readers in a magical universe. However, this attempt seems to be limited by the choice of vocabulary, which might be asking a little too much from the targeted readers to comprehend, relate to and aesthetically appreciate. The length of the story doesn't help much as well. The story is themed around the concepts of light and darkness and represent the night's darkness as evil whereas sunlight is equated with prosperity.

The story at times seems to have not been mapped appropriately and lacks continuity at crucial events, such as when the two princesses finally meet or when their fifteenth birthday comes. These errors make one wonder the purpose and objectives the story tends to serve. The illustrations often fail in interacting with each other as a holistic experience. In conclusion, the various things happening in the story only get overbearing as the story progresses and the author's attempt to build towards the final climax makes the story a superficial read.



**SADHU AUR JADUGAR**

By Harish Kumar 'Amit'. Illustrated by Ankur Mitra  
Children's Book Trust, 2020, pp. 32, ₹80.00

The story is about a prince who once encounters a snake who talks and claims to be a hermit, who once had magical powers until a sorcerer out of vengeance turned him into a snake. The hermit had got himself a boon of getting any one wish fulfilled in a day and the sorcerer wanted him to use the boon for giving him wishful invisibility. The story revolves around the prince helping the hermit who will help him in turn to get married to a princess of the neighbouring country and defeating the sorcerer in the due course.

The publisher and the illustrator seem to have done a fair job at choosing the crucial events from the story and depicting them, enhancing the readers' experiences and supporting their imagination.

Manjri Shukla writes about an old woman, fondly called Mammo who possessed magical powers. She lives in a town with her cat who could turn into other beings and has a garden in which all the flowers could talk like humans. Her townspeople are once threatened and enslaved by a sorcerer who also takes away Mammo's magical wand which is the source of her magical powers. The story revolves around how Mammo with the help from her cat saves her town and defeats the sorcerer.



The story seems to be doing justice to its theme of being a fairytale and is laden with various elements of magic from the start to finish. There is magic happening at every turn of the page, to the point that it might seem like an overdose and beyond the need of the plot. However, the magic happening in the story carries with itself a variety of intentions, sometimes magic is used to harm, overpower and instill fear while at other times, it is used to protect, help and to defeat 'evil'. Thus, the idea of 'good' and 'evil' gets rigid demarcations through the magical elements of the story, which leaves no scope for layers in the characters or the situation they find themselves in.

The story from the beginning attempts to use these distinctive magical elements to build suspense with the promise of unfolding as one reads on. Whether the author Manjri Shukla succeeds in keeping the targeted age-group (9-12 years old) hooked on to her story is the question, as a reader from this age group is easily able to understand and call out a plot which misses out on its thread of logic. The continuity error in the story with regard to the use of magical powers prevents readers from being involved in the story and the universe which fairytales and fantasy fictions try to create for their readers.

If a reader does get past the errors in the plot, the vocabulary being used is sure to take their interest and focus away from the story. The author's attempt seems to be to place the story in an 'ancient'

timeline, an unnecessary ‘compulsion’, one feels, when writing fairytale for children, often starting them off with ‘once upon a time’ and using sanskritized words. The illustrations present a conflict in the time and space in which the story is set. The text of the story is many-a-times running through entire pages, giving little mind space to the reader to interact with the illustrations as they go along the story.

The story of *Mammo aur Bauna Jadugar* is indeed imaginative but it could have been much more. The narrative is not very fresh and innovative and is only going to end up in a pile of stories written around this genre. The characters are driven to a resolution a little too easily, which leaves little scope for prediction.

The title of the story which is to be used as a hook to get the reader to pick the book up from the shelves doesn't sync with the plot and makes one wonder if she was even a crucial character to the story. The presence of a variety of smaller insignificant characters, ensuring that the plot buzzes, contributes to the few reasons why this story will be read.



## Sanchita Datta

### MY NAME IS GULAB

Written and illustrated by Sagar Kolwankar  
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2021, pp. 28, ₹175.00

**G**ulab, the daughter of a manual scavenger—is mocked at by her class mates as ‘stinky Gulab’, not because she is filthy but because of her father’s profession which involves cleansing of clogged gutters.

So, on science day in school Gulab takes the first bold step of showcasing a machine to clean up the drains without involving any human. She names it *Gulab* which will remove the dirt and spread fragrance.

The story revolves around the inherent class divide existing in our society. Both Gulab and the bullies are the victims of this societal discrepancy, one as perpetrator and the other as victim.

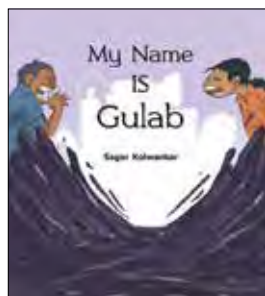
The book also reveals the dream in the child’s mind to put an end to her father’s miserable job and to cleanse society into one which does not distinguish between people on the basis of the jobs they perform.

The story accompanied by illustrations is in harmony to make it a joyful read. The words have been reflected in the colours and shapes, the details in the characters and vice versa. Both words and pictures have lent a unified vision of the story.

This book in contrast to the fairy tales, where a Prince always comes in rescue to the suffering princesses, deals with a real life situation. Here Gulab is the princess who is capable of handling her own miseries in the best possible way.

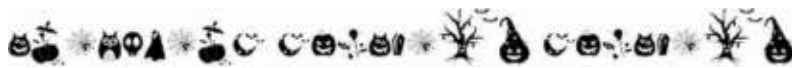
The story gets emotional when Gulab’s father describes his job, how the officer babu keeps his salary on the ground so that he does not have to touch him. Gulab’s father has accepted his ‘untouchable’ condition without any question. But Gulab does not and so she plans to make the cleansing machine for her science exhibition.

