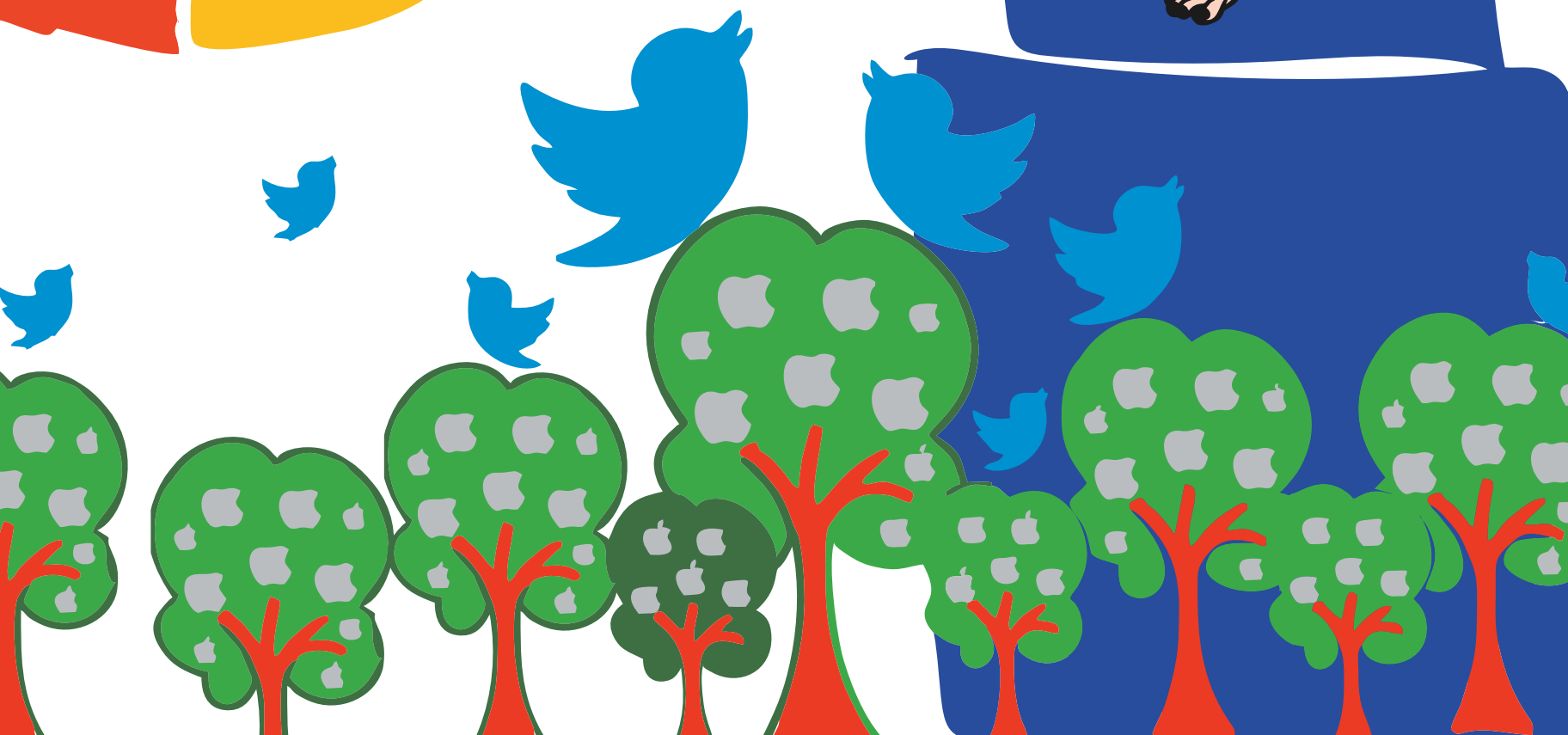
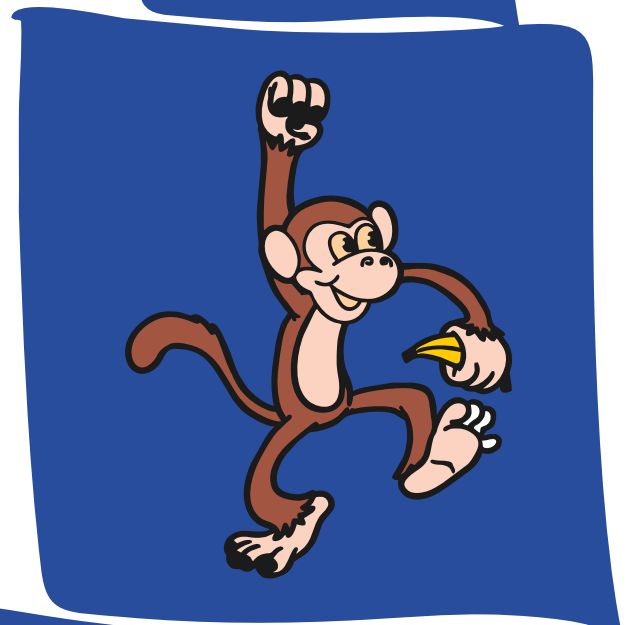
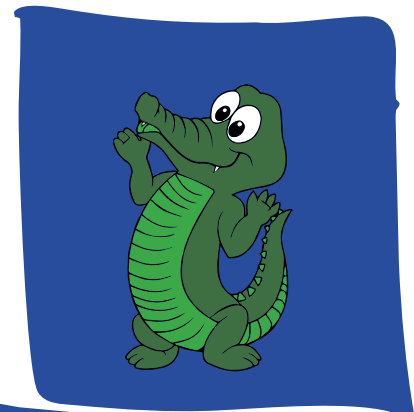


THE BOOK REVIEW

VOLUME XLIII NUMBER 11 NOVEMBER 2019



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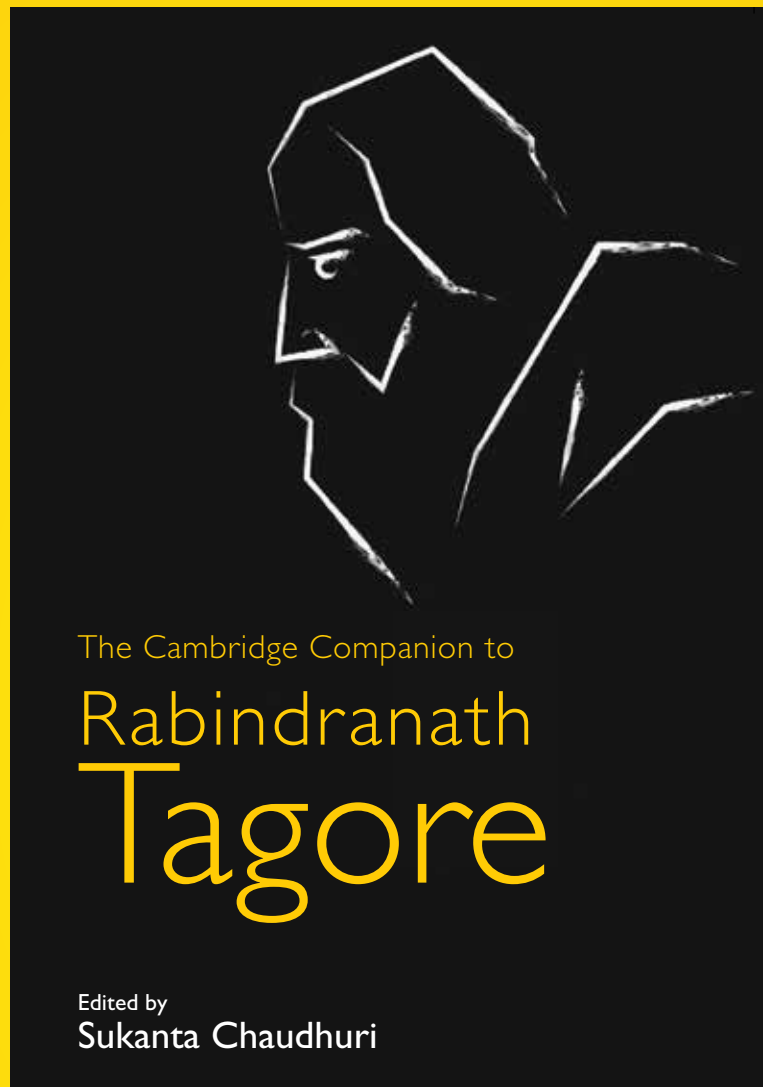
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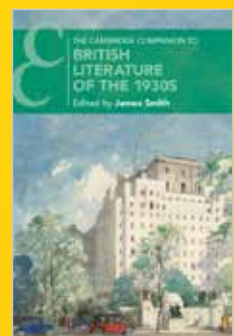
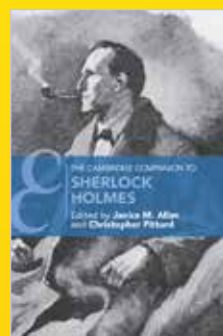
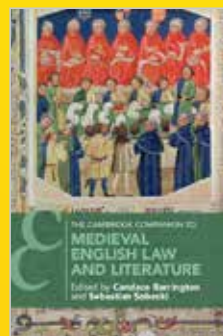
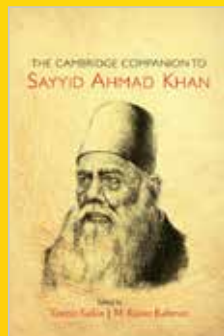
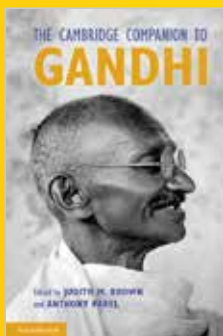
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Annual Subscription (12 Issues)
Individual: ₹1500 / \$75 / £50
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Approach to Teaching and Educating the Young

By Shubhangi Pandit

When we approach the subject of education in its truest sense, it should naturally lead us to the question as to what is the purpose of life? Is education needed to learn 'how to make a living' or to learn 'how to live'? If education meant collecting data and recalling facts then we do not need any schooling today because information is very easily available, almost always at the tip of our fingers.

Swami Vivekananda explains:

'What is education? Is it book-learning? No. Is it diverse knowledge? Not even that. The training by which the current and expression of will is brought under control and becomes fruitful is called education.'

When we move away from the regular systems of schooling in search of meaningful education then we find ourselves on a lesser trodden path of alternative schooling. In the madness of millions of 'Methods' in alternative education, one needs a well-grounded framework backed by a deep and sound philosophy for guidance. One may then find inspiration in Steiner education. It is enchanting to know how the Steiner philosophy crosses paths with the ancient Indian philosophy of looking at every human being not just as a physical body but as a composite being with many layers.

In this approach, the emphasis is on 'age appropriate' learning. In the curriculum lessons are introduced keeping in mind the need of the child's specific stage of development thus providing growing children with a nourishing and healthy environment to meet their inner needs. For example, reading and writing does not start until the secondary dentition which begins around the age of 6 or 7 years (ideally) when the child's etheric forces are freed from the task of forming the physical body. With the aim to nourish 'head, heart, and hands', this education looks at cultivating three principal faculties in children:

- 1) Thinking: Ability to think clearly and independently.
- 2) Feeling: Capacity to feel emotionally connected to one's work and the world at large.
- 3) Willing: Willingness to take action to achieve one's goals and to contribute meaningfully to the world.

Keeping the children at the centre, the programme is designed to address their all-round development by strengthening their will, fostering their imagination and directing their thoughts. Stories, art, music, movement and nature are an integral part of the curriculum and play an important role throughout the schooling years. All the elements, especially stories, are defined in the curriculum based on the age and stage of the children. To sum it up, in Rudolf Steiner's words, 'Our highest endeavour must be to develop individuals who are able out of their own initiative to impart purpose and direction to their lives.'

The teacher standing as the loving authority is at the core of this framework and the inner attitude of the teacher rendering the lessons is given utmost importance. After spending three years in kindergarten, the children walk into the grade school at the age of six to seven years. Then on, they are held by the same class teacher until they are fourteen years old. The bond that builds in the period of these seven years helps the children learn out of the teacher and not out of printed books. That explains the unique feature of not having any text-books. Instead, the children prepare their own lesson books in the morning lessons under the guidance of the teacher.

Various subjects are distributed through the grades with deep

reasoning. Every subject is taught through 'blocks' where the children have a two-hour morning lesson every day on the same subject for three to six weeks. The teacher has the freedom to plan the sequence and duration of her blocks and can use her own creativity to bring different lessons to meet the needs of her class. Every morning lesson starts with a 'morning circle' which includes songs, recitation, movement, rhythmic movement, games etc. Apart from the morning lesson, through the week, the children have classes for two to three languages, painting, handwork, music, form drawing, gardening and games. The day is balanced to ensure that growing children do not spend a whole day at school behind desks but instead joyfully learn their lessons through art, play and stories. What fun to learn alphabets out of pictures through nature stories and fairy tales in grade 1; imbibe moral values through fables without being moralized in grade 2. What joy to get introduced to botany on nature walks and sketching plants and how wonderful to bond with the Harappans or the Greeks while working with their beautiful pottery designs in grade 5.

With all this experiential learning where is the need for exams or grades?! In the absence of a grading system, throughout the schooling years, the teachers track the progress of each child. Reviews and reports occur at regular intervals. The teachers share their observations with the parents in review meetings conducted at least twice a year and submit a written annual report. The reports are meant to be descriptive and suggestive but never judgemental.

There are naturally a few challenges one faces while trying to stay on this path of education.

- 1) Finding the right teacher: One needs a teacher with commitment and passion who is prepared to walk this journey of self-learning and discovery while holding the children.
- 2) Finding the right parents: Such education demands stakeholders who understand and respect it without succumbing to the pressure of academics and scores present in today's scene of schooling.
- 3) Teacher training and Parent orientation: The success of such a program lies in the fruitful partnership of capable teachers and oriented parents.
- 4) Pedantry and Dogmas: The people working with a framework need to understand how to use it as a guide and not as a cage. Avoiding the pedantry and dogmas that creep into systems which follow any framework is very important to keep the program alive and fresh.
- 5) Localization: The curriculum needs to be adapted using one's own creativity to cater to the soul forces of the children connected to a land and culture.

On the path of alternative schooling where every parent earnestly looks for a balance between life and form, such a framework can truly become a guiding light for every teacher who wishes to contribute to child education in today's times.

When young feet with fresh hearts walk into our schools, as an educator we can turn to Kahlil Gibran's words,

'Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh and the greatness which does not bow before children.'

Shubhangi Pandit is a practicing class teacher for the past six years and drives the pedagogy at a homeschool collective in Bengaluru.

Upinder Singh

PEOPLE WHO MADE HISTORY: STORIES FROM ANCIENT INDIA

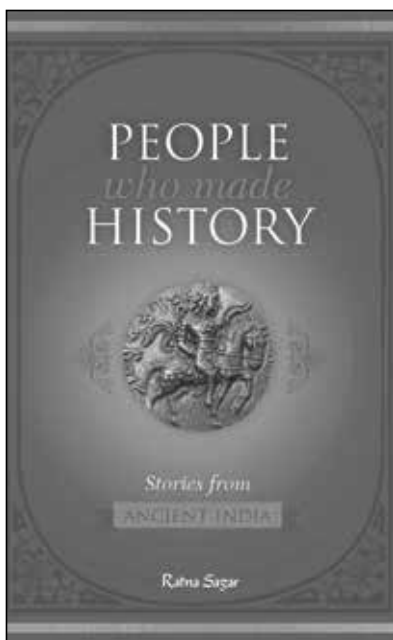
By Nilima Sinha, Nilima Jha, Nita Berry and Neera Jain
Ratna Sagar, 2019, pp. 96, ₹149.00

THE WOMEN WHO RULED INDIA: LEADERS. WARRIORS. ICONS

By Archana Garodia Gupta
Hachette India, Gurugram, 2019, pp. 299, ₹499.00

History has earned the partly-deserved notoriety of being a dreary subject with an overload of factual detail and dates. So there is clearly a great need to make the subject interesting and engaging for young people. The lives of individuals are a good way of humanizing the past and making it less drab and abstract. Life stories well told can engender interest, reflection, empathy and wonder. Both these books take on this important task with verve and enthusiasm, though in various ways.

People Who Made History: Stories from Ancient India is a slim book consisting of twelve chapters, written variously by Nilima Sinha, Nilima Jha, Nita Berry and Neera Jain. The subjects are well-known figures—Gargi, Siddhartha, Chanakya, Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Charaka, Gautamiputra Satakarni, Samudragupta, Fa-Hien, Kalidasa, Aryabhata, and Pulakesin II. Most of them were politically powerful men, but there are also a woman, poet, mathematician-astronomer, scholar, and Chinese monk. Recognizing the importance of visuals for young readers, the text is interspersed with drawings (the name of the illustrator is unfortunately not mentioned). A few endnotes explain Sanskrit terms or unfamiliar words. The stories are interspersed with snippets of information on miscellaneous issues such as the rise of Jainism, Pattachitra, Nalanda and Natya-shastra. There are no dates in this book, obviously a conscious decision.