Sagar Kolwankar ends the story with a strong message and hopes for changed mindsets of the people in our society. Children aged 5



to 8 years would understand and like the book, though the text is primarily aimed at educating younger children. It’s an interesting read even for the grown-ups. It introduces the key concept of social injustice and inequality which culminates later in major socio-political issues. The book encourages the key learning of the concepts of social equality and harmony that will, no doubt, prove useful to all of us in the long run. If only people realized how much life might be improved by a more egalitarian society, then maybe they would work towards it—it’s hard to see how such greater understanding can be fostered. If we want changes to be brought in our society, it has to start with our children. This book serves that purpose extremely well.

Tulika publishers are committed to inspiring and empowering intelligence across all walks of life but especially in the minds of our children. Tulika for Kids is committed to adapting and growing as the fields of education and intelligence evolve.



## Sandhya Gandhi-Vakil

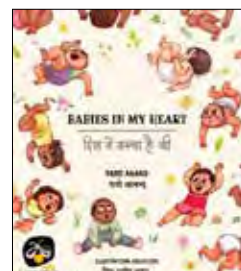
### BABIES IN MY HEART

By Paro Anand. Translated by Shashi Sablok. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe  
Jugnoo Prakashan, 2021, pp. 24, ₹120.00

**B**abies In My Heart is a simply-written story about the concept of family, and the types of families found in today’s world. The story begins by introducing the reader to a standard nuclear family with biological father, mother and their biological children—the archetypical *Hum do hamare do*; and then goes on to introduce families with twins, triplets and quadruplets. Then come same-sex families with two mothers or two fathers. Here, the concept of adoption is brought up by differentiating between *tummy mummy* and *heart family*. Then the concept of a single parent (actually a single woman) family is introduced. And lastly the idea of extended family with grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins, is brought in. The uniting thread of the variety of families is that babies are magical, a source of joy, love and laughter; they are a gift and good fortune.

The story is written in an iterative style with each concept being introduced with the sentence, ‘Sometimes I come hop, skip and jump...’. I wish this had not been done. The phrase in fact creates confusion by trying to tie together the concept types of families with composition and structures of family. For example, an extended family can be a part of a biological family, a family with adopted children, a family with same sex parents, etc. Biological families with *tummy mummy* can and do love their babies from their heart. The parent’s friends or neighbours can sometimes be extended families too. I also wish the author had not said ‘Sometimes I come... as a gift to a family who doesn’t have one of their own...’ to describe adoption. It makes it sound like only biological children are one’s own; or that people adopt when they don’t have their own; which is surely not the intention.

However, the book is a great attempt to open up the reader/narrator’s mind to contemporary family types and structures in a simple way, keeping love and joy as the common element. The style is simple and the illustrations are lovely.



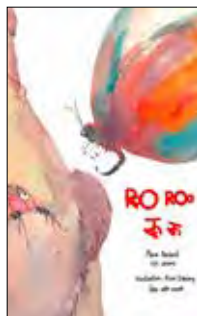


**ROO ROO**

By Paro Anand. Translated by Shashi Sablok. Illustrated by Rishi Sahany  
Developed by Ektara  
Jugnoo Prakashan, 2021, pp. 32, ₹170.00

Paro Anand's story of young Roo Roo the joey will strike a chord in every child's mind. His fear of leaving his mother's protective pouch and his need for friends has surely been experienced by every pre-schooler. His adventures are fun, and some of the animals included in his adventures are foreign enough to arouse curiosity and make the Indian narrator run to look them up, to show pictures to the child and provide additional fun facts. There is a nice touch of humour and excitement in the story to keep the child riveted, as Roo Roo overcomes his fears and explores the world around him. It is lovely to see Roo Roo offering the comfort of his mother's pouch and sharing its warmth and safety with all his friends. The fact that they all fit in mother's pouch is intended to be philosophical, and should not be interpreted literally as an absurd impossibility.

This is a great bilingual read-aloud story for play schoolers. The style is simple, and the translation in Hindi is accessible. The illustrations are very expressive, with watercolour paintings of animals in warm colours that are very pleasant to look at. However, one illustration of a bunch of mushrooms with a school bus is inexplicable. The use of an image of a python starting at page one and ending on the last page, chasing a mouse, adds a whimsical touch, as well as serving as a functional divide between the English and Hindi texts. The book will be a good addition to any library.

**Jaya Krishnamachari****CHAMAN LAL KE PYJAME**

By Anil Singh. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnoo Prakashan, 2019, pp. 43, ₹150.00

*Chaman Lal Ke Pyjame* is an interesting collection of six stories written by Anil Singh for children aged 8 and above. All the stories are set in Umariya, a district in Madhya Pradesh. The language is colloquial bringing back memories of a Madhya Pradesh I grew up in. The Hindi spoken in small towns of many Hindi-speaking States is something one does not generally hear in Metropolitan cities. It is very quaint and only people living in those parts may be familiar with some of the words that I came across in these stories.

The protagonists in all the stories are young boys between the ages of 8 and 12, so from the narration it would seem that it is the author reminiscing about his own childhood spent in Umaria. The first story, '*Bandaron ki Jal Samadhi*' is about the predicament of a group of monkeys who find themselves in an impossible situation and how knowledge of their condition affects a child, the narrator here. The author has described in quite some detail about the depredation of the environment in order to advocate providing of amenities like



bridges across rivers and so on. The author also dwells on the fact that while any sensational news is the talk of the town for a few days, the moment some other new event comes up the previous events cease to be of interest. Here it is the plight of the monkeys that, after nearly 10 days of being the talking point of the town is forgotten by the people of Umaria when they hear about, and preparations begin for, the arrival of a VIP in their midst.

The second story in this book, called '*Langda Gudda ki Chalang*' is about a group of boys who want to celebrate Holi separately from the customary Holi celebrated in the town in the Brahmin locality and the escapade they get into. The boys feel that since some older boys had started building a Holi bonfire in the Muslim locality, they should do the same. The rest of the story describes how the protagonist and his friends spend their time gathering the necessary firewood and other things for their celebration, about their activities during festivals like diwali, dusshera, Holi etc. A detailed description follows of how a Holi bonfire is built, and what the boys do to have a bonfire of their own. The author's description of the names of various plants required for a Holi bonfire is a good way to teach children not only about the festival but also names of local flora. It is interesting to read about how young children react when their efforts are thwarted. Suspense is built up till the end about the outcome of the children's actions by describing their state of mind, their anxiety and then their relief when the whole thing ends without much ado. At the same time they also learn that elders are not always out to penalize them for their silly adventures. A good story.

'*Chaman Lal Ke Pyjame*', the third story in this book is about sensitivity in human beings seen through the young narrator's eyes. The description of the place brings alive the town. Every small town in India has a main bazar and shops selling various things from cloth to provisions, snacks to vegetables and fruits and the author's description of all of it is so familiar that any child who has lived in such towns can identify with it. The story is about an old tailor who is well known for his skills and how, when because of his age, a mistake occurs, he is shamed by a wealthy man and how a Good Samaritan salvages the situation. If I say more I will be giving away the story, so I will leave it to the youngsters to read it and learn how one can be sensitive to others quietly.

'*Gajju Ka Baada*' is a story of an old house situated in Umaria. It is a godown and youngsters spend time playing near it. It has a huge compound but the gates are always locked, so no one really knows what it is like inside. Children are always curious by nature so when they notice something strange, their interest is kindled and they try to investigate the strange phenomenon. Much suspense is built up and the reader is curious to know the results of their investigation. The author ends the story with a very staid discovery leaving the youngsters rolling in laughter at their own gullibility. Simple stories, set in a familiar milieu, will certainly have young readers interested in reading these stories by Anil Singh.

The other two stories in this book are '*Bijuka*' and '*Pandit Gorelal Rabadiwale*'. In '*Bijuka*' the author brings out the emotions of the young protagonist who is very upset and annoyed with an elder for beating him regularly. The story is woven around the boy's planning to find the right time to avenge himself and how he goes about it. The punishment meted out to him is for neglecting his studies and bunking school but the young boy does not look at it in that light and his anger is aroused. The boy comes up with a novel way to get his revenge without anyone being harmed in anyway.

The last story '*Pandit Gorelal Rabadiwale*' is not really a story. The author remembers a person who was a part of his growing up years in his native Umaria. He remembers fondly the delectable *rabadi* made by Pandit Gorelal and how the people of Umaria loved

it.

Anil Singh is a natural story teller. I feel after reading these stories that he is able to effortlessly spin a tale around the ordinary happenings in day to day life. All the six stories in this collection are descriptive, informative and interesting. More such books would be welcome for young readers.

#### MITTI KI GAADI

By Priyamvad

Jugunoo Prakashan, 2020, pp. 39, ₹130.00

Priyamvad's collection of six stories in his first book written for children is a very thought-provoking one. He takes the reader through all the issues that have to be given serious thought to if we are not to lose our environmental well being, our traditional crafts and our sensitivity towards the poor and the downtrodden, especially the tribals living in remote parts of the country. Each topic has been woven into a story but the underlying thought in each will certainly make the young ones think and perhaps even leave a deep imprint on their minds. But the only question that came to my mind was—which age group is this book meant for?



When human beings indulge in pleasures like hunting, as they did in the old times, they fail to realize what harm they inflict on the animals and birds who are as much a part of the planet as humans are. The first story in this collection, 'Jheel Isliye Sookh Gayi', deals with the kind of environmental depredation that happened in earlier times. The author, while on a trip to Bharatpur for bird watching, finds that the birds are no longer there in large numbers as in the past and is dismayed to find the lake almost dried. His curiosity to know the reason for this phenomenon leads him to an old man who tells him the story of how the birds stopped coming and how the lake had little water now. An interesting insight into the manner in which unwittingly men become responsible for destroying the beautiful things that nature has bestowed on them. These days environmental science is part of the school curriculum, so stories such as these will help children learn very valuable lessons.

Similarly the next story, 'Munna Bunaiwale', deals with vanishing crafts like cane weaving in our times. The story is about an old man who is the only one left in the town who is adept in this art. The author describes in some detail about the process of weaving cane furniture and narrates the story of the old man and his concerns about the future of his craft. However, things are not so bleak after all and the craft does find a craftsman. I will leave the children to find out how. It is true that but for the efforts of modern day entrepreneurs, many of the old arts and crafts could become extinct.

'Rehmat Ke Fereshteh' is all about the art of storytelling that was part and parcel of a child's life in times gone by. Even now bed-time stories do form a part of a child's growing up years but not in the manner they were in vogue in times gone by. This story tells of a domestic help of the family who would weave new stories for the young protagonist. The author's descriptions are very evocative and you can almost imagine yourself in a big household, the daily routine of the household and so on. Subtly, the author has brought out the changes that have been taking place in life-styles so much so that many of the old ways have been pushed to the background. It also tells how the author's perspective about story telling changes with this chance meeting with the old man.

The next story is not a story and I wonder how it has found its

way into this collection. It is the author's ruminations while taking his daily walk in a cemetery near his house. I could not understand the logic of this theme in a children's story collection.

The most interesting story in this book is 'Mitti ki Gaadi', the central theme of which is the non-availability of good medical care for people living in remote parts of the country. The story revolves around a very well qualified doctor and how the visit of a patient and his giving a mud cart changes his life. Youngsters may find it interesting though the ideas expressed herein are again a little beyond a young one's grasp. Such stories are better told to children in person than being written for them to read.