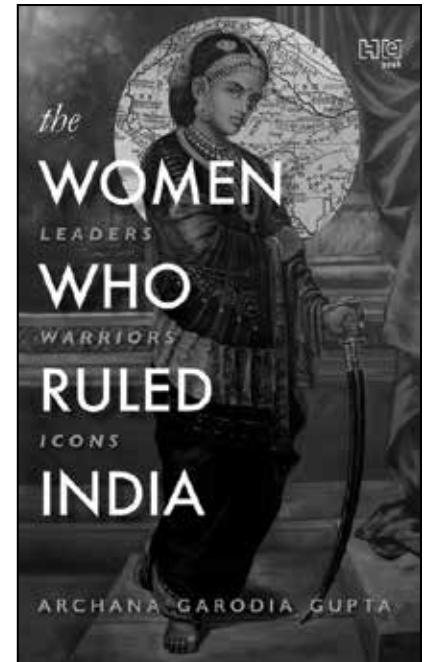
The introduction tells us upfront that the authors have blended fact with fiction, history with legend. Characters, events and conversations are invented. Instead of summarizing a whole life, the focus of the narration is on personalizing the stories and highlighting a few key dramatic events. The stories are told from different perspectives, sometimes

in the third person and sometimes in the first. The use of the latter is quite effective. Samudragupta's story, for instance, is told from the perspective of Harishena, and Pulakeshin II's is presented as a first person account. The authors state that their aim is to talk about famous people from ancient India who left an imprint on history, who did radical things. Presumably, the aim is also to offer inspiration to today's young.

The authors have done a good job of telling the stories in an engaging way. Of course, if looked at from the historian's point of view of accuracy, questions can be asked about liberties that are taken with historical facts, even about the very existence of one of the figures, namely Chanakya. It is the subject matter that creates issues when the audience consists of children. I am uncertain about the

extent to which young readers will be able to connect with the philosophical aspects of Gargi's debate, the Upanishadic search for *Brahman*, Siddhartha's search for truth, Gautamiputra seeing the divine light, or the complex vocabulary of Ayurveda. This is a part of the larger general problem of writing history for children.

Archana Garodia's book caters to an older, more mature age group and tries to remain scrupulously faithful to the historical facts. There are quotes from translations of original sources and from the writings of historians. The focus is on politically powerful women across the ages. The exciting cast of characters includes better and less known figures—the Bhauma Kara queens of Odisha, Didda, Raziya, Rudramadevi, the heroines of Chittor, Durgavati, Abbakka, Chand Bibi, Nur Jahan, Karnavati, Mangammal, Chennamma, the Attingal queens, Tarabai, Ahilya Bai Holkar, Velu Nachiyar, Begum Samru, Kittur Chennamma, Lakshmbai and the Begums of Bhopal. The stories of these women are interspersed with pages on more general issues such as interesting fruits, eras, and the origin of certain kinds of food. The narration is crisp and lively.



Archana Garodia's book has dates and lots of dynastic history. But the main point that the author clearly wants to get across, and does so successfully, is that women have played an important role in political history across the centuries, that they were historically relevant people. The book is based on research and there is complexity in the narrative. For instance, in the discussion of Chittor, the author alerts readers to the distinction between history and legend; that in the case of queen Abbakka, we actually have two tales fused into one. There is also a welcome attempt to question stereotypes—for instance, the highlighting of the achievements of the Rajput women who have earned pages in history books not by committing sati or jauhar but through other kinds of noteworthy deeds. There are, of course, larger, difficult questions that emerge from the stories, which need to be somehow explained to children in simple, straightforward ways. How did these women achieve power, given that they lived in male-dominated societies? What was the importance of the family in ancient Indian politics? What do the stories tell us about times when religious identities were not cast as rigidly as they are today? How should we interpret the rhetoric of power in texts and inscriptions?

Just how radical, innovative and imaginative should the re-tellings of the past be for children of the internet age? How should the sex and violence in history be presented to children—through erasure or otherwise? Should the stories be simplified, or made more complex in order to correct popular misconceptions and biases? Do they necessarily have to be used as a vehicle for moralizing? Authors will answer these questions depending on their agendas and goals. The answers can only emerge through conversations with the children who read these books. But there is no doubt that more writers need to take on the challenge of writing books on history for children.

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Meena Bhargava

PEOPLE WHO MADE HISTORY: STORIES FROM MEDIEVAL INDIA

By Nilima Sinha, Nita Berry, Neera Jain

Ratna Sagar, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 104, ₹149.00

This book is a part of the series on *People Who Made History*. The series aims at narrating stories from the lives of such historical figures that made a lasting contribution and left behind a glorious legacy whether in politics and governance or political thought and ideology, art and architecture, science, literature, travelogues or any other. The series belongs to the genre of historical fiction that brings alive the historical past by imaginative, creative stories. It is, in other words, a storehouse of stories from Indian history. Each story is accompanied by fine aesthetically done illustrations that enhance the worth of the story and would make it an even more interesting read for children.

The value of the book is its diverse focus on characters ranging from kings and queens to saints, women saints, Sufi Shaikhs. It tells the story of Kothai, adopted daughter of Vishnuchitta and Vrajai. Vishnuchitta was a Vedic scholar and poet known for his hymns to Vishnu. Kothai was later known as Andal—the girl who ruled over the Lord—for her ardent, passionate devotion to Lord Ranganatha, deity of Srirangam, whom she ultimately married in his temple in a grand ceremony. Of the twelve Alvar saints of India who lived between the fifth and the ninth centuries, Andal is the only woman *bhakta* saint from the Tamil speaking regions. The story on Nizamuddin Auliya is a narration of the rise of

the Sufi Shaikh into becoming one of the greatest Sufi saints, popularly called *mehboob-i-ilahi* or beloved of God, his experiences during the rule of Sultans of Delhi and the legacy that he left behind comprising disciples or *murids* (not *khalifas* as said in the story. *Khalifa*, when translated would mean leader, successor, ruler, vice-regent) like Amir Khusro. Also, it may be worth noting the meaning of *Awliya* or *Auliya* i.e., friend of God. The narration on Kabir is a tale of his evolution from a weaver to a spiritual sage and poet, whose *vanis* and *dohas* attracted both Hindus and Muslims. It is a story of syncretism, composite culture, community union, and togetherness of Hindus and Muslims. The description of the early life of Dara Shukoh, the Mughal Prince and son of Shahjahan and Mumtaz Mahal, is quite imaginary, perhaps a little too distant from historical facts as we understand them but then as the authors observe in the 'Introduction', the 'central facts of the story are provable. Notwithstanding the details of his personal experiences, sentiments and emotions, the story as intended, though briefly, portrays Dara Shukoh as different from his brothers with a bent towards intellectualism, syncretism and love for books.

The stories on kings and queens who ruled India at different points of time either from Delhi or any region are interesting and should certainly arouse the creative, inquisitive minds of the children. The simple and conversational style of depicting the rulers—whether it is the events that led to the enslavement of Qutubuddin Aibak or

his rise as Sultan, the bravado and statesmanship of Raziya Sultan and Rani Durgawati, political assertiveness and ambitions of Nur Jahan, Shahjahan's coronation and his forlorn state subsequent to the death of Mumtaz Mahal, the power of Prithviraj Chauhan, Shivaji and Chaolung Sukapha—makes them alive and should definitely nudge the children to investigate and ask for more. The inclusion of Chaolung Sukapha in the book is good planning. It takes away the glare from Delhi and such rulers who are already much known. Sukapha was the first Ahom king. He is acknowledged as the first Assamese who brought together the various tribes of Assam to form the Ahom kingdom. Assam day is celebrated on December 2, also a day when the people of Assam remember Sukapha.

Another significant aspect of the book is the interspersed brief description of a book comprising Indian folk-tales, a region, a personality and a style of art. All these make the book diverse and multifarious, catering to children with different talents and interests. The entry on *Kathasaritsagar* authored by Somadeva, a Kashmiri poet and writer would transport the children into the eleventh century by its tales and legends. Similar and yet different from *Panchtantra* (that narrates stories of animals), *Kathasaritsagar* is a compilation of stories of kings and queens, gods and demons, love and adventure that relates the life and social customs of the time. It was translated into English by Charles Henry Tawney, published in 1880 and 1884 in two volumes as *The Ocean of Story*. The description of *Charaideo Maidam* (*maidam* means tomb in Assamese), a complex of burial vaults of the Ahom kings is found in the district of Charaideo, the north-eastern State of Assam. It was in Charaideo that the first capital of the Ahom king was established by Chaolung Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty. *Charaideo Maidam* is an evidence of the architectural acumen, craftsmanship and skilled masonry of medieval Assam although most of these *maidams* are in ruins except 30 of them that are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Assam State Archaeology Department.

The entry on Vasco Da Gama is perhaps influenced by the fact that he was the first European to arrive in India by sea. A Portuguese, he made several voyages to India that opened up the sea route between Europe and Asia and expanded trade relations between India and Europe breaking the monopoly of Arab traders in India. The style of art that the book includes is *parchinkari*, the art of inlay work that developed in India during the Mughal period in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries and continues to survive as a popular art form and craftsmanship.

The book, beautifully and mindfully illustrated, cogently and lucidly written, should certainly invigorate the minds of children. It portrays the syncretism, composite culture, literary and architectural values of the medieval period in India. A book meant for children and intended to shape the thoughts and attitudes of children ought to have a discreet introduction. To begin by saying that 'the medieval period in Indian history was a ...strife-ridden one...there was a lot of fighting and bloodshed...there was much violence in the period' or to suggest that the building material of 27 temples was used in the construction of Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque without any explanation conveys a biased and an unfair assessment of the period. The stories in the book, however, to its credit, adhere to none of the qualifications stated in the 'Introduction'; they appear to be quite a balanced telling of the characters and characteristics of the medieval period in Indian history. Children, indeed, will not only learn and widen their horizons but also enjoy the stories and love the drawings.

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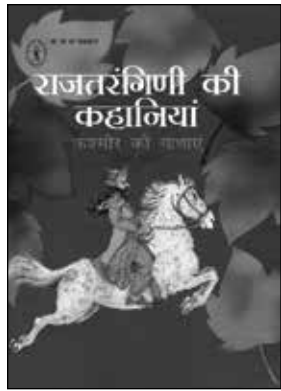
Vishwasmohan Jha

राजतरंगिणी की कहानियाँ: कश्मीर की गाथाएं (RAJATARANGINI KI KAHANIYAN: KASHMIR KI GATHAYEN)

By Devika Rangachari. Translated from English by Suman Bajpai. Illustrated by Ajanta Guhathakurta

Children's Book Trust, New Delhi, 2018, pp.120, ₹150.00

Devika Rangachari, the well-known story-teller, is an old hand at the Kashmir chronicle that is the *Rājataranginī* of Kalhana, having studied it at great length from what she has called 'a gender perspective'. The book under review is a Hindi translation of her Stories from *Rajatarangini: Tales from Kashmir* (CBT, 2001). It is a well-chosen collection—though others like me will naturally have their own sets of choices—of sixteen stories (one told in two parts) from the work of Kalhana. While using her own imagination to supply them with the required additional details for a riveting narration, the writer has generally been careful to keep the stories firmly rooted in their original content and context, and has succeeded in retaining the flavour of the times to which they belong. For this purpose, useful explanations too have been provided here and there, as in explaining the *nāgas* as 'serpent deities of the lake' (p. 5) or the *dīnāra* (*dīnnāra* in the original text) as 'currency in coin' (p. 114).



Rarely, however, there occur quite unnecessary and misleading deviations from the text. For example, in the last story ('The Coins in a Lakh'), an adaptation of the Eighth Tarāṅga (verses 124-156), we read about a *nāga* merchant whereas the

original does not refer to or suggest any such association of the merchant, who is simply called a *vañij*, appropriately translated as Bania or Seth by RS Pandit. The story is about this unnamed Bania and a rich person, also unnamed. The latter has been turned into a hard-working person who has saved a good amount of money, which is all right (as are a few other insertions from Rangachari's side); however, he has also needlessly been given a name of Vijaya. The historical flavour of these stories stems first and foremost from the retention of the original historical names, and Vijaya was not only the name of a celebrated king but also of other persons in the original text, and ought to have been reserved for those contexts. Also, the reader would be less puzzled if told that *dīnāra* in this story was a copper coin (as explained by Pandit in his translation of the *Rājataranginī*, p. 77fn103), not of silver or gold as commonly understood.

Next, Ajanta Guhathakurta is to be heartily congratulated for providing truly evocative illustrations in the book.

The Hindi translation by Suman Bajpai makes for enjoyable reading on the whole, barring a few foibles. For instance, the title of the just-discussed story—'The Coins in a Lakh'—means एक लाख सिक्के, not 'लाख में सिक्के' as done here. Similarly, on p. 63, 'astonished king' should have been translated as आश्चर्यचकित राजा, not 'आश्चर्यजनकराजा'.

A technical point. There is a significant, though infrequently observed, difference in writing Sanskrit names in English and other European languages on one hand, and in Hindi or other Modern Indo-Aryan languages on the other. One writes Aśvatthāman, Rudradāman, and Sudāman in English, but अश्वत्थामा, रुद्रदामा, and सुदामा in Hindi. So Avantivarman should have been transliterated as अवन्तिवर्मा (pp. 93, 95, etc.); contrariwise, in the English version it ought to have

been Hanumat, not Hanumān (p. 99).

It is the Hindi transliterations in the book that leave almost everything to be desired, and cry out for our urgent attention as the symptoms of a malady that has assumed the proportions of a virulent epidemic for some time. The following table (more than illustrative but not exhaustive) gives the scale on which the book perpetrates the distortions of proper nouns (allowing for the peculiarities of Hindi, as in doing away with *halanta* at the end of a word, e.g. सम्राट):

Serial No.	Names As Written In The Book	Correct Names
1.	नागा, नागाओं	नाग, नागों
2.	विशाखा	विशाख
3.	नारापुरा	नरपुर
4.	सुशरावास	सुश्रवा
5.	गोनंदा	गोनन्द
6.	वृषनियों	वृषणियों
7.	वैशरावण	वैश्रवण
8.	दामोदर सुदा	दामोदर सूद
9.	समधिमति	संधिमति
10.	प्रज्ञज्योतिष	प्रागज्योतिष
11.	अमृताप्रभा	अमृतप्रभा
12.	हिरनया	हिरण्य
13.	तोरामना	तोरमाण
14.	रत्नाप्रभा	रत्नप्रभा
15.	ब्रह्मारावासिनी	भ्रमरवासिनी
16.	मकक्षिकासवामिन	माक्षिकस्वामिन
17.	जयापिदा	जयापीड
18.	करामाराज्य	क्रमराज्य
19.	देवशरमन	देवशर्मा
20.	उकाला	उच्चल

The sorry state of affairs, rather scandalously represented by the table, is in fact seen all around, as when the Hindi-medium students of NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) history books read, year after year, as the names of the great saints, groupings and works of the Bhakti movement, मणिकचक्कार, अलवार, नयनार, नलयिरा, अप्पार, अंडाल, करइक्कालअम्मइयार, and सुन्दरार in place of माणिकवाचगर, आल्वार, नायनार, नालायिर, अप्पर, आण्डाल, करैक्काल अम्मैयार, and सुन्दरर. The sad scenario can at any time be easily witnessed at some of the most informed of chat shows and speeches.

In a sense this vandalization of knowledge is worse than perpetuating illiteracy. Its ineluctable beginnings and growth date back to the significant collective moment in our intellectual history, some half a century ago, when we began to abandon the well-established practice—even in school books—of providing diacritical marks, at least the macron for the long vowel. DD Kosambi's *Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (1965) is the last important book (for the general reader) in my experience that followed it. There can be no excuse for this grievous lapse: learning to add vowels to Indic consonants (e.g. क, का, कि, की, कु, कू, के, कै, को, कौ, कं, कः) in Class I takes more effort! I have written in some detail about this critical matter over the last five-six years (in articles that remain in hibernation), and been talking about it to my first-year undergrads for a longer span. I am glad to have been able to raise it in my maiden piece in this prestigious publication with an extensive profile.

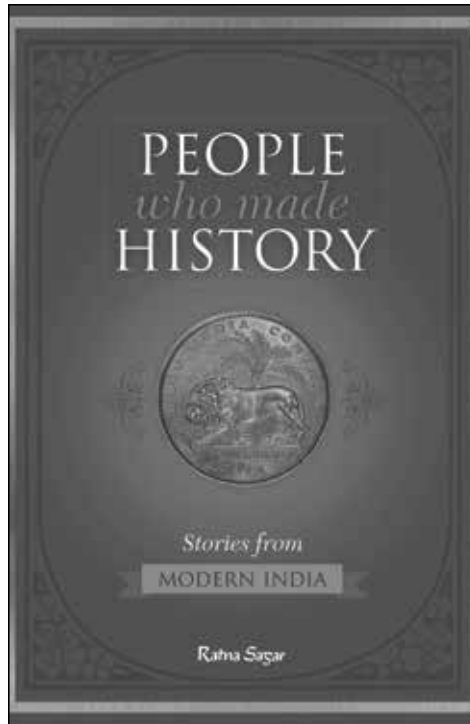
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Partho Datta

PEOPLE WHO MADE HISTORY: STORIES FROM MODERN INDIA

By Nilima Sinha, Nita Berry and Neera Jain
Ratna Sagar, Delhi, 2019, pp. 143, ₹149.00

This little book has an unobtrusive cover—a green background with an East India Company coin signifying the advent of colonialism and the modern era. It is perhaps too plain and may fail to attract attention, which will be a pity. A glance at the contents may confirm the first impression—a book for children about ‘great men’ (a few women also) and really do we want another well-meaning, meliorative text which will turn children into obedient, submissive and good citizens of India?



But Nilima Sinha, Nita Berry and Neera Jain have defied the norm and written an amazing text. They have chosen fifteen from the nationalist pantheon but individuals who challenged stereotypes. Some were fiercely independent, courageous, stubborn and rebellious, taking on the colonial state or patriarchy—Birsa Munda and Kasturba Gandhi for instance. Elites who foresaw an India that was sophisticated, modern and industrial—Jamsetji Tata and Chittaranjan Das. Individuals in traditional roles whom circumstances elevated to dizzying heights of leadership—Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Chennamma, Begum Hazrat Mahal. Talented individuals who were trailblazers in their field—Raja Ravi Verma and Dhyan Chand. Reformists and writers who rejected caste and tradition—Vidyasagar and Subramania Bharati.