The last of the stories in this collection is 'Mujhe Dhoop Se Dar Lagta Hai'. I feel this is also a little difficult for a child to comprehend. Some incidents that take place with a couple of squirrels become a reason for the author to feel scared of sunshine and he expresses his thoughts in the conclusion. Not a good example for young ones.

Priyamvad is a well-known writer who has written a number of stories and novels for adults and this is his first collection for children. He comes across as a very sensitive human being who can make ordinary incidents and events take shape as stories to ponder over. Hope the youngsters would relate to the themes.



#### PK Basant

##### SHER KI NEEND

Written and illustrated by Manica K Musil.  
Translated from the original Slovenian into English  
by Jason Blake. Translated into Hindi by Shashi  
Sablok

Jugunoo Prakashan, Delhi, 2020, pp. 28, ₹170.00



##### MASAI MARA

Script by Kamla Bhasin, Photographs by Bina Kak  
Jugunoo Prakashan, Delhi, 2018, pp. 52, ₹175.00



##### KITABON WALA GHAR

By Jasbir Bhullar. Translated from the original  
Punjabi into Hindi by Rakesh Pankaj. Illustrated by  
Chandramohan Kulkarni

Jugunoo Prakashan, Delhi, 2020, pp. 58, ₹200.00



##### MAGARMACCHON KA BASERA

Text by Jasbir Bhullar. Illustrated by Atanu Roy  
Jugunoo Prakashan, Delhi, 2018, pp. 56, ₹180.00

##### TITAHARI KA BACHCHA

Retold by Pradyamani, Simran, Vidyabharati,  
Sanjhli, Sunaina, Amar, Sonam, Deshmani, and  
Ashikana Singh. Illustrated by Bhargav Kulkarni  
Jugunoo Prakashan, Delhi, 2018, pp. 36, ₹130.00

##### NAAKON KI SHAHZAADI

Text by Mira Ganapati. Illustrated by Nancy Raj  
Pratham Books, Bengaluru, 2019, pp. 20, ₹50.00

The 'children's books' I grew up with were essentially preachy adult stuff parading as stories for children.

It is a delight, therefore, to see these six books which try and see the world through the eyes of a child.



*Sher ki Neend* (The Lion's Sleep)

written and illustrated by Manica K Musil presents a lion who is not a fierce hunter out to kill and frighten children. Rather, it is a lion that desperately needs a snooze but cannot sleep because birds and monkeys and insects don't let him. Finally a bird leads him up a hill and he falls asleep: a lovely metaphor for a child's desire to guide grownups. While the tale alone is sure to engage any six-seven year old, the fabulous illustrations, created with a variety of fabrics, threads, rope and wool, would compel even older people to turn its pages.



Jasbir Bhullar's *Kitabon Wala Ghar* is moored in the nostalgia of growing up in rural Punjab about seven decades ago. Little Veer's is a small world where a sweet-seller gives a child a gulab jamun for a piece of paper that the child believed was a currency note. It is an idyllic fantasy in which a bitch, whom the young Veer had saved from starvation and death, treats him as her own pup by allowing him to suckle. The description of the school is delightful with the teacher taking an afternoon snooze in the school premises and children left on their own. However, that may not be unreal even today as far as schools in rural areas are concerned. The description of a movie being shown in enclosed tents in a dark night is delightful. The child's discovery that while darkness invisibilizes everything, it visibilizes some movies where heroes subdue villains is beautifully described. Echoes of Partition reach Veer's village in the form of a great fear where people try to protect themselves from an invisible calamity. However, the memory of Partition is resolved in a beautiful gesture when his father preserves a copy of the Quran and hands it to his friend who had moved to the other side.

The other work by Jasbir Bhullar, *Magarmacchon ka Basera* (Home of the Crocodiles), is more of a 'boy book'. It is an ambitious project of writing a fictional biography of a female crocodile. To human eyes crocodiles represent nature 'red in tooth and claw'. Humanized, they lose their crocodile selves, else few people would want to have anything to do with them. Any attempt to turn these ponderous amphibians known for passivity and slothfulness into creatures caught in epic journeys is a brave endeavour. Kirali, a playful female crocodile, grows into a healthy adult and falls for Magdhu, a powerful male croc. Together they hunt and terrorize nearly every creature around them, not excluding other crocodiles. One day a sudden flood separates Kirali from other crocodiles and she ends up in a small pond. She works very hard to enlarge the size of the pond since she has to lay eggs. She becomes the mother of a large brood that is growing under her parental care until disaster strikes again. Another flood carries her away. This time she is caught by humans. Luckily for her she is released in an 'abhayaranya' (a forest exclusively for animals). There she meets her lost love Magdhu and they live happily ever after. A very human end indeed. I wonder, though, how many kids will buy this story.

Kamla Bhasin and Bina Kak's *Do Bahanon ki Masai Mara Yatra* (The Journey of Two Sisters to Masai Mara) is a delightful travelogue. Kamla Bhasin uses the popular trope of whispering among children as the carrier of important messages; the book begins with a dialogue that has been overheard by someone hiding nearby. Those are whispers about two sisters visiting the Masai Mara forest in Africa 'all alone'. Bhasin proceeds, in her signature style, to throw

the gauntlet down at patriarchy. So, the journey to Africa, from the planning to the adventures that attend it, challenges patriarchal assumptions at every step. We see lions, panthers, elephants, wild buffaloes, rhinoceros and cheetahs roam. We learn of the Serengeti Plains that witness the great migration of zebras, wildebeest and deer of many kinds. There is a chapter on exotic birds that include ostrich, kingfisher and cranes. Excellent photographs enrich the text. As always, Kamla Bhasin's work has a directness and a sense of communication that few can match. This book is her parting gift to children.

I am not sure whether *Naakon ki Shahzaadi* is a story about the production of *itr*/perfume, or a fantasy, or about a grandma's special sensory abilities. There's a bit of all this, but it is not clear how they come together. The tale goes from one thing to another with just the barest thread of connection between them. Maybe the author just wrote up a dream she dreamt? Or wanted to introduce very young readers to magic realism? The illustrations are fun, though.

*Titehri ka Baccha* is in a different genre altogether. Ten narratives of one to two pages each by children of the Pardi community (long been stigmatized as a 'criminal tribe'), who live in a residential school in Bhopal. No artifice, no theatrics. Twelve year old Pradyamani Singh begins her narrative by saying how much she loved water and dreamt of a life spent in water, only to land up, soon after, working in paddy fields. The back-breaking work of transplanting saplings in standing water, followed by domestic responsibilities in the evening is recounted in a matter-of-fact way. She also proceeds to say that her younger sisters were not particularly responsible, which meant a greater burden for her, but notes that they are beginning to help as they grow up. In another narrative, she tells of encountering a tiger in the forest—not an event of touristy excitement, but one fraught with danger. But this is no by means a saga of unrelieved hardship: children discover joy and love in the most exacting circumstances. Ten year old Vidyabharati recounts the games they play in the forest while collecting firewood while Simran remembers the time bees swarmed into their house after a hive was broken. The family ran out, then remembered their pet parrot, and their grandmother returned, covered in a shawl, to rescue it. The affection for Mithu—conveyed in such childlike expressions as, 'I was in tears. Our Mithu is very good. He speaks a lot. He even knows our names', is heartbreakingly beautiful.

Twelve year old Sanjhli Singh's story is about a lapwing chick separated from its mother. The few hostel kids who hadn't gone home during the summer try to raise it but the chick does not survive. I wish the story had ended with the chick flying away, but then, this is life, not fiction. And a lesson that nurturing life is an art, the greatest of all. In *'Darukutta Undara'*, eleven year old Sonam Singh shares an amusing anecdote about a mouse which makes a racket at night. They discover in the morning that it had lapped up the few drops of liquor left by her father in a glass at night! The illustrations complement the narration—there is a straightforward simplicity and realism. I only wish there were a glossary at the end for unfamiliar words; the story about the 'undara' was, luckily, illustrated with a mouse in a glass, but I have not been able to figure out what 'achaar been-na' is.

The fact that I am reviewing this book, presumably to help parents and educators decide on whether it is a suitable read for their wards is itself stomach churning. Is there any question about whether privileged children should learn about other childhoods lived in such deprivation? Everyone of us needs to read these stories.



## Aruna Patel Vajpeyi

### HAWA MITHAI

By Arun Kamal. Illustrated by Bhargava Kulkarni  
Jugnoo Prakashan, Ektara Taxila Education Society, Bhopal, 2020, pp. 43,  
₹160.00

**H***awa Mithai* by the renowned Hindi poet is a collection of essays on the elements, water, light, air, as also on sound, the earth, sky, fire, the seasons. E.g., water is derived from clouds, rains and rivers and light are derived from the Sun, Moon and the stars. Humans, birds, animals and even plants and trees, all depend on the elements. We derive abundance of pleasure from them but when we make them angry, they bring misery to us by causing floods, earthquakes, thunderstorms, etc. The author has described these elements in colourful details. There are three essays on potatoes, cycle and green chillies to add spice to the volume. The illustrations are attractive, Kulkarni has done a very good job.



If this book is written as extra reading for primary students, then the print is too small for their comfort, and if it is meant for older ones, the text is too elementary. The author has used some local words like *Hawa Mithai, tadit, thake, fabe, nithar* which are not commonly used in Hindi. A glossary at end of the book would have helped.



### GHUDSAWAR

By Udayan Vajpeyi. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghoshal  
Jugnoo Prakashan, Ektara Taxila Education Society, Bhopal, 2020, pp. 55,  
₹200.00

**P**erceptions are coloured by one's imagination: the night sky, the star-filled skies, etc., are what we see as well as partly what we imagine too. The collection of eight short stories for children by Udayan Vajpeyi, a well-known Hindi poet, bring to the reader a delightful mix of the real and the imagined.



'*Ghud Sawar*', '*Lambe Raja ke Aansoo*' and '*Billota ki Pasand*' are three stories told with a vivid imagination like transformation of a restless prince who was good for nothing into a sharp shooter and a horse rider. In the second story, the King is so tall that he rules the kingdom by throwing instructions to his subordinates on pieces of paper. His queen, whose face he had never seen dies and he cries because he could not meet her. But he imagines that he sees her in heaven and sheds tears of joy. In '*Billota ki Pasand*', a bear is trying to reach the honeycomb on a tree but he fails. So he climbs a hill and performs penance and transforms himself into a Billota (cat). He returns to the tree, climbs up and takes out the honey but he cannot savour it because billotas do not like honey.

The remaining chapters are abstract essays dealing with the five senses: hearing, sight, touch, smell and taste.

The illustrations by Taposhi Ghoshal are attractive and efforts are made to match with the text.



### GODAM

By Vinod Kumar Shukla. Illustrated by Taposhi Ghosal  
Jugnoo Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Taxila Publications, Bhopal, 2020,  
pp. 8, ₹50.00

**G***odam* by the award-winning poet and novelist Vinod Kumar Shukla is written in the first person. The protagonist lives in a rented house with a tree. This is his sixth rented house. All the earlier five houses had also trees in the compound. He is accustomed to hearing the chirping of birds and scampering of squirrels. They seem like his family members. In the sixth house the tree stands on its own. It has fresh green leaves, with small flowers which exude a sweet smell.