The authors focus on an event or episode in the life of individuals. The stories are compellingly written—the interest never flags. The fictional dialogue between historical characters is a narrative device which is compensated by the attention to historical detail that is very impressive. How many know that Vidyasagar appealed to Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (forced into exile in Calcutta) for funds to start a university? That Begum Hazrat Mahal was offered a pension after the Mutiny by the British which she rejected? The ‘Indian’ flag that Dhyan Chand carried in the 1936 Berlin Olympics was a Union Jack with an emblem of India with the British crown on the top? Details like this make the story complex and interesting.

Seemingly unconnected to the text are two-page inserts on significant developments that marked the advent of modernity—print cultures, cinema, the metropolis. This is a nice touch. Hopefully the authors are planning many other books in this series—one will look forward to it.

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Manisha Chaudhry

10 INDIAN MONARCHS WHOSE AMAZING STORIES YOU MAY NOT KNOW

By Devika Rangachari
Duckbill Books, 2019, pp.104, ₹200.00

This slim volume takes us on a whistle-stop tour of many kingdoms where we meet kings and queens whose names are not unfamiliar, but about whom we might have known just a few sketchy facts.

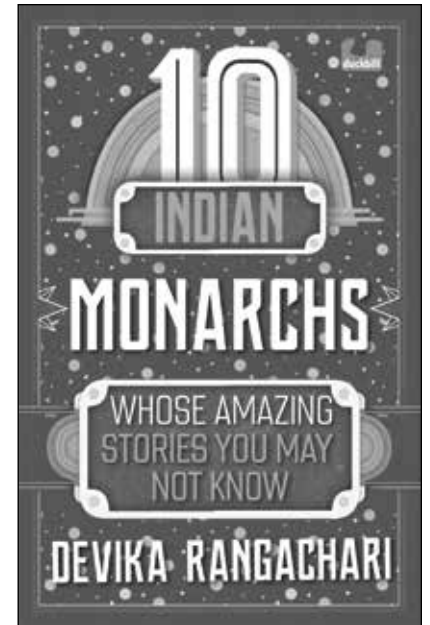
Author and historian Devika Rangachari breathes life into them as she weaves vivid portraits that step out of their frames and speak to us. Facts gleaned from various historical sources are arranged in a manner that you get glimpses of various geographies and periods of Indian history as read in school. Since her work as a historical research scholar has

been largely on late ancient and early medieval Indian history, she has chosen rulers from that period. In her introduction, she suggests it is an idiosyncratic selection but it is clearly more than that. She has a strong stand for many of her choices as she rescues characters from obscurity using her resources as a historian and the need to parse facts that shed light on what constitutes our understanding of history at different points in time.

Rangachari writes, ‘There are very few women rulers written about in history text-books, not just in India but all over the world. It is true that the majority of rulers were male, because most monarchies are patrilineal. But there were more women rulers than history books list and wives and sisters and mothers of kings frequently played more significant roles in policy and administration, which are not necessarily catalogued in text-books. When you consult the actual sources of history such as coins, inscriptions and contemporary text, you often get an entirely different picture of the role that women played in the political, social, economic and religious spheres.’

The very welcome inclusion of Didda, ruler of Kashmir from CE 980/1 to 1003, Abbakka, ruler of Ullal from c.1525 to 1570 CE, Chand Bibi, ruler of Bijapur and Ahmadnagar around the 1580s and Ahilyabai Holkar, ruler of Malwa CE 1767 to 1795 among her ten Indian monarchs with fascinating stories, is reason enough to grab this page turner. The overt neglect of the role of women in history is very much in line with a patriarchal world view where their very existence is defined by how they prop up men who are supposedly the drivers of action—political, social or economic. This world view is being challenged repeatedly in all spheres and history is being re-examined from multiple perspectives to arrive at a more complete picture. As you look at the facts gleaned from various sources through the kaleidoscope of time, the pieces shift to reveal new patterns that make up entirely new dioramas.

In citing the various sources that are used to build a picture of times past, Devika is also educating us about how histories get written. The example of Ashoka that she uses underscores this rather well: ‘An example of how rulers may slip into obscurity is Ashoka, the



third century BCE Mauryan ruler. Today, the story of his grand spiritual transformation from violence to nonviolence is well known as he documented this all over his vast empire most innovatively through inscriptions on pillars and rocks, and the Ashokan lions are used as the national emblem. Yet, until these records in the Brahmi script were deciphered by Indologist James Prinsep in the nineteenth century, Ashoka had been completely forgotten for some centuries.'

If a towering figure like Ashoka whose place in our collective imagination seems immutable, can be so subject to the vagaries of time and chance, the project of carving out a due place for women rulers takes on even greater significance.

The story of the powerful Didda drawing sanction from mythological tales of Kashmira being a material manifestation of the Goddess Parvati to the much more material manifestation of her name appearing on coins along with her husband's, is deftly told. In fact, Devika hilariously finds a parallel in the name of Diddakshema as found on the coins of the period (Didda was the second wife of Kshemagupta, the king) to WillKat! But her commentary also uses direct quotations from books on Kashmir to reveal massive gender bias in how Didda has been portrayed. Instead of acknowledging her powerful rule and influence, they'd rather describe her as '... monstrous and dissolute. And she had a fatal weakness in her character, didn't she, because she did not kill herself on her husband's death but decided to live on?' The tales of Chand Bibi and Ahilyabai Holkar, closer to us in time, are no less fascinating and the one thread that is common to all the women's stories is the sexism that they had to endure, in addition to all the other intrigue and power struggles.

The other rulers such as the comparatively familiar Ajatashatru, Bindusara, Pulakeshin and Harsha to the relatively little known Rudradaman and Ramapala all have points of interest and often they have interconnections. Reading about their intertwined stories is somewhat like watching an old photographic print develop in a chemical bath in the darkroom. Their faces are in shadow but you can almost imagine them going to battle or ordering an inscription! Rudradaman's story as the restorer of a lake was a very pleasant surprise among tales that are mostly about conquests and alliances. As stated by the author, 'nothing in history can be read or understood in isolation. There were webs of war, rivalry, marriage and exchange that are continually forming and dissolving, and it is vitally important to acknowledge these and appreciate their significance.'

Reading this, one is tempted to say '...things have not changed much.' But then, this is why we read history—to find a thread between our past and present. Devika's book gives an interesting twist to this link.

Manisha Chaudhry who headed Pratham Books, currently runs her own not-for-profit publishing house called Manan Books in the education sector since 2018.



Armaan T Verma

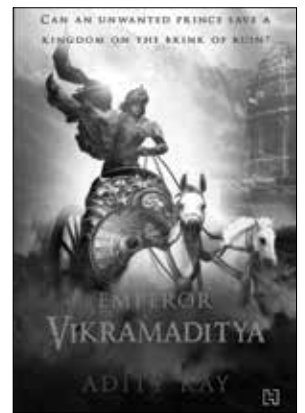
EMPEROR VIKRAMADITYA

By Adity Kay

Hachette India, 2019, pp.356, ₹399.00

When a child thinks of a king, myriad images come to mind—of extravagance, of power, and of majesty. However, very rarely does the image of inner struggle strike the child's mind: she may image a king to be invulnerable, or automatically capable of making perfect decisions. Therefore, any

narrative of a king that also portrays his struggles, dilemmas or vulnerabilities is an eye-opening encounter for a child. One such narrative is Adity Kay's *Emperor Vikramaditya*, the sequel to *Emperor Chandragupta*, that illuminates the inner conflict of duty against personal security that haunts Chandragupta Vikramaditya. With a lineage of great men behind him and an unwieldy and fragile empire to defend, 'Chandra' faces the risk of being just another soldier taking orders from his volatile and jealous



brother. The book follows his actions in the face of political conflict and inner struggle, and the life lessons that emerge from them. We see a human face behind the historical figure, his difficult journey through the highways of history, and realize that he was like us. It can be empowering for a child to learn that all greatness is forged on the anvil of very human fears, doubts, and uncertainties.

Kay depicts a subcontinent that is now all but lost to us, which is challenging for a work of historical fiction. By alluding to the infamous Shaka invaders and Naga hill tribes, the book brings forth names of nations, peoples, and places as a brilliant method of familiarizing young readers with the power centres of India during the Gupta period. Large parts of the book are clearly the product of imagination, which one would expect when dealing with a time period that has relatively so little to show for it in terms of historical evidence.

Chandra himself is idealized and his conflicts are easily resolved, but their validity remains, and the questions he raises are pertinent in the life of any leader. This idealization, as part of Kay's style of narration, fits the subject matter and the coming-of-age aspects of the book, though it can make the interest of the reader waver, given that Chandra is portrayed to be wise enough or clever enough to overcome every one of his obstacles, thereby partially contradicting the idea of character conflict altogether.

Instances like Chandra's first encounter with Kalidasa plunge the reader into the politics of a long-forgotten age, whose circumstances, as Kay shows us, still give us much to learn from. I do wish though that Kay had better balanced the Show Vs Tell ratio of the narration to render this moment, as well as many others, livelier and more dramatic. Although the book encapsulates a world wherein Kay moulds obscure personalities such as Kalidasa and Samudragupta into more relatable characters for a modern audience, the focus on character development seems secondary to action. The text is weighed down by a linear, somewhat stolid narration that veers between the archival/historical texture and the dryly interesting.

Kay's attempt to vivify a historical figure, though salutary, might have been far more appealing, had a complex sense of delight, wonder and enigma been generously added to the mix of the tale. Considering that this is an offering for young readers, a little lightness of touch may have lifted the prose from the mostly denotative to the somewhat heightened imaginative treatment that such subject matter demands. Having said that, it remains an excellent way of introducing this part of Indian history to anyone, as well as an acceptable introduction to historical fiction writing for young readers.

Armaan T Verma reads and daydreams at the University of Edinburgh and occasionally graces the lectures on English Literature. He also has two children's books based on Greek mythology and the Ramayana respectively, to his credit, written in fits of youthful creative energy at ages 11 and 15.

Aryan Kumar Bhattacharjee

RATTU AND POORIE'S ADVENTURES IN HISTORY: 1857

By Parvati Sharma

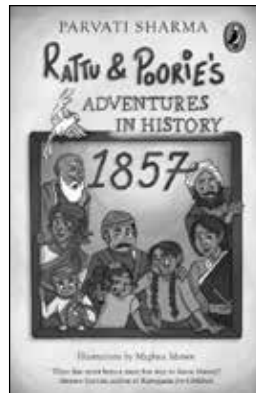
Puffin Books, 2019, pp. 112, ₹299.00

The book is an extraordinary example of how a carefully structured narration of history can be rousing as well as evidently informative. In an age when science and economics are increasingly corroding the value that history is perceived to add to our lives, what is important beyond all else is to remind ourselves that we stand today on the shoulders of so many who laid us before themselves in the past. Thus, Parvati Sharma's true success lies in her contribution to engage a new generation of readers and thinkers with a subject that contains lessons on how one must live more than any other, and in remembrance of those whose valiance enables our existence in comfort.

The plot revolves around a young girl Rattu who has the magical power to realize her wishes instantly. As she carelessly wishes one day for someone to defend her against her elder sister Poorie, Rani Lakshmi Bai and Jhalkari Bai appear before her; what follows is Sharma's masterful interweaving of Rattu's immediate problems and memorable stories of the historical figures. Rattu's encounter with bullies is contrasted with Azimullah Khan and Nana Sahib's struggle with the Company in their [Khan's and Sahib's] own voices, increasing the authenticity of the narrative manifold. Bahadur Zafar II's removal from the Red Fort is explored through Rattu's grandfather's moving out from his old house to come to stay with Rattu and Poorie increasing our sympathies for Zafar in imagining how much suffering he endured if we ourselves are so inconvenienced when shifting houses. This connecting with the historical figures not on an academic level through text-books but rather on a personal level in comparing their problems with our own is what drives the plot and makes the book so special.

Parvati Sharma's choice of making the heroes of the Uprising in 1857 themselves narrate their stories will have a profound effect on the reader. She [the reader] is no longer perceiving these heroes as obscure figures from the past but rather as human beings in their own right, enabling her to connect at a far more intimate level not only with the historical figures themselves but also with the historical events at large. Through this, Sharma ensures that the young reader does two quintessential things: she does not dismiss the historical figures as removed and distant, yet values their contribution to her lives, leading to a deep importance given to them and their actions without discounting them as human beings. A fresh look at history, explored further and more extensively, this pedagogy could transform the outlook an entire generation has on its past.

Additionally, Parvati Sharma's carefully casual usage of more complex vocabulary and syntax seamlessly enables young readers to develop an intuitive grasp over the English language. Her conscious efforts towards idiomatic expression and the usage of phrasal verbs are but examples of her intention not only to better engagement with history but also with the language at large. Yet, what could have been made subtler is the italicizing of difficult vocabulary to facilitate an even greater seamless development of language skills in children.



However, why is such learning significant? That in our world a special emphasis is laid on study as an activity distinct from what is enjoyable, leads to an attitude in students prepared to go only so far as is absolutely required for them. Learning and the pursuit of knowledge, thus, relinquishes its arduous status into something enjoyable and more importantly indispensable.

The bold and novel outlook Parvati Sharma explores through her novel *Rattu and Poorie's Adventures in History: 1857*, not only facilitates learning in readers but also instils in them a unique sense of patriotism born only through a genuine investment in one's culture and tradition. A must read for anyone waiting to get in touch with their roots!

Aryan Kumar Bhattacharjee is a student in The Doon School, pursuing the IB Diploma Programme in Class 12. He enjoys drama, reading, writing and debating.



Sabah Hussain

THINGS LOST AND FOUND IN HISTORY: A DOZEN AND A HALF STORIES

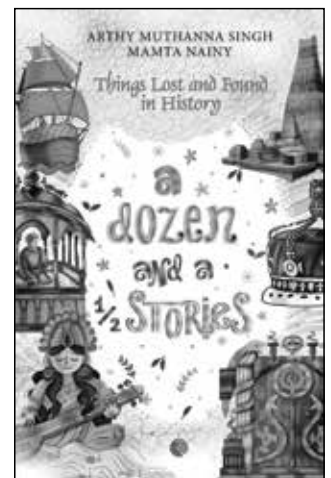
By Arthy Muthanna Singh and Mamta Nainy
Rupa Publications, 2019, pp. 159, ₹195.00

In the world where science can provide answers to most questions, the unsolved mysteries of the world intrigue and fascinate us even more. Especially the kids who have completely different levels of inquisitiveness and worlds of imagination. The authors Arthy Muthanna Singh and Mamta Nainy have written the book in the form of a detective novel, finding clues and unravelling the mysteries step by step. They entrust the role of a sleuth to the readers from the very outset so that the onus of analysing the clues rests with the readers. In the beginning the book gives the feel of the NCERT ancient history book but only simpler and plainer sailing.

There are twelve and a half stories in the book tracing a long period of history from the ancient ones like the doom of the cities of Muziris and Mathura, Harappan civilization to the latter day mysteries like that of the Padmanabheswamy Temple vaults. Both the authors have immense experience writing children's books in a way which not only can inculcate the interest of book reading in the children but also adds up to their knowledge about vital topics like introducing important personalities like Gandhi through anecdotes and the retelling of Jataka tales rather than the preachy moral science books.

Since childhood I have been hearing and reading the enthralling tales about the great Mogul peacock throne, Koh-i-noor diamond and about Tipu's swords which created enormous enquiry bubbles in my head then but had no one stop source to settle the queries. This book has all those stories at a single place, well researched, well placed in space and time and catering to a wider audience, not just children.

The book appends tantalizing stories of the Bhimbetka and the Ajanta Caves, and the Kanishka Caskets with meticulous details. The details given are so vivid and arresting that the lack of corresponding graphics and illustrations in the book irks the reader. Although there



are page-long line sketches on the title page of the respective stories, these illustrations do no justice to the grandeur and popping curiosity with the reading.

The book has some stories which are enlargements of the earlier stories. One such associated string of fables is about where a casket containing the relics of the Buddha's bones is found along with about 1,600 small jewels and gold pieces in Piprahwa village in Eastern Uttar Pradesh in 1898. Through this watershed discovery, historians could ascertain the location of the ancient city of Kapilavastu although the claim is still contested internationally. The book covers all such debates in great depth along with all the recent developments around the issues. This is the case with all the thirteen stories since most of them deal with excavations, thefts, cities falling off and reappearing on the map, rumoured narratives of the rise and fall of empires, where it becomes all the more important to keep the reader updated about the neoteric breakthroughs. On the successive progression of the stories these details become complex, supplemented by an inordinate amount of facts, which may make the book a heavy read for the children but this same thing makes it a gem for the older ones.

The story about the quandaries behind the theft of Tagore's Nobel medal also contains some eerie connections with other such thefts of Nobel medals of Ernest O Lawrence, Arthur Henderson, Kay Miller and Kailash Satyarthi. Similar astounding and uncanny links of prophecy and curse are drawn in the stories of the Ajanta Caves and the Koh-i-noor diamond. It provides that whosoever tried to possess the replicas of the cave drawings or in the other case, the Koh-i-noor itself, had witnessed dilapidations and led empires to fall.

All the stories leave the reader with elbow room to alternative endings, possible scope for uncharted histories and unaddressed questions in the form of a 'conclusion' paragraph. The last story is terminated with myriad interpretations only to be pondered further by the readers and thus categorized as a half story. The stories are supplemented with riveting facts and related definitions boxed in between the main text. The authors have dealt with the history and the associated facts very carefully without endorsing any ideological position. History can be intimidating and boring sometimes, we tend to think that there is an ocean of things which are beyond us and are arduous and innominate. But this book obliterates that phobia and helps children and even adults to approach the subject more scientifically and in an exhilarating way.