The simple desire of the protagonist to always look for a house with a tree to rent ends tragically, because tired of asking his tenant to move out, the house-owner decides to cut the beautiful tree to show the tenant that the house is now treeless. This ruthless move of the landlord makes the protagonist decide to live in a store, *godam*, airless and with no trees. However, the story is a bit too complex for a child reader. Also, the author could have used this as a peg to hang the message to plant and nourish trees to protect the environment, an opportunity he has clearly missed.

The illustrations are eye catching, specially the cover page.

Jugnoo Prakashan takes a very creative approach to commissioning well-known authors and poets of the Hindi literary world to write books for children. However, the volumes under review show that the attempt has not really resulted in great literature for children. There could be many reasons, the authors are used to writing great intellectual novels and poetry for adults and are unable to relate to what children want to read. Most of the stories will be incomprehensible to the young reader or at worst, seem meaningless. Perhaps the editorial team at Ektara needs to have one-on-one conversations with the authors in future collaborations, and conduct workshops to sensitize them to the approach to children's literature. What comes to mind is a similar exercise undertaken in Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, in the eighties when the greats of art and literature like J Swaminathan and BV Karanth interacted with children to teach how to paint or produced plays like *Shuk Shiksha* by Tagore (titled by Karanth as *Pinjar Shala*, and *Gilhari Ramayan*). The improvisations and the artists' personal interaction transformed tongue-tied, diffident young ones into actors who brought tears to the eyes of the audience.

## Manyata Makkar

### THE WAITING

By Dipavali Sen  
Invisible Publications, 2020, pp. 220, ₹199.00

**T***he Waiting* may seem like a simple book, but it is pretty complex with multiple stories surrounding the main character, Anit, and his friends—Bimal, Chandan, and Deeksha, also known as the ABCD gang in the book.

Dipavali Sen talks about bullying/ragging and connects it with mythology, magic, historical research, scientific experiment, contemporary attitudes, and mystical practices.





*The Waiting* is an adventure book. It starts with Anit's story of shifting to a new house, a new school, and how he is bullied there as a new boy. Even though he is irritated and frustrated, he does not tell his parents about the ordeals of the ragging he faced. Being the only child, he understands all the hardships his parents had gone through to buy a house for themselves. But he accepts help from a stranger for the same. That stranger introduces himself as a magician and links his magic to mythology to help Anit fight his bullies. When he is able to protect himself from his bullies, they want to become his friends, for they feel Anit is strong and worthy of their friendship.

The story slowly progresses to the school principal's farewell and how no one likes him because he is very strict. Even on his last day, the principal was humiliated by the gift given to him, yet he maintains his calm and does not say a word. This particular incident shows his growth as a person and teaches everyone how important it is to be a bigger person, to be kind, in this cruel world.

The author then talks about Anit's relationship with his neighbour, Mr. Nath. Even though his friends don't like it that he spends his time with Mr. Nath, Anit knows better. His values and morals make him help Mr. Nath by reading newspaper headlines for him every Sunday.

The ABCD gang is the most curious one. From peeping into other people's houses to discovering a dinosaur, from learning magic tricks to helping Anit's grandmother, the ABCD gang goes through a roller-coaster ride in this book.

Dipavali Sen has taken the mystical, magical world and beautifully explained the concepts of parenting and schooling. Through Anit, she talks about how over-parenting or strict parenting can lead to indisciplined children. She then subtly discusses the role of teachers in encouraging children to explore more, discover more, experiment more, and learn more. No one likes strict discipline, but Anit understands why his school's ex-principal wanted things to be done in a certain way. Everyone notices the chaos that was happening once he left the school.

The author talks about the hardships people face from different walks of life, including a scientist and a magician. She sheds light on how some people are over-shadowed and not taken seriously just because their ideas are out of the box, just like Dr. Chakladar and his obsession with creating a dinosaur.

Overall, this is a good book for children who are starting to read, as the language used by the author is simple and easy to understand. The book is good to be read by adults too. It is refreshing and helps us in revisiting our school days. The book ends on a happy note for

## Madhurima Kahali

### THE SACKCLOTHMAN

Written and translated from the Malayalam by Jayasree Kalathil. Illustrated by Rakhi Peswani.

Eklayya, 2021, pp. 44, ₹150.00

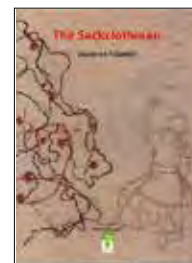
*The Sackclothman* has been developed for *Different Tales: Stories from Marginal Cultures and Regional Languages*, an initiative of the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad.

To be honest, I judged this book by its cover—in fact, I was totally intrigued by it. The illustrations by Rakhi Peswani are commendable. The story evokes the familiar imagery from Rabindranath Tagore's famous story 'Kabuliwala'. There is a young girl, an 'outsider', a social outcast; and the familiar attachment between the two of them. It even has the same gut-wrenching scene of the outsider being taken

away from society after establishing a tender bond with the little girl. The big difference between 'Kabuliwala' and 'The Sackclothman' is that Kabuliwala was narrated from the father's point of view while the latter is narrated by the girl.

The story is profoundly sad. The young protagonist, Anu, and her family are grief-stricken due to the sudden demise of her elder sister. The loving family has fallen apart, with Anu's mother in depression, father turned alcoholic and Anu, in her own lonely world. She is wise and empathetic beyond her years. The loss of her sister, her best friend, creates a void in her little world.

It is then that she strikes up an unusual friendship with the village 'madman' who has a sad past of his own. She waits for her friend, Chakkupranthan, every day. With him, she feels heard, in the world that is quick to snub a child's emotions or questions. When he is taken away from the village, Anu goes through her second big loss. It is then that the parents realize that they need to pull themselves together to save Anu from falling apart. The book touches you deeply. The raw emotions of Anu and her family grappling with their loss, are heart-rending. Although I liked the book, I wouldn't have the heart to recommend this book for young children.