Sabah Hussain is a PhD Scholar in the Department Of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Rina Sen Goel

INDIA THROUGH PEOPLE: 25 GAME CHANGERS

By Devika Cariapa. Illustrations by Aparna Chivukala & Roshini Pochont

Tulika Books, 2019, pp. 160, ₹650.00

For many of us who were teenagers in the 50s, 60s or 70s, patriotism was a normal social and familial reality, no cousin to the fervid nationalism that exists today. It was normal to revere the leaders who won us our freedom from



colonialism, gave us the Constitution, our national anthem, or our right to speak and vote and educate ourselves freely. It was normal to read about our rich spiritual history, and be proud of it, not directed by mere jingoism, as is the wont today. The social reality in 2019 is vastly different, however much we want to wish it away. The nation is an entirely new animal today.

In this environment, Devika Cariapa's *25 Game Changers*, is an exciting departure from the norm. Using a clear-headed and impartial metric, Devika chooses 25 of the nation's top visionaries in the last 100 years (or more) who have shaped the country—its social norms, culture, art, sports, science and politics—and challenged its people to ceaselessly reason, question and improve, paving the path for individual and collective growth.

The list of the visionaries encompasses men and women from across the country, chosen not only for their passion and commitment to a purpose, a belief or a craft, but also for their love for their country, its people and rich heritage. Despite the neutral, practical tone of the passages describing these famous personalities, listing their profound ideals and their struggle to overcome insurmountable odds, author Devika Cariapa infuses a candid warmth that underpins each sentence. There is care in her prose, thought in every sentence and above all, an unerring clarity about evoking the interest of her core audience—young readers who enjoy condensed powerful imagery.

Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and CV Raman find place in the collection, all heartening inclusions! More significantly, however are other extraordinary, path-breaking voices that have broken taboos and delineated a narrative that was so penetrating and true that they left everlasting change in social mores and national history.

The few pages on Dakshayani Velayudhan, a fierce and feisty Dalit voice from Kerala's Pulaya community, who rose against inequality and injustice to finally overcome all odds, makes one thirsty to read more. Here is an incredible account of a woman in early 20th century fighting to set right caste, gender and role issues! In 2019, she would have had 20 million Twitter followers!

Here is Rukmini Devi Arundale dancing over the pages, comfortably turning down Morarji Desai's request to become the President of India! Meanwhile, Rukmini was re-inventing the dance form of Devadasis, the sadir, and anointing it as 'Bharatanatyam', a Sanskritized term which was so purist as to appease the archest Brahmin in Chennai society. For a young reader of today, it is fascinating to dive into the etymology of Bharatanatyam and connect the passion of Rukmini Arundale to today's global acceptance of an art form that was first celebrated in Kalakshetra, Rukmini's institution of dance.

Another fascinating account is of DD Kosambi, a maverick Harvard educated scholar, mathematician, geneticist, anthropologist, historian and numismatist—not to mention a linguist with command over twelve languages. In light of today's heated debate over the archaeological remains of the famous 'Rakhigarhi Woman', and its significance, (hopefully untainted by far-Right ideology and appropriation), it is thrilling to read of Kosambi exhorting scientists and archaeologists in 1956 to consider the social, military, political and religious contexts that shaped the history of India and its people over millennia.

Real history is not of kings and king-makers and battles won or lost. Real history is about the people of the land! This reviewer will surely circle back to the seminal work of Kosambi: *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*.

And then there is Satyajit Ray. As legendary Japanese film maker,

Kurosawa said. 'Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.' There is not much to add to that glowing tribute, but Devika manages to use her words with an understated flourish to create the multifaceted persona of a giant of the creative arts, specifically film making and writing. Watching Ray's films or reading his books may be a natural progression for a reader.

This is a delightfully planned, written and presented book. It opens 25 windows into the extraordinary worlds of extraordinary people in language, presentation and style that will only stoke the desire to learn more.

It is to be hoped that parents, schools and libraries pick up copies, while Amazon lends it several stars!

For other readers, old and young, if you have ever felt a swell of emotion listening to the national anthem, get this book. Our countrymen are indeed quite incredible!

Lover of the arts and languages, and one-time journalist, **Rina Sen Goel** writes, reads and worries about the state of the environment.



Vishesh Unni Raghunathan

10 INDIAN WOMEN WHO WERE THE FIRST TO DO WHAT THEY DID

By Shruti Rao

Duckbill Books, 2019, pp.105, ₹200.00

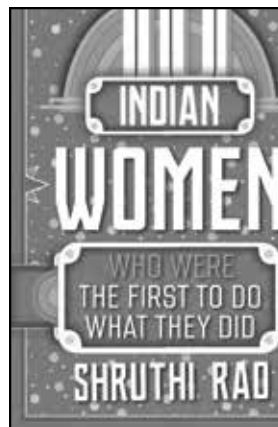
THE GIRL WHO WENT TO THE STARS AND OTHER EXTRAORDINARY TALES

Written and Illustrated by Ishita Jain and Naomi Kundu

Puffin Books, 2019, pp.112, ₹499.00

As the title suggests, Shruti Rao tells us the stories of ten Indian women who were path-breakers in their respective fields. Women have had to fight discrimination, violence and resistance in a highly patriarchal and misogynistic society. The stories of these women's achievements are also stories of facing lifetimes of discrimination and resistance from society, and fighting to overcome them to do what they did. Most of the stories are from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which was a period of awakening around the world. It saw the suffrage movement and the two World Wars, and in India the Independence movement. These events saw women come out and participate in public life, lead struggles and fight for their rights and strive to claim a place for themselves. The story of Savitribai Phule is an inspiration and relevant even today where access to education and opportunities are denied to Dalits and lower castes. Her grit and determination to educate girls of all backgrounds was a movement for the good which brought in access to education at a time when it was available only to rich and high caste women. The men in the past felt that women were the weaker sex who shouldn't be burdened with education!

Women like Kadambini Ganguly and Cornelia Sorabji fought their way through a system which tried its best to deny them their rightful access to higher education. Their desire to achieve was driven by the need to improve the lives of women, through access to better health care in the case of Kadambini Ganguly, through access to



better legal services in the case of Cornelia Sorabji. Both were denied full qualifications, simply because they were women, but neither gave up on their missions and got their rightfully earned qualifications eventually. Lakshmi Sahgal was a maverick who was part of the Indian National Army. She led the women's division which was involved in a direct action, at a time when women were given only ancillary and support services in the armies of the world.

PT Usha was a trailblazer in almost the literal sense of the word. She put India on the athletics world map, and won many a medal. CB Muthamma became an Indian Foreign Service officer despite the efforts of the men in the system to stop her from becoming one! She took the country to court and the landmark judgement in her case changed things for the good in the Services. We all know about Indira Gandhi and her contributions to the nation. Anusuya Sarabhai led the protests of the mill workers against the owners, and helped them get better pay and working conditions. Jaddan Bhai was an actress, director and a musician who ruled the silver screen. A Lalitha was one of the first engineers to qualify out of the College of Engineering, Guindy. Shruti Rao gives us a concise account of each person's life, struggles and the magnitude of their achievements. She brings forth the discrimination faced by them in society, their courage, guts and grit to achieve and be forerunners. The writing is simple, and easy to understand. The book is suitable for children eight years and above. It also has a brief write up on other women, from India and across the world who also achieved in the same fields as the women discussed.

Some books are a joy to see, touch and read—the book isn't just the writing, but an experience in itself. *The Girl Who Went to the Stars and Other Extraordinary Tales* by Ishita Jain and Naomi Kundu is just that.

The book is about 50 Indian women who are an inspiration to us. They are leaders, scientists, artists, writers—each a pioneer and pathbreaker in her own right. Colourful, vibrant and exciting, the illustrations bring the various women to life. They are an absolute delight, and one can spend hours just looking at them! The first motor-woman of Indian railways, Surekha Yadav, waves at us from her engine, while Indira Gandhi smiles at us with her magnificent eyes. The sketch of Kalpana Chawla has stars and her shuttle flying from her hair. We see Prabha Dutt covering the 1965 war on the sly even when her editors didn't give her the permission. With a table of food in front, Tarla Dalal is seen tossing vegetables about. We see a cool Lakshmi Sahgal with shades saluting, while Ismat Chughtai has thoughtful women surrounding her. Mahasweta Devi is seen imagining her next story.

With its crisp and simple sentences, the text should be easy to follow for even younger children. The stories are concise, and at the same time give us an idea of what these women have achieved, the challenges they faced, and the impact of their achievements. The illustrations, along with the simple writing should make for a great show, whether in classrooms, or even as bed-time tales. Well planned and designed, the authors and the publisher have given us a must have book.

Vishesh Unni Raghunathan is a poet from Chennai who is also a Chartered Accountant.



Subhadra Sen Gupta

THE VEDAS AND UPANISHADS FOR CHILDREN

By Roopa Pai. Illustrations by Sayan Mukherjee
Hachette India, 2019, pp. 424, ₹399.00

I remember picking up Roopa Pai's *The Gita, for Children* at an airport bookstore and while flipping through the pages spotted a subhead that said, 'A Killer App for Contentment' and I knew the book was for me. Then all through the flight I was doodling through the pages and smiling at the whacky take on a very solemn and ancient treatise. It made that crunched-into-the-economy-class-middle-seat experience sort of bearable.

Now to my delight Pai has taken on something even tougher than the Gita—the Vedas and the Upanishads. As a reluctant reader of Indian philosophy, I have to confess that I doze off every time I open any tome by S Radhakrishnan, finally here was a book that explains it in my lingo. I know that many adult readers will find this book both easy to read and enlightening. Imagine someone making the 'neti neti' line easy to understand without using words that need a dictionary to decipher.

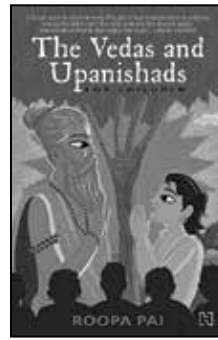
For a book on a complex subject like the Vedas and the Upanishads the research has to be impeccable and then it has to be presented in a light and humorous manner that children can relate to and that is not easy at all. Pai is becoming very adept at this challenge.

At a time when our mythologists in parliament are turning ancient India into a la la land of headless Ganeshas and pushpak ratha space-ships it was reassuring to discover that Pai was sticking to proven facts and supports the historical belief of an Aryan migration. She then reminds us that Indian philosophy welcomes questions and debates and the Upanishads are all about queries and speculations. Cities in ancient India had debating halls called *kahutuhal shalas* where philosophers defended their theories and even the Buddha did so. At these debates you could present any concept from atheism to hedonism with complete liberty and no one was declared anti-national for laughing at the king.

All through the book Pai goes on gently busting myths. 'True rishis were not escaping the world at all! In fact it was the world with its infinite wonders and apparent randomness which fascinated and engaged them.' She emphasizes that rishis encouraged pupils to agree, disagree or if the mood took them, sit on the fence. Then she describes the Vedas and the Upanishads as sources of 'secular wisdom' and when I read those two words I sighed in happiness. Things have not been easy for us secular vadis recently.

The section on the Upanishads was a revelation. Pai has analysed the ten most important Upanishads from the *Isha* and *Kena* onwards and ending with the *Brihadaranyaka* and I discovered that each Upanishad has its own shantih mantra. Here is an idea. Why don't we come up with a small pamphlet of these lyrical poems that we could read at dentist's waiting rooms and traffic jams? The wonderful phrases are perfect stress busters, as we gain both peace and wisdom whispering 'Om shantih, shantih, shantih...'

When you are taking a complex narrative, be it history or philosophy, the real challenge is to help a young reader understand concepts. As I have discovered, even a twelve year old may not totally grasp the meaning of democracy or a republic; become confused about the role of a parliament or the judiciary. Still in history you are dealing with facts, it is much harder to clarify the Brahman, the advaita philosophy of Shankara or the meaning of the Gayatri mantra. Pai solves the problem by using contemporary references that range from the Beat poets and Dara Shukoh to the *Sound of Music*.



My favourite was finding that the poets of the Rig Veda were really spiritual brothers of Groucho Marx!

'These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others,' says Groucho Marx generously.

'This is my creation myth. If you don't like it I have others,' say the poets of the Rig Veda.

Now that is a creative leap that you are not going to forget easily.

The bell ringing, ash smearing Hindus would be saddened by Pai's clarification, 'Unlike most other formal religions in the world today, belief in God is not central to Hinduism—one can be a good Hindu even while questioning the existence of God.' And she is not looking at the past with pink tinted Hindutva spectacles either, stating bluntly, 'The real downside of the gurukul system was that a lot of scary smart girls and shudras never got the opportunity to try their luck at academics.' Never forget, that dreadful misogynist Sage Manu was also a rishi.

We have to acknowledge that the Vedas and the Upanishads are going to be a tough read for young minds. The inclusion of poetry, stories and Pai's easy-going style makes it easier but still there will be much they will not understand. If the book engages their attention one hopes they may go back to it again. Also, I do recommend it to adults who have no problem reading a book for children because they will gain much. What they will absorb is that the 'Upanishads is the set of conclusions all that questioning and analyses threw up. Those conclusions are so wise, so secular and so liberal that it makes a lot of sense to revisit them today, at a time when the world seems more divided than ever before.'

This book revives what Hinduism truly stands for and we need it in every school and college library.

Subhadra Sen Gupta enjoys introducing India's amazing history to young readers, through both fiction and non-fiction. Her *The Children's History of India*, (Rupa / Red Turtle) was specially written for every child who falls asleep over a history text-book.



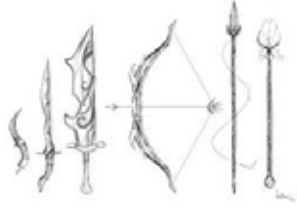
Ansh Raj

ASTRA: THE QUEST FOR STARSONG

By Aditya Mukherjee, and Arnav Mukherjee
Penguin/ Random House India, 2019, pp. 256, ₹250.00

Among the many firsts of childhood, Ramayana is probably the first exposure to the world of mythological adventure. For many, the mention of Rama has always evoked memories of the cheeky but loyal Hanuman as he burnt the whole of Lanka with his tail, or the Banyan tree that sprouted from Ravana's corpse and also implanted in the minds of many the first-learned childhood moral of the victory of good over evil. Therefore, when equally exciting characters with even more exciting powers drive a story set against the backdrop of the Ramayana epic, adolescent readers are bound to be enthralled.

The book under review traces the journey of Varkan, the brave young prince of Ashmaka, as he adventures through the kingdoms of Bharatvarsha to answer to his fate. He is accompanied in this enterprise by the magic-wielding gypsy duo of Draksh and Tara, as well as his own midget and lovable elephant Daboo. As they together traverse the beautiful and diverse landscape of ancient India, they are



encountered by *Rakshasha*, falcons, *Yaksha*, and kings and queens—characters who have been drawn from mythology, but been painted in this book in more contemporary colours to relate with the modern audience. And while these fantastic characters play an important role in the progression of the story, it is really the *astra*, or the weapons, in which the pivot of the story lies. As the plot moves forward, it is the threatening and ever-growing presence of Varkan’s own weapon, the titular Starsong, that throws the world in mayhem, and causes destruction. Among other things, the theme the *astra* most vividly brings about is the dangers of absolute power. This theme of power, in turn, is complemented by the concept of ‘balance’, whose reiteration across the story is able to posit a robust explanation for the world of the supernatural. The supernatural, by its virtue, would create disbalance in the world of the ordinary. Thus, in the case where the supernatural exists in a ‘balanced’ world, the supernatural’s presence could be justified.

The book relies on many elements to make a plot set in the days of yore appear more stimulating to contemporary adolescent readership. Chief among them is humour. Instances capable of eliciting smiles and laughter are spread across the book—from tiny



Daboo’s unyielding masquerade as a war elephant, to Tara’s free-spirited attitude towards life (the latter brought in sharp contrast by Draksh’s solemn behaviour). The portrayal of specific mythical characters is another defining feature of the book. The allure surrounding the brief roles of Ravana, Yama, Vibhishan and Vishwamitra give tickling goose bumps to readers as the mention and description of these characters strikes a note of familiarity and quenches a curiosity that any adolescent would expectedly have.

The narrative of Ravana (and by extension, *Rakshasha*) has undergone modern development, from authors like Devdutt Pattanaik. In this book, while the *Rakshasas* clearly play the role of antagonists, a few peeks are also made into the suffering of the supposed monsters. Conversely, the cruelties of man are also explicitly mentioned by a *Yaksha*, bringing into Ramayana’s backdrop of good and evil a few shades of grey.

The smooth visual and aural imagery is another aspect that merits praise. Using crisp sentences, the descriptions—be it of war or the landscape—is expressed with a clarity almost reminiscent of Harry Potter. On the note of drawing parallels, the book is also similar, in theme and content, to the popular Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan. However, while Rick Riordan’s series’s weakest link is its American setting for a Greek adventure, *Astra*’s cultural homogeneity greatly helps in the organic smoothness of its plot.

With Harry Potter and Percy Jackson having amassed such great popularity in Indian adolescents, the side-lining of our own fantasy literature seems disheartening. Books like *Astra* can shift this narrative, and show the richness that our own mythological and magical fiction have to offer.

Ansh Raj is a Grade 12 student at The Doon School. He is an avid reader and writer, and edits the school’s flagship weekly newspaper.