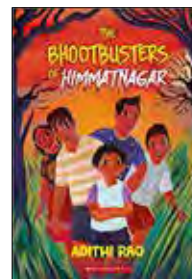


## Anuradha Mathur

### THE BHOOTBUSTERS OF HIMMATNAGAR

By Adithi Rao. Illustrated by Sayan Mukherjee

Scholastic, 2020, pp.144, ₹250.00



Once cheerful and sunny, the village of Himmatnagar has changed in the past month since the mysterious deaths of three of its natives Ram Nayak, Chintamani, and Reddy. The natives of the village seem to have stopped smiling and are always tense; the police seem to have no leads to the cause of the deaths. Welcome to the village of 'Himmatnagar: Land of the Brave', formerly known as 'Phattupur: Village of Cowards'.

Adithi Rao in *The Bhootbusters of Himmatnagar* brings the village canvas alive—the trees, the ponds, the local school, the expansive farmlands, and the village cemetery. Illustrated by Sayan Mukherjee, the book makes an effortless and fun read for pre-teens. Three deaths have occurred, all three have something in common—*eclair toffees*. As the story unfolds, the reader gets to meet different personalities: Ratna Bai, a coconut seller still in shock, Biru the village potter who is always fainting, and a stranger with dense and matted hair who is always muttering under his breath. The reader also joins Kalki, Angad, Vasuki, Mukund, and Govind in their quest to find the murderer(s). The clues lead them to the village cemetery, a bizarre message in a bottle, and *eclair toffees*.

This smooth and flawless narrative weaves the bonds of friendships and promises to keep the reader gripped. The book provides a peek into village life and adventures for the kids growing up in the urban world. The characters remind us of friendship that can tide over the biggest challenges. The important lessons of being kind, unbiased, united, and brave have been expressed very well by Rao. The illustrations offer the necessary visual hooks that support Rao as she unfolds the mystery. The illustrations appear timely, which helps the reader come to terms with the characters.

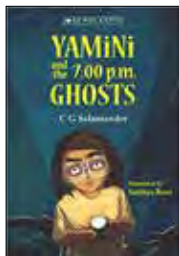
Follow Kalki, Mukund, Angad, Vasuki, and Govind as they attempt to unravel the secret behind the mysterious deaths in the village. Will they do a better investigation than the village police? Well, you have to read to find out!



## Ritika Gour

### YAMINI AND THE 7:00 PM GHOSTS

By CG Salamander. Illustrated by Sahitya Rani  
Scholastic, 2020, pp. 85, ₹295.00



**Y***amini and the 7:00 pm Ghosts* is a story by CG Salamander that revolves around 12-year-old Yamini and her friends discovering the mystery of ghosts in their neighbourhood. The story begins with Yamini hearing the rumours about ghosts in her neighbourhood that come around 7 in the evening. Everyone in the neighbourhood is scared of these ghosts, including Yamini's friends. But Yamini doesn't believe in the rumours. Therefore, she tries to solve the mystery.

Yamini is a curious child and one who questions everything. Her character breaks many stereotypes as she is not afraid of the ghosts even when the men around her are scared. The women in the story are portrayed as more powerful and fearless characters, be it Yamini's mother or her friends Priya and Shreya.

Some of the characters in the story are fascinating and portrayed in an amusing way. The character of Yamini's father is very conflicted as he believes in science like one believes in religion. He worships science and tries to keep everyone safe by using science and scientists as religion and gods respectively. However, the characters of children are not given much space in the story even though they play an important role at the end. The overcoming of fear and friendship is a good character arc given to them.

The story maintains a good pace in the beginning and at the end. However, it gets slightly slow in the middle. The illustrations by Sahitya Rani can help one in understanding the setting and mood of the story. The choice and use of colours give the story a very charming look. The interesting mystery of the story can keep a reader engaged and one will definitely enjoy reading it.



## Neena Jaisingh

### THE GRUMPY MAN

By Cheryl Rao. Illustrated by Suvidha Mistry. Edited by Navin Menon Children's Book Trust, 2020, pp.16, ₹60.00



### THE TWILIGHT ZONE

By Nabanita Deshmukh. Illustrated by Subir Roy. Edited by Navin Menon Children's Book Trust, 2020, pp.32, ₹80.00



**T***he Grumpy Man* makes for a delightful reading experience. Illustrated by Suvidha Mistry, the scenes are set so beautifully that children are sure to have a blast reading this short story by Cheryl Rao.

As the title suggests, the story is about a grumpy man and the kids

in the neighbourhood who are wary of him. Their curiosity is aroused and they want to know about this grumpy man who is not moved even by their good deeds. Their childhood pranks are always met with disapproval. On holidays, they would leave sweets for him at his doorstep but even that gesture does not endear him to them.

The children are very excited when their dad brings home a dog. Spot, who gets his name because of the dots all over, is much loved, for and despite his antics. The kids do their bit to ensure that they don't lose sight of Spot, and so, one day when he lands up in the grumpy man's territory, they become worried about the dog's dreadful fate, drawing up all sorts of scenarios. Imagine their surprise when they see that the grumpy man had befriended their pup and did not seem perturbed or annoyed by Spot's playful ways.

Spot had brought out the best in the grumpy man. They become friends, each finding in the other a loving new companion. Their bond is beautifully depicted by the cheerful illustrations that also bring out the playful and lovable character, not only of Spot, but also of the grumpy man. The story underlines the benefits we all experience from loving pets and is more than just about the grumpy man living next door. It is also a touching story about the relationship between humans and animals and is sure to appeal to the young ones.