Cihnnita Baruah

RAAVAN: ENEMY OF ARYAVARTA

By Amish Tripathi

Westland Publications, 2019, pp. 375. ₹399.00



R*avaan: Enemy of Aryavarta* is Amish Tripathi’s third volume in the Ram Chandra series, which is his personal take on the epic Ramayana. In this series of books, Amish aims to interpret the pluralistic history of Hindu culture, which is not limited by depending solely on a narrow lens of religion. This book is a riveting tale of the life and times of Raavan, that borrows as much from mainstream mythology as it does from fiction. The deep complexities of Raavan’s character, to the author’s credit, are presented in a way that intrigues and captivates the reader.

At different intervals in the book, Amish makes an attempt to sensitize the reader to Raavan’s softer human side. To cite an example, the King of Lanka is shown in terrible pain and suffering at the loss of the woman he loves. The book also emphasizes the role of Kumbhakaran in the life of Raavan. In fact, the protagonist’s relationship with his brother has been another way of showing his human side. For as violent and powerful Raavan was for the world, for Kumbhakaran he was always a protective and caring elder brother.

The book, as all other works of Amish, delves into elaborative detailing, for instance, when it describes the beauty of Kanyakumari, the majesty of the Pushpak Viman and even the eeriness of the sporadic events of torture, leaving the readers spellbound. However, some aspects of Raavan’s life could have been pursued further, such as his rivalry with Vali.

The epic saga takes the reader through a mesmerizing journey filled with gripping twists and turns that satiates the thirst for thrill and adventure, still leaving the reader in a state of wanting more. It is no wonder then that those attached to the series eagerly await its next installation.

Cihnnita Baruah is a Research Scholar in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



Ram Kumar Saroj

I, DURYODHANA...

By Pradeep Govind

Om Books International, 2019, pp. 344, ₹295.00



The Mahabharata has been a fascinating story for all kinds of readers and writers for a long time. Many of us have read the Mahabharata again and again, be it as part of school text-books or in the form of story books, comic books etc. The Mahabharata is an epic tale and one of its kind. It portrays all the emotions known to human beings and other life forms. One should be careful while narrating this story not to lose any thread and the grip on the story.

The book *I, Duryodhana* narrates the story of the Mahabharata in Duryodhana’s voice. He talks about what he knows about the happenings around, what he has done and why, giving justification for his acts while on his death bed. He also tries to explain why he lost the war in spite of having so many powerful warriors on his side. Duryodhana presents himself as a victim of many false accusations,

Subhadra Sen Gupta

AMMA, TAKE ME TO THE DARGAH OF SALIM CHISHTI

By Bhakti Mathur. Illustrations & Design by Priyanka Gupta
Puffin, 2018, pp. 64, ₹350.00

Bhakti Mathur has taken young readers on a trip to the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the Venkateshwara Temple at Tirupati and now she is on a journey of discovery to Fatehpur Sikri and the dargah of Sheikh Salim Chishti. At a time when children are often confused by the battles over religion it is good to find a writer presenting the positive side of faith and speaking with reason, compassion and empathy.



Sadly the subject has become so absurdly toxic that a genuinely well meaning writer like Mathur has been forced to add a disclaimer in the beginning. In the screeching world of social media you can be sure there will be some thin-skinned bigots ready to claim that their religious feelings have been hurt by this gentle and generous book. This is the world we live in.

The narrative voice is of a nameless Amma and her two young sons who are on a trip to Fatehpur Sikri. So the story is livened up by the questions and comments of the two boys who are not exactly enthused by a long car ride and the prospect of a day spent looking at a lot of old buildings. So Amma has to try hard to capture and hold their attention and that means research and Mathur has done her homework very well. To digress a little, in her bibliography I discovered my book on Fatehpur Sikri and smiled for a long time.

Mathur tells the story of Akbar's religious tolerance and of Salim Chishti and the Sufis with a light touch. Amma says, 'That is why I love dargahs. They unite people across religions and I love everything that unites humanity.' Recently I have noticed many children's writers gently writing about religion that contradicts the official, political narrative. They are doing it with scholarship and civility and it will be understood by young readers as it is done without what kids call 'giving gyan', that is the default voice of our academics.

This book is as much about Salim Chishti as of Akbar. Mathur gives many examples of a tolerant, open, generous time, like the quotation from Jesus Christ that is carved on the Buland Darwaza and about Akbar's Ibadat Khana where even atheists were invited. I really liked her sensitive explanation of why people tie threads on the *jali* at the dargah, '...the real hero lies within us, that we already have everything within us to turn our dreams into reality. The act of tying the thread is a way of seeking the saint's blessings to give us strength to work hard and for our endeavours to bear fruit. So no one else can make your dreams come true, only you can!' It was an excellent way to strip the act of superstition while still looking kindly at faith.

A thoughtful book like this needed an artist who could capture the spirit of the place and Priyanka Gupta's sensitive colour illustrations are a perfect companion to the text. I looked at them very carefully for historical accuracy and particularly liked the way he had captured the *jali* corridor with the sunlight pouring in and the dappled reflection on the floor and also the image of the quawwali singers. One must also thank Puffin for publishing a fully illustrated, all colour book; Indian publishers are often reluctant to do so.

Subhadra Sen Gupta enjoys introducing India's amazing history to young readers, through both fiction and non-fiction. Her *The Children's History of India*, (Rupa / Red Turtle) was specially written for every child who falls asleep over a history text-book.

tricky situations, conspiracies, and deceit by his very own trusted allies like Shakuni and sometimes Radheya (Karna). So, this book is more like an autobiographical narration of Duryodhana. One thing new is that we get to read more about Duryodhana's feelings here, as compared to the other typical narrations of the Mahabharata.

However, the book, as a contrast to the typical mythology genre, states a very linear story through Duryodhana. The character development is average. Other major characters seem to be standing in the shadow of the main character of Duryodhana.

This is Pradeep's first work in this genre and it is evident in the reading of the book. The pace of the book is also not as action packed as the Mahabharata is expected to be. Not for a single moment was I curious to turn the pages and know what is going to happen next. However, it reflects freshness in his understanding and how he has perceived the content through different resources and research. Indeed, he has worked hard in weaving such a complex story into a simple narration. Hopefully his upcoming works will show more layers and intertwining.

For an author, the biggest challenge possibly is to spellbind the reader through the power of his/her narration and it becomes even more challenging when you are telling a story which is already known to the readers. Interestingly, the reading of this book helped me categorize readers into three groups. First, for the beginner, who has never explored the story of Mahabharata from the point of view of not the heroes, but the villains, this book will be a good start, for it is gripping and a page turner. The adolescent and rebellious mature readers will also be attracted to the book, especially those who are trying to widen their understanding and develop different perspectives.

For the average reader of the second category, it might turn out to be a good work; one that makes them connect to the main story page to page and helps them unravel some new layers through the eyes of Duryodhana. The book will give these readers a chance to question their understanding of the character of Duryodhana and his story and they might even ponder, 'What if Duryodhana had won the war?'

For the third category of mature readers who have already explored good works in this area, the book may prove to be a bit disappointing. It gives no proper and detailed context except for few incidents like why Duryodhana and his brother start hating the Pandavas, especially Bheema, what sparks the rage for Draupadi and why Duryodhana was not ready to share even an inch of either Hastinapur or Indraprastha. For these readers, this work is a very simple and straightforward narration of what a character could have known around her/his surroundings and adding the description of major event from his side. It is no less than the major plot as revealed by the original Mahabharata and other books written against antagonist Duryodhana like that by Devdutt Patanaik.

Comparing with the other works on same or similar subjects, like *Ajay* by Anand Neelkantan and *Duryodhana* by V Raghunathan, I found Neelkantan's work indeed a masterpiece. It narrates the story of Mahabharata weaving around the possible reality like what would have been the past based on our known tradition like caste and religion etc. It is gripping and unfolds layers and layers opening up many political, sociological, economical, religious connections and common man's understanding which made it more than realistic. For logical explanations of false accusations on Duryodhana, I found the book *Duryodhana* by V Raghunathan more logical. For the uninitiated beginners in the genre of mythological novels and biographies, as well as for those who have begun to develop a taste of this, the book will have some interesting insights to offer.

The illustrations are good and the cover reflects the story.

Ram Kumar Saroj works at Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal, in *Shiksha Ki Udaan* Project. He has deep interest in reading books especially mythology mixed with sci-fi and thrillers. He also likes to do film reviews in the area of art or parallel cinema.

Yatin Gour

MUEZZA AND BABY JAAN: STORIES FROM THE QURAN

By Anita Nair

Puffin Books, 2018, pp. 168, ₹699.00

Anita Nair's *Muezza and Baby Jaan* portrays the enchanting mythology of the Quran and attempts to reveal the more accurate interpretation of it, which differs from the present status quo. It consists of 28 stories and vivid artwork, which will appeal to children, steering out of her general domain of adult fiction which asserts her role as a contemporary and versatile writer.

The book does more than tell tales. It attempts to change the current perception with which people view Islam. During her work on *Idris: Keeper of the Light*, Anita Nair studied the Quran and tried to understand its lessons and associated fables. Around the same time, the Westgate Mall shooting took place in Nairobi in which terrorists segregated Muslims from non-Muslims by asking the name of Prophet's mother. She told *The Hindu* that 'People including children know the names of Ravana's brothers or that Mary is the mother of Jesus but not who Prophet's mother was.' Her belief is that change in perception begins with educating the next generation.

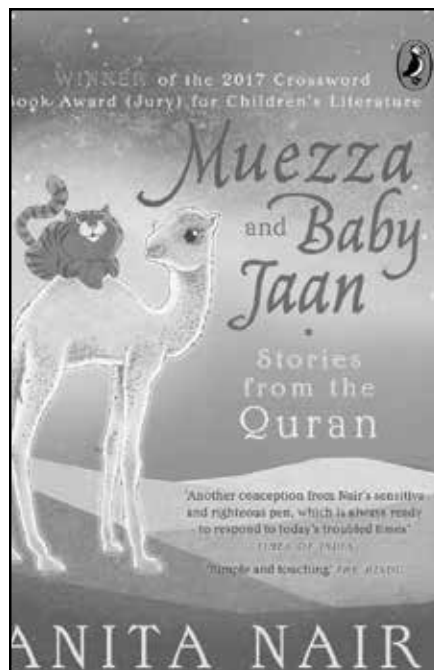
One can notice the similarities in the narration techniques used in the book and *The Arabian Nights*, wherein, Muezza, a cat relates these tales to a Djinn, Baby Jaan, while waiting to be reunited with his owner, Sharir, while lost in the desert. Nair treats the stories as a medium for the djinn, who seems to have no understanding of God or the world that he lives in, a way to grow and develop. Muezza is unenthusiastic about helping him at first, but sympathizes with the babyish djinn. Outside the telling of tales, their setting creates opportunities and threats that force them to cooperate. Despite their differences, by the end, they succeed in becoming close friends who are reluctant to separate. Their experience in the short duration for which they were together matures and develops their persona over the course of the book.

The average reader can distinguish the similarities between the Old Testament of the Bible and the Quran. In regard to the world's origins, subtle differences such as names of the characters are identifiable. Noah and his Ark becomes the story of Nu and his Ark. Likewise, the creation of Adam and Eve from paradise is the sculpting of Adam and Hawwa.

Nair's creation is one of friendship, love, and tolerance. While the book's tales serve to impart a very explicit lesson, the book and its allegorical representations are a parable for depicting the need for compassion.

Nair's creation is one of friendship, love, and tolerance. While the book's tales serve to impart a very explicit lesson, the book and its allegorical representations are a parable for depicting the need for compassion.

Yatin Gour is in Class 10 at The Doon School, Dehradun. He is an avid follower of football and enjoys learning about various aspects of the world from literature to science.



Nilima Sinha

FESTIVAL STORIES: THROUGH THE YEAR

By Rachna Chhabria. Illustrations by Rayika Sen

HarperCollins Children's Books, 2018, pp. 246, ₹250.00

Natasha and Nikhil, born and settled in the USA, get a sudden shock when they learn that their parents are relocating to India. They are told that they would live with their grandparents in Bangalore until their parents are able to join them after winding up their home in the USA.

The twins are dismayed to hear that they would live and study in India, a country they know little about. However, India turns out to be fun for the twins, as they join their elders in celebrating various festivals in their new home. It begins with Lohri, celebrated on 13 January. The twins are at Dadi's brother's home in a village in the Punjab where bonfires are lit on Lohri, and people sing and dance around it. They enjoy tasty food such as *make ki roti* and *sarson ka sag*, followed by sweets made of *gur* and *til*. Dada and Dadi tell them more about the festival, including the stories behind its celebrations.

And so it continues. As the seasons follow each other, there are other festivals at other places—from Holi in the North to Pongal in the South and from Lohri at the beginning of the year to Christmas that comes at the very end in December. All the major Indian festivals are

covered, from different regions as well as religions. The unity in diversity of India is well represented through the activities of the children as they celebrate the various festivals along with their elders.

The information is well presented in an entertaining manner so that nowhere does it seem as if it is being stuffed into the child's brain. Rather, the reader enjoys participating in the particular festival along with the twins and their friends. The special dishes cooked for the festival are enough to make one's mouth water. The participation of the twins in festivals like Holi and Diwali bring out the joy and fun of the occasion. After Chhabria describes the activities of the day, each twin pens down more about the festival in blogs and in a diary. This adds a personal touch and makes the celebrations come alive and closer to the reader.

The author has very skillfully and beautifully described each festival, allowing the meaning and significance of it to come through stories told about Nikhil, Natasha, their grandparents, and their friends and neighbours.

The illustrations by Rayika Sen are simple but delightful, providing additional charm to the book.

Nilima Sinha is an award-winning author of several books for children. She is also the President of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), the Indian section of the International Board on Books for the Young (IBBY).



Govindan Nair

A WEEK ALONG THE GANGA

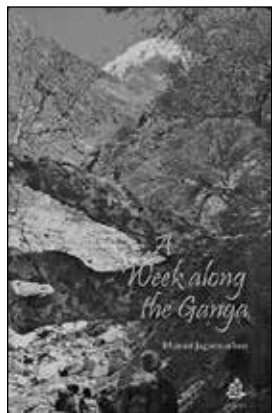
By Bharati Jagannathan

Eklavya, 2018, pp. 135, ₹115.00

Through the ages the Ganga has held an inexplicable fascination for seekers, adventurers and travellers alike. Entwined in myth and worshipped like no other river, Ganga Ma is said to be one of the few things that India speaks of in one voice. Its origins in the high Himalayas, which have been depicted as 'the golden windows of heaven', provide the essence of the Ganga's mystique.

Whether it be sages seeking the divine, explorers in quest of Shangri-La, or trekkers looking for temporary escape, the Himalaya has invariably been transformational. Lama Anagarika Govinda described how the mountains raised consciousness to a level transcending the concerns of ordinary life; and, even the hard-boiled imperialist, Francis Young husband, felt himself uplifted to a higher plane, cleansed of meanness and paltriness.

A Week Along the Ganga recounts an expedition to Gaumukh, the mouth of the Ganga, by a bunch of urbanites, including a 'geriatric' couple and three children. Centred on the experiences of two pre-teens in the group, Bharati Jagannathan, the author, captures the awe and wonderment that seizes them as they hike alongside the Ganga into the higher Himalayan reaches. Regaled with Gangetic lore and legend, the children are enraptured by the moods of the river: deep, tranquil and gentle at times, roiling, thunderous and playful at others.



The first glimpse of snow peaks leaves the group dumb-struck with astonishment, and the first touch of snow brings out the child in them. The procession of towering behemoths accompanying them, culminating with the majestic Bhagirathi peaks at Gaumukh, epitomizes the sublime beauty and magnificence of nature. As they watch the irresistible Ganga crash through walls of rock and hurtle through narrow gorges, and witness ice-formations shift and

whole mountainsides slide down, they are reminded of the puniness of humans and the pettiness of their preoccupations.

Jagannathan offers the children helpful tips on capturing fleeting vistas on film and deftly introduces information about the flora and fauna they encounter: evergreen forest changing to chir pines and birch, to treeless grasslands and, finally, the scree rock at higher altitudes; avian life peculiar to the mountains: redstarts, red-billed blue magpies, rufous turtle doves, choughs; elusive bhawal and goral goats, and the legendary snow leopard, a mere glimpse of whose pugmarks is a tale to take home.

The wondrous effects of changing seasons are on display: 'for the trees down below it is already summer; at Chirbasa it is still spring; and up near Bhojbas winter is still not over.' But the ravages of climate change are omnipresent: the rhododendrons are flowering earlier than usual. From the frequent road blocks caused by friable hillsides to alarming shrinkage of glaciers, the fragility of the Himalaya is hard to miss.

The mouth of the Gaumukh glacier is an awesome sight: 'All ice. Menacing white-blue cracks and crevices like millions of wrinkles lining its ancient yet ageless visage.' A similar description was offered by J A Hodgson in 1817—the first outsider to reach there—with the

difference that the glacier then was 300 feet thick while now it is barely a third of that. Receding at a rate of hundreds of meters every year, the effect of declining snow-melt on the flow of the Ganga is portentous. To underscore the inclement power of nature, the trekkers are rudely disturbed by huge chunks of ice breaking off the Gaumukh glacier and rocks thundering down.

The expedition affects each member of the group in some remarkable way: new bonds form, encrustations of habit dissolve, the crotchety old couple come to realize how much they mean to each other, the tightly-knit family draws even closer together, the professional trekkers revel in the surroundings. Agonized by a rocky marriage, and unsure of the future of her daughter and herself, Paru's mother finds answers in Gangaji. 'Just look at her', she exclaims to Paru, 'she is so free...nothing, nobody can bind her. And it seemed to me that she was telling me not to measure my life through someone else.' Her mother's transformation thrills Paru whose life will probably change beyond measure, but the week she has spent beside the Ganga will help her to cope.

This little book encourages children to respect nature and build empathy with their surroundings, their fellow beings and their loved ones.

Govindan Nair is a former Civil Servant based in Chennai.



Bharati Jagannathan

THE JUNGLE STORYTELLING FESTIVAL

By Janaki Sabesh. Pictures by Debosmita Mazumdar

Tulika Books, Chennai, 2019, pp. 32, ₹195.00

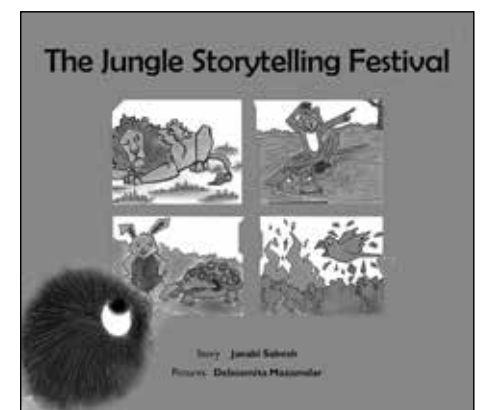
THE FORBIDDEN FOREST; TROUBLE IN THE FORBIDDEN FOREST

Both by Kay S. Illustrations by Soumya Menon

Tulika Books, Chennai, 2019, pp. 56 each, ₹165.00 each

Even in the very crowded world of children's books about talking animals, *The Jungle Storytelling Festival* stands out for two reasons. Ostroo the Ostrich stammers, and is derided by the other creatures when he wants to participate in the storytelling festival. Slinking away to hide his tears, he comes across

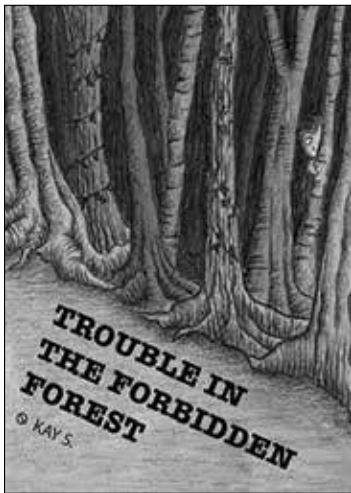
Mouse mamma and her two baby mice who teach him to sing his tale. As a talented singer who has been conducting storytelling and sing-along workshops for children for years, Janaki Sabesh taps into the power of singing to overcome stammering. This enabling tale is simultaneously enriched by the very power of storytelling. My quibbles are minor. The animals could have been given more creative names—Ostroo for Ostrich and Squirry for squirrel are lazy and unimaginative. Other animals don't have names at all. The exceptions are the definitely nice names for the baby mice, Eli and Meli. The story would have been enriched by the actual tale that Ostroo told at the festival—we learn that it was about how he got his long neck—and we want to know how! Perhaps the book could have ended with that being the tale for next time, to create a sense of anticipation. The



illustrations are delightful, and do much more than complement the pictures—they tell a parallel tale, for the stories told by the monkey, the tortoise and the lion at the festival are not spelt out in words. This book will help its readers recognize the multiple languages—words and pictures—in which a tale can be told: an undeniable masterstroke!

Arun lives next to *The Forbidden Forest* which he is not allowed to enter. But he naturally does—what child can resist the temptation of doing the forbidden? He runs into no tigers or elephants, but sees some stray deer. So far so good. We learn next that the only sound in the silence is the chirping of birds. An observation so typically urban that most of us would not even think about it. If there is birdcall—‘hundreds of birds calling out from the trees’ as the author puts it, it is not silence. Our urban notion of peace, of relief from the industrial noises that crowd our world, might make us remark on the ‘silence’ of forests, but a forest is teeming with sounds. Wind moving through trees, branches whooshing, twigs crackling and falling off, reptiles slithering along fallen leaves, squirrels scurrying about busily and calling out to keep in touch with their companions...

If this book is meant to sensitize children to the natural world, birdcalls cannot be lumped as one undifferentiated mass. Bulbuls



sing, parrots screech, owls hoot, sparrows chirrup. Well, okay, there aren't words for the entire repertoire of birdsong, but the least one expects is some research on the variety to be easily spotted in a forest in Assam or elsewhere (I am assuming this is Assam as Arun's father, a forest officer, is Mr Bordoloi, but it could be Eastern or Western Ghats as the sequel features robbers after sandalwood), and naming some birds that Arun sees/ hears.

Next, this forest abounds in flowers: ‘white, red, pink, blue, orange, yellow, they hung in

bunches from green bushes and trees’. Could we learn the names of some of these flowers, please? If this were simply an enchanted forest, with no relation to reality, this kind of over-the-top description might pass, but in the sequel, it will turn into a real forest under threat from loggers whom Arun will help nab. But in this, the first book, Arun, who is playing an imaginary game of cops and robbers breaks a branch, which is apparently a breach of the rules of the forest, and invites the wrath of its guardian spirit, a yaksha. Who is predictably a ‘big giant with a fierce white beard and thick white hair flowing past his shoulders down his back’. Yawn! By the way, isn't a giant big by definition? And how exactly does a beard manage to be fierce? Never mind, it is all in the good cause of making Arun—and by extension all children—understand the importance of not harming trees. To that effect, the yaksha turns Arun into a tree so that he can know how trees feel. But Arun wants to return to his family, and softening at his sincere apology, the yaksha allows him to transform into a boy at night though in his human form he is not allowed to speak of his daytime life. Rather confusedly for a plot with magic, Arun has to be nudged in the morning by a mango tree to hurry up as it is time for him to return to being a tree. As Arun clammers out of the window and rushes to his allotted place in the garden, one wonders if the yaksha's magic was dependent on the lad's cooperation! Eventually, after the yaksha lets Arun return to being a full time boy, on condition of secrecy about his experiences in the forest, the tale he

spins to explain his absence to his parents is as hackneyed as possible. The one genuinely creative element in the story is the relationship between the cook Lakshman and the gardener, Mungroo.

Having briefly been a tree, Arun retains the ability to converse with trees. In the sequel, *Trouble in the Forbidden Forest*, he is asked by the mango tree outside his window to help the forest where robbers are cutting the trees to sell the wood. And King Yaksha, whose magic transforms anyone who breaks a branch into a tree is helpless because the gang leader of the robbers is his brother taking revenge for not having been chosen king. If we intend to make young people aware of the threat to forest wealth, this is certainly not the way to go about it. Nor does this kind of story handle any issue of sibling rivalry and jealousy. Though this is not a review of *Year of the Weeds* (by Siddhartha Sarma),* it is worthwhile to mention that excellent novel simply to say it gets everything the two *Forbidden Forests* don't, and makes none of the glaring errors that these two books are practically sunk in. Alas, these two books are neither magical nor real, nor even remotely in any realm of magic realism.

Bharati Jagannathan teaches History in Miranda House, enjoys conducting tree walks and narrating the Ramayana, and has written several books for children.

*See review, *TBR* Volume XLIII, No. 10, October 2019



Nita Berry

10 INDIAN ANIMALS YOU MAY NEVER AGAIN SEE IN THE WILD

By Ranjit Lal. Cover design by Pia Alize Hazarika

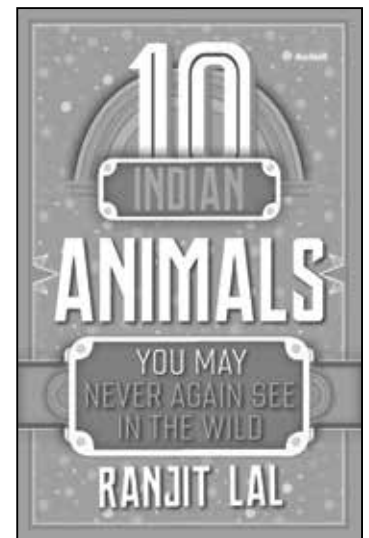
Duckbill Books, 2019, pp. 90, ₹200.00

Any ‘development’ that destroys natural habitats is not development at all, just sheer destruction. This is the theme of Ranjit Lal's book that eloquently echoes the Native American proverb, ‘We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our children.’

The destruction of our rarest animals and their habitats is happening at an alarming pace, as a consequence of which many beautiful species are on the verge of extinction. Even the meagre 5% of our country's area protected by law has been ravaged. Shameful indeed!

Forest land is being put to more urgent uses, highways run through national parks and sanctuaries, and mines and dams result in whole scale destruction. There is also the serious problem of noise pollution. ‘For a wild animal—especially a carnivore—living cheek by jowl with noisy, impatient, irascible human beings and all their clutter is a risky proposition.’ And river pollution caused by effluents, fertilizers and pesticides, all of which wash down into rivers turning them into toxic sewers, is fast wiping out water creatures like crocodiles and river dolphins.

Despite the seriousness of the issues involved, Ranjit Lal writes with immense humour. Tongue-in-cheek asides, anecdotes, animal histories, origin of names, even mythology and superstitions dot the

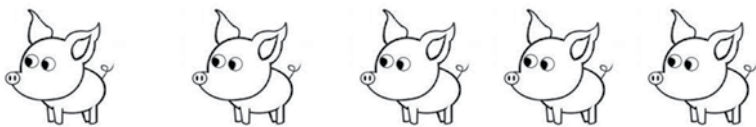


book, making it highly readable and instructive at the same time. He has done heaps of in-depth research here. He delves into the details of different species of India's rarest big cats, birds, antelopes, deer and water animals, some of which have made a heroic comeback from the brink of extinction, while others are dwindling down to their last few numbers. The author's deep love and understanding of these creatures of the wild underscores this slim book.

Ranjit Lal is a prolific award-winning author, having written over forty books, both fiction and non-fiction, for children and adults. He was recently awarded the Zeiss Lifetime Service Award for Promoting the Cause of Wildlife especially Birds, through Exceptional Literary Skills.

But there is a huge lacuna here in this book. One wishes there were photographs or illustrations of the birds and beasts Ranjit Lal writes so imaginatively and fervently about, especially as this is a book for Middle Readers (says the back cover). How on earth does one expect the young reader to picture/imagine these wild and wonderful creatures without a single sketch or picture? For instance, what is the difference between a gibbon, a gorilla and an orangutan? Visual images would have helped the young reader to grasp the information on India's rarest animals better, apart from making the book much more attractive. Surprisingly, the publisher chose to print such an informative and well-written book without this vital ingredient, maybe to cut costs, without which it is quite incomplete.

Nita Berry writes short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full length non-fiction for children of all ages.



Andaleeb Wajid

A TIGRESS CALLED MACHHLI AND OTHER TRUE ANIMAL STORIES FROM INDIA

By Supriya Sehgal. Illustrations by Jit Chowdhury.

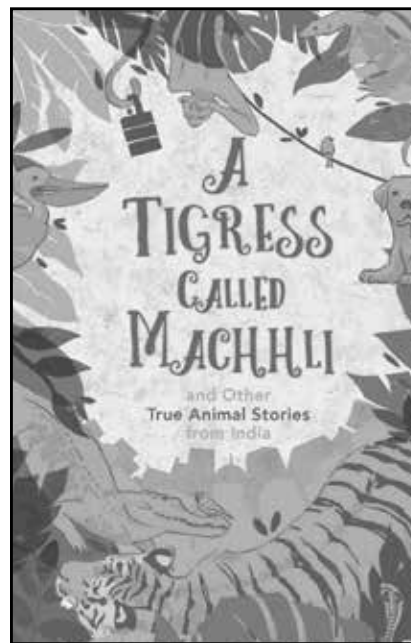
Hachette Publishers, 2019, pp.161, ₹299.00

As someone who has never been drawn to reading non-fiction personally, I think the idea of a collection of true stories about Indian animals is still something that is intriguing enough to make me want to pick up the book. Supriya Sehgal doesn't disappoint.

An easy to understand style, an almost conversational banter between the author and the reader, draws you in to the many different fascinating stories that populate this book. Animals and their relationship with humans forms the fulcrum of almost every story and it is heartening to read about everyday people who care for animals, who go out of their way to help animals in distress, who try to make the lives of our furred and four-legged fellow creatures easier. These stories are inspiring and never enter the didactic category even when the author is warning us of some wrong practices that are harmful for animals.

There are numerous heart-warming stories here and it is hard to choose a favourite. All of them have an extra element, something that makes you go back to the story and wonder why it made you smile. Whether it was the story about Dr. Mathur who makes prosthetics for animals, or the myths surrounding the chill-inducing monitor lizard, or Gowri Shankar's efforts to make snakes less feared, each of these have something special about them.

The author's profession as a travel writer has taken her to a



number of interesting places in various locations in India that normally one would not get to go to. The stories she has gathered from these places, specifically to do with animals, have a wholesome appeal about them. I loved reading about the Jackals of Kalo Dungar in the Rann of Kutch that she describes so vividly that I could picture myself to be there. Or the description of the road that leads to Mehrangarh Fort in 'A Feast for Kites' is charming, especially as one reads about the many street dogs who follow Abdul Latif Kureshi to the fort where he feeds

hundreds of kites every single day.

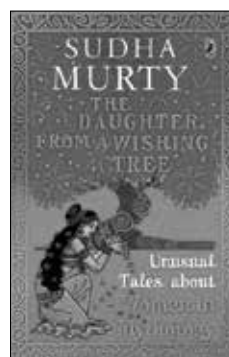
There are also stories that talk about the not-so-good relationship between humans and animals. In 'Wildlife SOS', she tells us about Kartick Satyanarayan and Geeta Seshamani who set up the rescue and rehabilitation organization to help animals. There are stories about wrongful breeding ('Life of a Tigon') and flying birds for sport or *kabootarbaazi* ('The Sport in the Sky') which tell us about the harm that humans cause to animals, either out of ignorance or just malice.

There are also amusing stories such as donkeys being married off to ensure rain ('A Monsoon Wedding') or the vegetarian crocodile which will keep you smiling much after you have finished reading the stories. The titular story of Machhli is also fascinating as is the somewhat sadder story of 'The Tiger Boy'. There are plenty of stories about dogs here and the author writes about them with such fondness that it will make you want to reach out to the nearest stray and give them a pat on the head.

What I also enjoyed about the book was the sidebars in every story that offered more information about either the animal or the sanctuary or just a nugget of history that was connected to the story. The author's tone is consistent and is perfectly suited for anyone who wants to talk to children and actually make them listen. There's never a boring moment and as the author herself says in the introduction, 'If you love animals, are endlessly entertained by their antics, and find them funny, sweet and outright ridiculous sometimes, this book is for you. And if you're scared of them or not very sure you like them, well, this book is also for you.'

Andaleeb Wajid is a Bangalore based writer who has been writing books for adults, young adults and children for the past ten years. She has recently published a romance novel called *A Sweet Deal*, published by Fingerprint.

Book News Book News



The Daughter from a Wishing Tree: Unusual Tales about Women in Mythology by Sudha Murthy features, from Parvati to Ashokasundari and from Bhamati to Mandodari, enchanting and fearless women who frequently led wars on behalf of the gods, were the backbone of their families and makers of their own destinies.

Puffin, 2019, pp. 192, ₹250.00

Manika Kukreja

THE GREEN WORLD SERIES (SET OF FIVE BOOKS)

By Sonia Mehta. Illustrations/Design by Quadrum Solutions
Puffin Books/Penguin, pp. 62 each, ₹225.00

The Econuts is a group of five children who are concerned about their environment. The Green World series are a set of five books with an environment troubling mystery to be solved by the Econuts. Dewy is passionate about water, she loves the sight and sound of clean water. Woosh is worried about the air quality in the atmosphere. Pebbles is an Earth Champion and he wants to recycle things. Plants, trees are comfort and love for Petals. Waggy's prime aim is to care for animals.



The five books have a pattern of the story and resemble a TV cartoon series. I visited 'Mickey Mouse Clubhouse' from my memory lane where the characters in each episode have an agenda to use the tools for the day. I would eagerly wait for situations that are created in their day to apply those objects which were present for the day. The show and the book alike are made to ignite the child's interactivensness as in addition to the stories the series is also a collection of activity books.

These children solve a mystery in each book of the Green World series: *The Mystery of the Weird Noise*, *The Mystery of the Grey Cloud*, *The Mystery of the Lost Waterfall*, *The Mystery of the Plastic Rings*, and *The Mystery of the Paw Prints*. Keen observation, and research are the two tools that these children rely on to solve mysteries. Research of resources are through newspapers, library books, and Internet. In addition to being environmental detectives they act as environmental activists too explaining to their neighbours about the problem and that is how the mystery really demystifies.

Activities supplement the story from page to page. The author, Sonia Mehta, is a co-founder of a children's edutainment retail brand. The idea of learning while playing is set at the root in these books. There is an attempt through Econuts to make child readers aware of the environmental issues and its solutions. Illustrations with soothing and yet colourful images are used. The activities for young readers feed to the visual and linguistic cognition of the intended child reader. These include thinking of rhyming words, solving crosswords in the context to the story. Another is finding differences in two pictures which is an exercise that helps in training the eye for noticing details.

Story and activity content are laid out in the books thoughtfully. It is arranged according to the appropriateness of the developmental stages and making use of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The book also mentions that it is best suited for children of ages six plus. However, I feel this series would cater to a particular class group of audience from the outlook presented through price, the setting of the characters of the story and the kind of illustrations that indicate it.

The story overall falls short of connecting to the reader from any setting. The connect that could arise out of compassion for the character(s) and excitement towards the action happening in the story is missing. The story does try to reach out to the emotions that a

reader would engage in while reading the books. It comes out as a good package for occupying young language learners in activities and not an interesting story per say.

Manika Kukreja has an MA in Education with focus in Early Childhood Education and special interest in courses about sustainable and environment friendly living. She enjoys listening to stories very much and has started working in this domain area with Eklavya Foundation.