Children love to read fairy tales. It transports them into a magical realm of fairies, kings, princesses, and creatures of the animal kingdom. *The Twilight Zone* by Nabanita Deshmukh is one such story which, with its colourful illustrations by Subir Roy, is bound to engage the curiosity of children.

The plot of the story goes like this: there are two kingdoms—the Kingdom of Night, which is ruled by the gloomy Darkins, and the Kingdom of Light that has Lightnus as its monarch. Each of the kings is gifted with a baby created by the magic wand of Sheera, who is the Queen of Fairies. The daughter of Darkins is called Nocturna, while Aurora is the name of the daughter of Lightnus.

Both princesses are very different from each other; Aurora does not know darkness, while Nocturna has never seen the light of day. The young princesses are not allowed to venture out alone from their abodes. When they turn 15 years old, they both become curious to see what lies on the other side of their land. They venture out to the other side, with permission from their respective fathers.

The story moves on to chronicle the adventures of the princesses and how they overcome difficulties along their paths with the help of enchanting creatures of the animal kingdom. Sheera ensures that both princesses are protected during their journeys by creating two birds and sending them to lead the princesses to their destinations.

During their travels, the princesses meet and become friends. After days of wandering, both reach the other side. Nocturna brings the splendour of the Night to the Kingdom of Light and Aurora brings light and the beauty of birds chirping and children playing to the Kingdom of Night. The story ends beautifully, where the people of both kingdoms live happily ever after and Sheera's joy knows no bounds.

*The Twilight Zone* is a charming story and does a great job of hooking readers. The author brings the princesses' adventures to life in this book, with the colourful and engaging illustrations adding to the readers' imagination. All-in-all, it is a delightful tale that is sure to tickle a child's curiosity and develop a love for reading among children. Readers will not only enjoy the book for the adventures of the two princesses, but will also absorb the lesson within, for this story is also one of discovery, appreciation and finding beauty in everything.







The Book Review Literary Trust is a charitable, non-profit Trust, set up in 1989. One of its chief ongoing projects is the publishing of the review journal *The Book Review* which completed its 44th year in December 2020.

*The Book Review* was the first review journal in the English language in India and has been in continuous publication for the last 44 years. In this time, it has promoted scholarly debate, Indian writing in all languages, South Asia studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and many other aspects of writing and publishing, becoming the benchmark, across the world, for critical reviews of works published in South Asia. Globally, leading experts in fields as diverse as international relations, Gandhian studies, and Indian history, regularly contribute to the journal. Covering a very broad array of subjects, this pioneering venture has rendered a unique service to the literary and academic community and the reading public.

*The Book Review* is brought out in a print edition, as well as a digital edition accessible on its website: <http://thebookreviewindia.org>. The journal's primary revenue for ongoing operations is from advertising revenue and subscriptions.

As the journal enters the 45th year of publication, and The Book Review Literary Trust has completed 31 years, the Trustees have put in place an agenda for the continuance of its activities in the coming decades. The Trust now seeks large grants/endowment/goodwill advertisements/ subscriptions to enable the Trust to undertake infrastructure development, to widen the scope of its activities on the digital platform, and gain greater visibility for its activities including *The Book Review*.

The Trustees of The Book Review Literary Trust therefore appeal to individuals and organizations to support this venture and help fulfil their aspirations for the Trust.



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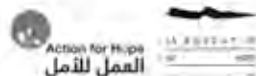
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## For Intellectual Grooming



### **Sādhana: the realisations of life**

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ISBN: 978-93-91431-13-6 | INR 300

In Sengupta's preamble, he highlights Tagore's intimate friendship with Bhupendranath Sanyal. By extensively quoting letters written by Tagore, Sengupta contextualizes the journey of the great sage. Tagore writes in a letter dated 21 April 1903, "I would like to conclude my worldly journey if I can secure your companionship." Sengupta provides the reader with the additional insight that Tagore's sagely journey involved such contemporaries as Sanyal and study of the scriptures. We are reminded that people need one another: intimate and secure contacts and exchanges. In our era of the Great Reset, this important characteristic of human nature should not be violated. Tagore's wisdom throughout *Sadhana* explains precisely why humans are unique, in need of one another in their spiritual journeys and pursuit of the beautiful. **DUSTIN PICKERING**



### **A Bengali Lady in England**

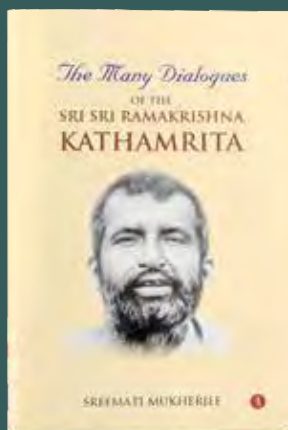
Krishnabhabini Das

[translated by Nabanita Sengupta]

ISBN: 978-81-94421-20-7 | INR 500

The book is actually a sharp social and cultural commentary on all aspects of British life, both virtues and vices. [It] is a hat tip to the pioneers of modern-day feminism.

**THE HINDU BUSINESSLINE**



### **The Many Dialogues of the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita**

Sreemati Mukherjee

ISBN: 978-81-94807-76-6 | INR 650

[The book] brings in the role of song and dance in the messages of Ramakrishna. For that, the author refers to his conversations with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Narendranath Dutta among others.

**THE STATESMAN**



### **Manottama:**

**Narrative of a Sorrowful Wife**

Hundukula-Kamini

[translated by Somdutta Mandal]

ISBN: 978-81-948077-7-3 | INR 300

The dominant issues in the narrative of Manottama are the need for education of Indian women, importance of companionate marriage and how an educated woman can be a more aware wife and mother. Historically, therefore, *Manottama* may be read as a significant 19th century narrative addressing gender politics.

**THE STATESMAN**

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