Yamuna



JONAKI DREAMS; BLOWING IN THE WIND

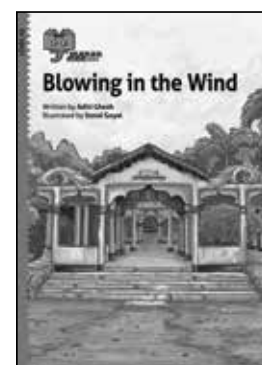
By Aditi Ghosh. Illustrated by Sonal Goyal
Manan Books, Urja Series, 2019, pp. 20 each, ₹200.00 each

Both books talk about renewable energy. The main characters in both stories are school going siblings Puhor and his elder sister Ushmi, and the stories take place in Kuwaritol, Assam. Books evokes sentiments akin to Ruskin Bond stories, aptly capturing the nuances and beauty of the remote locale and scenic Kaziranga jungle. It also captures the travails and simple joys of the people living in such villages.



Jonaki Dreams, (jonaki being the Assamese word for fireflies) is a beautiful story about Puhor, who is a budding inventor and who always thinks outside the box. Due to his father's influence, Puhor is handy with tools and enjoys creating many things one of which is a stationary cycle which when pedalled gives light or can run small electric appliances. As the story goes, a science fair was to be held at Sonitpur District school where students from all over India were to come and share stories about renewable energy and also see the display of Suraj Enterprise's brand new solar lamps. En route to this fair, while cycling in the dark forest with his sister, Puhor thinks of a unique idea where 'Jonakis' could be collected and kept in jonaki houses inside each street lamp which will eliminate the need for electricity! At the fair, Ushmi wins a surprise competition, a naming contest, when she suggests the name 'Jonaki' for the newly launched solar lamps. The kids receive a solar lamp with its own solar battery charger as a prize. Post this, the children and villagers rush to the open air cinema to watch a new Assamese movie and to meet the VIP celebrity Labita who was a renowned Assamese heroine. However, when the electricity as well as the generators fail to work, Puhor, with the help of twenty young boys and girls ride his power generating cycles to keep the cinema projector and fans running, thus saving face for the theatre owner and saving the day for everybody else.

Blowing in the Wind talks about harnessing wind energy. The story weaves around the two children who while visiting the river island get caught in a flood and have to take shelter with some monks in their monastery known as Kamalabari Satra. Due to the floods, for two whole days the children who are residents of the Satra as well as those who had taken shelter in the Satra, face various challenges. There is no electricity, drinking water is contaminated, health of some of the children deteriorates and due to lack of diesel no ferries can ply,



so no medical supply or assistance is possible. Both Puhor and Ushmi return with a ferry on the third day full of children who needed to be shifted to a bigger hospital in Kuwaritol. The ferry is the life line for the island situated on the Brahmaputra river which gets flooded very often, and Puhor feels something must be done to ensure this lifeline does not get hindered for any reason. After spending seven days researching and drawing different plans, he comes up with an idea which also includes help from the Chief Engineer at the Suraj Solar Park Company. He starts interacting with various boatmen, keenly watches every aspect of constructing and repairing boats and in the process wins over Khura, an old and well respected boat builder on that island. With the help of other adults, the boatmen, especially Khura, Puhor spearheads the creation of a streamlined catamaran that runs with the help of sturdy sails fitted with super thin flexible solar panels, hydro power generator on the propellers and specialized solar batteries and chargers. Thus is created the wind-cum-hydro-cum-solar-river-ambulance!

Both stories manage to keep the story simple but the latter story feels unnecessarily convoluted. Neither story goes into too much depth of how the various energies were harnessed. The two books are more for children in middle school and above.

Yamuna is a legal consultant and has been practicing law for more than 15 years. She is also an avid book reader and does not discriminate on any subject material as long as it catches her interest.

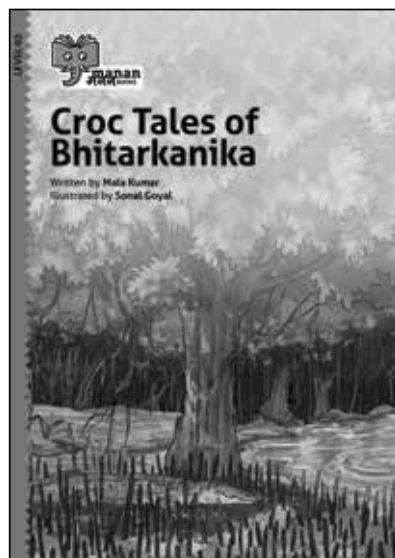


Subhashini

CROC TALES OF BHITARKANIKA

By Mala Kumar. Illustrations by Sonal Goyal
Manan Books, Urja Series, 2019, pp. 20 each, ₹200.00 each

Croc Tales of Bhitarkanika is another story from the Urja series by Mala Kumar. These stories inspire young readers to think scientifically and live sustainably. This story is all about kindling the spirit of scientific enquiry in the young minds. It is set in the mangrove forests of Odisha, which inspire a group of school children to create a new device for their science project. The author seems to have a penchant for mystery, and it shows in her stories. The protagonist of the story is a class X student, Sanjana, who is deeply interested in science and is fondly called 'Scientist Rani' by her friends. Sanjana and her family have just moved from Bangalore to Kendrapara in Odisha, very close to the mangrove forests and the Bay of Bengal. She and two of her classmates are working hard on a model for a State-level, inter-school science contest. They have a working model ready but Sanjana feels something is missing. Then comes their school trip to the mangrove forests where they meet



Bimal Da, their boat guide who explains all about the mangrove forests and their ecological importance. They also come to know that Bimal Da has lost one of his legs in a close encounter with a nesting crocodile, while trying to save his son from its clutches. Still he chooses to continue spreading awareness and protecting the biodiversity of the land. This inspires Sanjana and the trip also becomes a turning point when the mangrove forests give her an idea to improve their design and complete the missing part of their science project. They win and Sanjana is chosen to represent the team at the regional science fair to be held in Assam. Looking forward to her further adventures in Assam! Lots of information has been weaved into the story that will pique the interest of the children and inspire them to learn and understand more. Sonal Goyal's illustrations beautifully depict the mangrove forests and add colour to the story. The RECHARGE sheets have additional information about solar and wind energy and energy efficient buildings. Definitely a good read for middle schoolers.

Subhashini is a translator with Pratham books and a voice over artist. She is interested in children's literature and enjoys a well written children's book anytime.



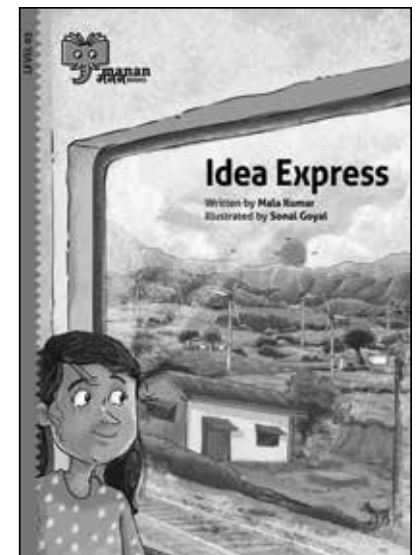
Raja Perumal

IDEA EXPRESS

By Mala Kumar. Illustration by Sonal Goyal
Manan Books, Urja Series, 2019, pp. 20, ₹200.00 each

A story set in the ever-charming, long and increasingly rare train journeys where strangers meet and become part of one's hope, dreams and fear albeit for a moment. It captures beautifully the sound of the last minute rushing in of the families, the smell of hot samosas and chai and the sight of father running to get the sweets and savouries. The inevitable sharing of the same with neighbours as if for that moment the boundaries of the families are readjusted and expanded to accommodate all around and like a perfect gathering of friends sets the stage for a passionate discussion.

There is the family of three with a teenager, on their way to a vacation sharing the compartment with a curious young graduate student and an old seemingly grumpy grandfather. The conversation gets on to a start with sharing of the story of Puhor, a friend of the family who is busy in his world of generating energy out of waste tea leaves and he has a name for his product called Teenergy! In the same line the young adult too shares a story of *dhhol* makers of a tribal community and how they got help from an organization that used renewable energy to set up an ecosystem that helped people to



overcome poverty. They quickly connect the lessons of this project with the teenenergy, and how the involvement of further research, collaboration of private and government organizations can make this project successful.

The book has two sections filled with thought-provoking topics for young students to take up as a project and apply their creativity and scientific temper to create a sustainable system which is useful to the society.

Like the *tadka*, it has spluttering of new age parenting tips when the girl says that she is perfectly relaxed and ok to travel before her exams. The grandpa perhaps representing the old-world ways shakes his head in disapproval not once but many times during the journey on various issues pertaining to change. His coming around towards the end of the journey is a nice way of showcasing the openness of all to change when the dialogue is kept open and cordial, an increasingly rare commodity in the world now.

Last but not the least, it also subtly challenges the stereotype of the female member of the family as it mentions that the travel is sponsored by her LTA and her fearless rambling on the fitness of the bus they had boarded to get to the station.

The story beautifully weaves in various social, financial and technical aspects into its tapestry. An innovative way to introduce the youngsters to visualize and experience the many dimensions of change and nudges them to become the change makers.

Raja Perumal has worked in the corporate sector in leadership positions and currently is a leadership coach. He is also on the board of a nonprofit organization which works in the area of innovative educational initiatives.



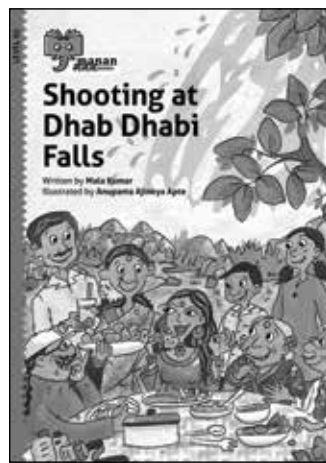
Subhashini

SHOOTING AT DHAB DHABI FALLS

By Mala Kumar. Illustrations by Anupama Ajinkya Apte

Manan Books, Urja Series, 2019, pp. 20, ₹200.00

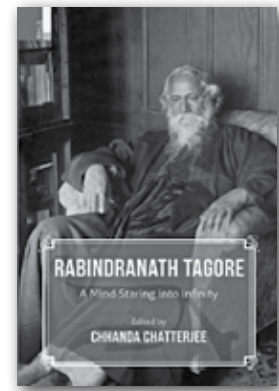
Shooting at Dhab Dhab Falls published by Manan books is part of their Urja Series. These are stories that are set in the Indian landscape, with tidbits of



information in between that encourage middle schoolers to think and recharge their minds. This story is set in a place called Mukrapura close to the Dhab Dhab Waterfalls in Kalaburagi, where the Baligar family is running a home style restaurant. The entire family works at the restaurant dishing out local delicacies like Jolada roti and Ennegayi with homegrown vegetables. The Ajja, Ishwar Baligar, is an avid Bhimsen Joshi fan who even sings to his earthworms so that they make vermicompost faster. Things take a sudden turn, when they are commissioned to deliver food to a movie crew who are shooting at the Dhab Dhab Waterfalls. The family of six, including the visiting cousin Sanjana, take a trip to deliver the food and to catch a glimpse of their favourite movie stars, unaware of the adventure awaiting them there. Shooting sequences, rescue missions, Ajja missing, chain snatching, mobile phone thief...the whole story suddenly turns into an action-packed movie sequence. With a happy ending, of course. The author has done a wonderful job of describing what life in a small village is like. The Baligars are also shown as people who live sustainably by composting their waste, saving water, growing their own veggies and helping the villagers. She has also tried to bring in details to every character in the story, like Ajja singing to the earthworms, Deepak not missing a chance to pull his grandmother's leg, Sanjana's habit of nibbling on things when deep in thought etc... The illustrations are apt and add to the story. Despite all this, there is something lacking in the narrative, which fails to engage the reader and deliver the intended message. The sustainability portions of the story are thrown in just as passing statements failing to intrigue the readers. A little more thought could also have gone into the RECHARGE sheets that are provided in between the story. Overall, a story that started well but lost track midway turning into an action movie sequence. A one-time read.

Subhashini is a translator with Pratham books and a voice over artist. She is interested in children's literature and enjoys a well written children's book anytime.

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Deepa Balsavar

GREY SUNSHINE: STORIES FROM TEACH FOR INDIA

By Sandeep Rai

Aleph Book Company, 2019, pp 270. ₹399.00

Grey Sunshine is about the challenges faced by most children in our country to get any sort of education; it is a revelation of the abysmal state of our government schools and educational practices; above all it is about the children, their parents and the educators that make up the programme.

Sandeep Rai, the author, is Chief of City Operations at TFI. He started his career at Teach For America where exposure to some of the most challenging environments in that country led him to realize that his calling and future lay back home, where conditions are infinitely worse. Rai writes of the 10 years since that decision, and the beginnings of the organization in which 4,000 people have now completed their fellowships and worked with over 38,000 children.

The book makes a compelling read. Listening to children in communities where basic facilities are missing and poverty takes on a whole new meaning, it is difficult not to despair. Rai writes early on in the book that spending time in *bastis* 'forced me to acknowledge, in ways that I hadn't before, the deeply damaging effect of hopelessness on the very essence of the human spirit.' He goes on: 'We need *real* stories of success to sustain their aspirations to fuel their desire to hope.' And that is what *Grey Sunshine* attempts to do—provide those success stories that sustain the children, their families, the educators and the programme itself. Students from TFI have gone on to complete their schooling; some attend prestigious colleges at home and abroad and as one young girl put it, 'Don't I deserve to dream too? I definitely deserve to dream!'

The real heroes of these stories though are the highly qualified individuals from reputed colleges and corporates who take on the TFI fellowship and work as full-time teachers in government schools for two years. The book traces the experiences of several of these youngsters as they stumble through their first few weeks and grapple with problems that they could not have imagined. Their doggedness and creativity lead to innovative and far-reaching solutions. If Rai claims that children's lives are transformed, it seems evident that a greater transformation is seen in the lives of these dedicated teachers.

Despite the wonderful stories though, there are a few niggling questions and one truly baffling issue. The niggling questions are to do with methodologies that at times seem questionable (like giving Rs 5,000/- to school teachers for attending a series of workshops, or asking children to set their goal as Harvard and nothing less) or unsustainable and heavily teacher-dependent.

The truly baffling issue however is—why is there no critique of government priorities and policies that necessitate organizations like Teach For India in the first place? Rai may have reasoned that this is not the place for such an analysis, but the government is the one entity with the power to drastically change, for the better, the lives of all our children—a responsibility it is increasingly abandoning, and yet it is allowed to get off scot free!

Grey Sunshine offers much food for thought and should inspire



many more to work in the field of education and that time cannot come soon enough for millions of Indian children.

Deepa Balsavar, a writer, illustrator and story teller is author of 27 books for children, has been developing educational material and teaching and conducting workshops on script writing, storytelling and illustration for children and adults for over 25 years. Her story book *The Seed* was chosen by White Raven, Germany as one of the outstanding books for young children for the year 2006.



Bharat Kidambi

BEING A MATHEMATICIAN: MASTERING SECRETS OF MENTAL MATH

By Gayatri Kalra Sehgal

Rupa, 2019, pp. 194, ₹295.00

MATHS PROBLEMS WITH DINOSAURS

By Rakesh Khanna

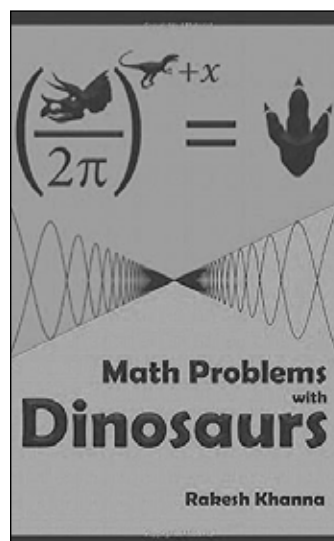
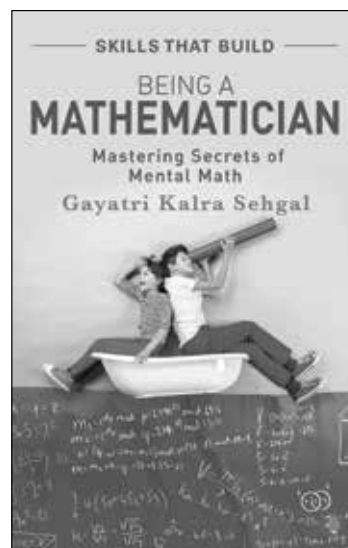
Blaft Publishers, 2019, pp. 233, ₹495.00

The debate on the economy has once again taken centre stage with the publication of the Q1 GDP growth rate for Q1 FY 2020. Questions are being raised whether India is entering a deep phase of recession and the fear that this may stoke higher unemployment rates (which is already at an elevated level). India's population and the so-called demographic dividend or burden debate is once again back on the talking head forums.

Most surveys on employability of graduates (Engineering, MBA) tend to show a poor score for the employability of these graduates.

Both these qualifications presume a certain degree of competence in numeric ability and communication (verbal and written). The low scores are indicative of the significant challenges that we confront because of the poor quality of education right from school through college.

As the old saying goes, catch them young, a lot of this has to do with our teaching at the school level. In particular, the way maths is taught (important while evaluating analytical competence). Most school students I have interacted with confess that they approach maths with trepidation, higher the class, greater is their nervousness of performing poorly.



Their senses have been numbed by a wide variety of formulae and theorems, which they are encouraged to commit to memory by teachers. Most teachers lay emphasis on accuracy and rote learning rather than laying emphasis on the conceptual aspects of the subject.

The use of gamification and everyday problem statements to make the concepts clear can make the learning process more enjoyable. It also helps in bridging the theory to application divide. In this context, the two books under review are useful to make maths more interesting for young students.

Being a Mathematician by Gayatri Kalra Sehgal is a book where the author through a wide variety of activities brings out key mathematics concepts whether it is measurement concepts, or tracking of time, addition or multiplication. It will be useful to children in the primary school, who are being introduced to the basic mathematical concepts. In particular, parents/teachers will find the introduction to the book very useful to help them make the early learning of maths for their kids/students both interesting and rewarding.

The second book under review is *Math Problems with Dinosaurs*, by Rakesh Khanna, aimed at mid to senior school students, and introduces a number of mathematical concepts using problems around dinosaurs. As the author states, it is not a regular math text-book. The concepts are nicely brought out by creating a wide variety of situations in which the readers have to exercise their mind as to which mathematical concept is most appropriate.

Both books are written in simple style and it is really the content and the activities that make them good reference material for young students.

Bharat Kidambi is a Bangalore based entrepreneur.



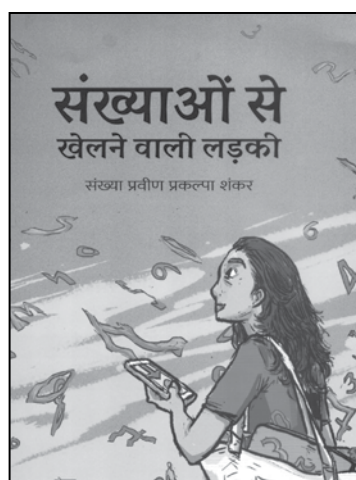
Deepali Shukla

SANKHYAON SE KHELNE WALI LADKI: SANKHYA PRAVEEN PRAKALPA SHANKAR (*THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH NUMBERS*)

By Shreyasi Singh. Illustrations by Ray/Roy. Translated from the English into Hindi by Puja Omveer Rawat
Pratham Books, 2019, pp.16, ₹50.00

After reading the second line of the title of the book, I wondered about the meaning of Sankhya Praveen. Is Prakalpa so well acquainted with numerals and numeric functions that she was conferred with this title? But as soon as you read the story, the mystery unfolds. The story isn't about Prakalpa, but about the initiative she has led; Social Caps, a company that extensively deals with quantitative data analysis. Now, the adjective *Sankhya Praveen* seems somewhat out of place.

This book explains how Prakalpa's company works and collects data at the ground level through different tools. It explores the how and why of government processes like the selection of beneficiaries from data sourced at the



community level, analysis of the number of children who fell ill after eating mid-day meals at school, and so on. The book is divided in two parts. The first part explains Prakalpa's interest in numbers and figures and the second part narrates the story of transforming this interest into a company. I feel interest and expertise are two different things and should not be confused with each other. But this confusion is evident in the title.

The Hindi translation of this book could have been better. At some places the sentence structure is complex, thus affecting the flow of the story, making it difficult to understand what is intended to be conveyed. The title and cover page create an impression that it's an illustrated biography, but the text reveals that it's an information book.

There are finely detailed descriptions in the pictures portraying social diversity but even here, the nuances are missing in some places, for example, in the facial expressions.

For children who are fluent in reading, this book will be more meaningful only when they are given some space to think. At present, the book offers no such scope.

Deepali Shukla loves reading, especially children's books. An enthusiastic photographer and storyteller, she is associated with the publication programme of Eklavya Foundation for more than ten years.



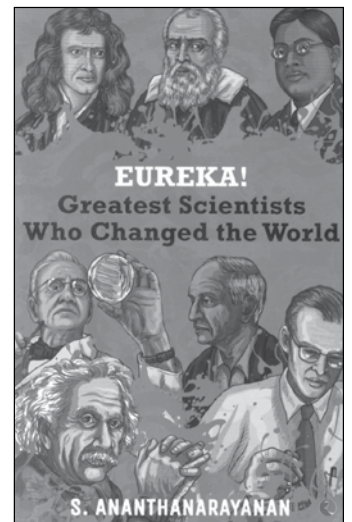
Vinatha Viswanathan

EUREKA! GREATEST SCIENTISTS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

By S Ananthanarayanan
Rupa, 2019, pp. 237, ₹295.00

The book is a quick run through scientists from the early Greeks to those in the twentieth-century as is. From Pythagoras to Har Gobind Khurana, this book is a chronological Who's Who of the giants in science from the 6th century BCE to just past the mid-twentieth century. Barring a few names, it is likely that you have heard of most of the names either in the news, in text-books or popular science articles on the history of science. The book talks about the greatest accomplishments of these scientists, the challenges they faced and how they fared, in a few pages for each. In 55 chapters it speaks of the contributions of 60 scientists. Each story is well-written and in the easygoing style that author is known for in his popular science articles. Various topics of science are represented in this tale of sciences—astronomy, physics, chemistry and the life sciences.

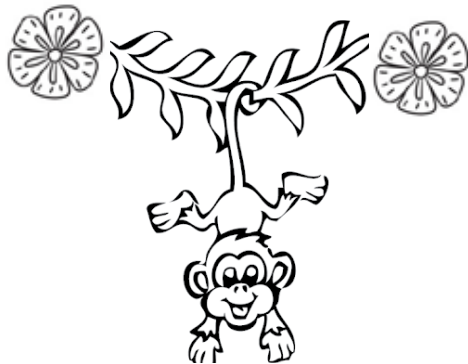
The book is not difficult to read, and can be read by a young or an older adult. The sections about the struggles and triumphs of scientists, the stories of their lives are particularly engaging. However, the book is unlikely to appeal to the uninitiated. It is likely to appeal to those already interested in science and the work of scientists. The



brevity makes for a superficial treatment of some of the discoveries that have changed the world we live in. This treatment may therefore leave some readers with a sense of dissatisfaction, but maybe it will make you reach out for in-depth treatises that will tell you more; some of these chapters may whet your appetite for science and the lives and times of scientists. All through the book, the author's grasp of a wide range of topics in science is apparent. Some statements are delightful, as is this one early on in the book—that the way Euclid laid out mathematics is essentially the way it is laid out in our text-books today!

On the whole, the book is what it claims to be—a glimpse into how some of the most important concepts and principles in science came to be.

Vinatha is an ecologist by training, works as an editor and science communicator at Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal. She enjoys spending time with her cat, her daughter, and watching TV serials.



Susan Visvanathan

501 FACTS FACTORY: AMAZING BUILDINGS OF THE WORLD

By Sreelata Menon

Hachette India, Gurugram, 2019, pp.170, ₹299.00

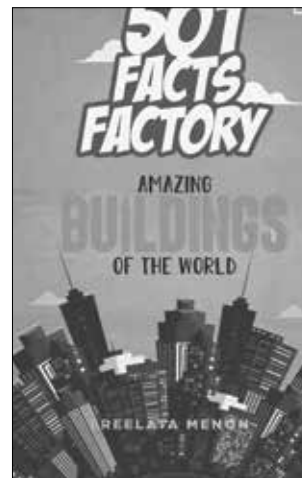
Sreelata Menon has engaged in a labour of love. The task she took on was huge, and yet, while discussing 501 architectural facts about buildings all over the world, she has succeeded in being lucid and interesting. Young people who have a skill for memory tests or general knowledge facts will find this a very interesting collection. The chapters are titled very clearly into Castles, Churches, Clock Towers, Forts, Homes, Libraries, Lighthouses, Mausoleums and Tombs and concludes with the sections on Temples, Towers and Unusual Buildings. There are 21 chapters and include Mausoleums and Tombs, Mosques, Museums, Nature Inspired Buildings, Opera Houses, Theatres and Concert Halls, Palaces, Residences of Heads of State, Skyscrapers, and Synagogues.

What is provided for ever curious teens, and literate preteens, with computer facilitation, is a map of the world, where time is presented not linearly, or chronologically, but in terms of dates, figures, descriptions of places as mnemonics, and some typically found, or commonplace, photographs of the place defined. It takes about 8 to 10 hours to read the book, though it is of only 170 pages. The line drawing facing the first chapter is peculiarly beautiful. Publishers have always depended on some image, it could be paragraph breakers which are aesthetically pretty, when they feel the book might not otherwise attract attention. Here, the one drawing to catch your attention is an image like a heart beat's rhythm on a cardiograph, but is actually a row of continuous buildings.

Menon's attempt is to show in brief paragraphs that the world is composed of a multiplicity, and that every war leads to a structural

transformation, representing the ideology of the conqueror or the surviving victim. As a result, monuments and city plans and gardens bring to us a statement of what rulers or presidents wanted us to observe. Children will find in this little handbook a delightful memoir of the armchair traveller, all the places and palaces that people want to see. Of course, most children have a 'palace complex' which novelists attempt to fulfill through their stories, because the metaphor of luxury and flagrant consumption still exists in the world. The net and Wikipedia would be encyclopedias, which provide easy access to the sites mentioned. Since tourism is no longer limited to the wealthy, but senior citizens and backpack students have also access to air and train travel, before the world subsides into a natural entropy, this beautifully produced book would be a good entry point into just how much there is in the world to see.

There is a problem with the ink though, as the starting lines of each para are in thick printers ink, (bold) and the rest of the para shifts to very pale ink. These are the detrimental features of believing that children underline their copies and text-books. It is irrelevant why Hachette's designer did this because it somehow hurts the ancient mariner's eyes. I think the world of design must move away from the Shakespearean notion of the four stages of life, and imagine that children's book are immensely of interest to old people, as they are expected to entertain their grandchildren, and reading aloud is one of their hobbies. This is called by Radcliffe Browne, 'the merging



of alternate generations' as grandchildren learn a lot from grandparents, who have time on their hands. Elders are expected to enjoy the time they spend looking after grandchildren, and one way is to share the same interests that children have. A love for journeys, short outings to museums and memorials is one way that bonding occurs.

While it has an international focus, and a cosmopolitan appeal, Sreelata Menon imagines that children will be intrigued by how many bricks go into making a building, where marble is sourced, and how different temples, and religious associations provide for tourist appeal. In this sense, it is a verbal and concise map, allowing us to go forward into the iconography of the net, where we may make virtual tours. For her, India is interspersed with the other countries of the world in such a way, that we are meshed with the world's histories in an interesting way. Item 333 in *501 Facts*, however, had me a little confused:

'The Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand houses the famous temple of the Emerald Buddha. The Emerald Buddha traces its roots to India around 500 hundred years ago from where it was brought after the Lord Buddha attained nirvana. It was enshrined in the Wat Phra Kaew temple within the palace grounds in 1782, when the palace was built during Rama's reign. This is a 26 in seated meditating Buddha made of green emerald stone and clothed in gold' (p. 113). The second sentence seems a little displaced chronologically. No other printers' devils were noted.

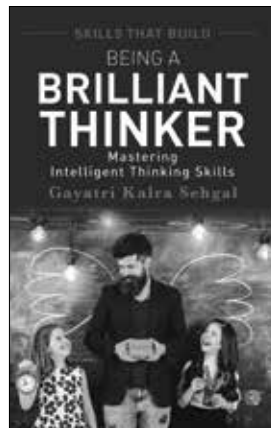
Susan Visvanathan is Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her latest collection of short stories is titled *Adi Sankara and Other Stories* (2017). She has edited with Vineetha Menon, a festschrift for Prof TK Oommen titled *Chronology and Events: The Sociological Landscape of Changing Concepts* (Winshield Press, 2019). Susan Visvanathan is also the Editor of *Structure, Innovation and Adaptation* (Winshield Press, 2019) and *Art, Politics, Symbols and Religion* (Winshield Press, 2019) which are essays, dedicated to the Founders of Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU.

Ira Saxena

BEING A BRILLIANT THINKER: MASTERING INTELLIGENT THINKING SKILLS;
BEING A CREATIVE GENIUS: MASTERING ACTIVITIES THAT INSPIRE CREATIVITY

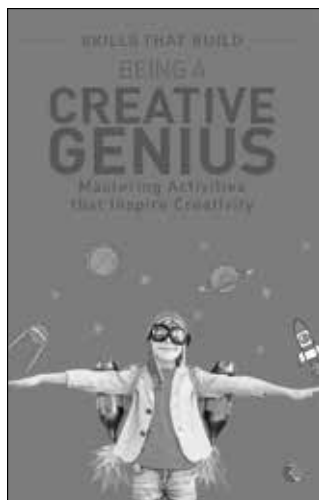
By Gayatri Kalra Sehgal
 Rupa , 2019, pp. 224 & 28, ₹295.00 each

This selection for review among current reads for children is primarily due to the contents of the books connecting teachers and parents with children directly. The titles clarify the purpose and meaning of the books under Skills That Build series aimed to guide parents and educators to develop a child’s essential life skills through tackling aspects of mental processes and suggested activities on their road to maturation.



Creativity is the ability to produce original ideas and new items. It is the key to success in life. The spontaneity of actions and reactions in children is a true indication of creativity. The anchor points of creativity is taking off from curiosity that includes attention, observation, problem-solving, risk-taking in its fold. Children seek acceptance and appreciation through their performance and the fear of being wrong causes stress in young creative minds. As conscious facilitators careful monitoring of the child is required in developing creativity. Developing a creative environment, promoting unstructured exploration, fun with intelligence, merging learning with creativity, and the much-needed Eco-centric approach in acquiring life skills enables sustainable creativity.

Thinking is a mental process encompassing the senses, association, concept formation, problem-solving skills and learning. Intelligent thinking, primarily, is efficient manipulation of sensory information, synthesizing, analysing and evaluating information functionally essential for enhanced creative solutions. Thinking represents a creative chain of processes to reach perception and mental maturity.



There are different types of thinking. Concrete thinking, linear in nature, develops abstractions leading to convergent thinking and divergent thinking towards structured organization of concepts. Critical thinking, analytical thought develops creative thinking and sequential thinking capable of being honed by offering tangible solutions in a guided

setting. The efforts of parents and facilitators can evolve child’s thinking skills and enhance creativity. Independent thinking in a child empowers diligently towards deeper learning. Such futuristic approach is the need of children today.

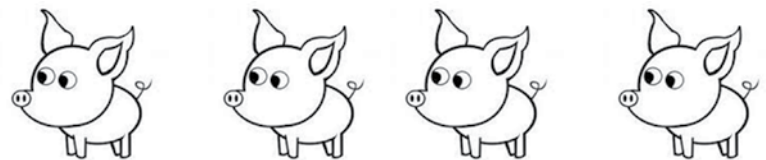
In *Being A Brilliant Thinker* Gayatri Sehgal enumerates a variety of activities affecting memory and association, synthesis, analysis and evaluation, inference and problem solving amounting to adequacy and creative thought process. These activities utilizing ordinary ideas like Grandpa’s radio, mango tree, no electricity, a giant robot friend are fun to practice and enhance critical thinking.

In *Being A Creative Genius*, the author outlines a variety of activities to inspire creativity. A practical approach devised for sharpening curiosity from the early stage in primary education is the strongest feature of the book. The degree of difficulty of the recommended activities, using simple, inexpensive things of daily use and the natural elements, offers ideas and practice for older children as well. Activity plans like making a kaleidoscope, lava lamps, flour batik, cement pots, fridge magnets, embroidered bottles, fairy lights, wooden vase, wind chimes or destressing wrist supports are only some of the practical lessons suggested by the author in simple prose and cultivated after years of experience in teaching and experimentation in behavioural learning.

The simplicity of the language and interestingly organized opening chapters do not extend into lengthy concept lectures on creativity; rather the hands-on quality could fittingly prompt even young readers to turn the pages of this book. Most certainly this book excels in its worth for educators, parents and tutors teaching primary grades in schools.

It is obvious that works of such calibre could be the created only through close contact with children. The author, who is actually an artist, has also been a dedicated educator with a vision of creating global leaders of tomorrow.

Ira Saxena, a Ph.D. in Child Psychology, is the author of innumerable books for children.



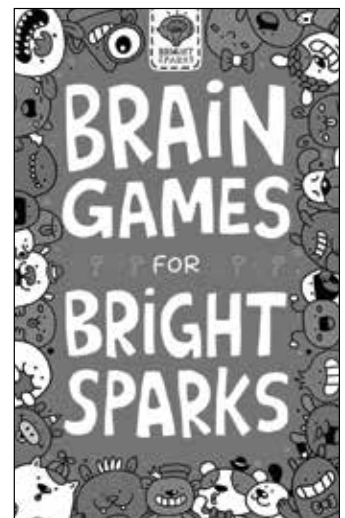
Andal Jagannathan

BRAIN GAMES FOR BRIGHT SPARKS
QUIZ GAMES FOR BRIGHT SPARKS

Both by Gareth Moore. Illustrations by Jess Bradley. Designed by Zoe Bradley. Edited by Sue Macmillan and Katy Lennon. Cover Designed by John Bigwood Hachette, 2019, pp. 160 each, ₹250.00 each

Decode secret messages, do some monster math, test your sequencing skills with numbers, finish fences, link shapes and do a lot of other fun stuff with Dr Gareth Moore’s *Brain Games for Bright Sparks*. The puzzles in the book are designed for ages 7-9. Adults can peek in too!

The bottom right corner of each page has a slot for marking time taken to solve the puzzle on the page. Children can be challenged to time-bound puzzle solving to add an element of thrill to the activity. In addition to several word and number puzzles there are quite a few math puzzles and tricky logic puzzles too. The book has more than 80 puzzles.



Page 79 has an interesting activity called ‘Picture Merge’. Children will find it very engrossing. The jigsaw grid on page 68 is yet another fun puzzle which will keep children’s heads buried in the book till

they get it right.

The author advises users to use pencils so that it is easy to change answers, if needed. The back of the book does contain all the answers, but it would be good fun to try and solve all the puzzles and then cross-check answers. Back-of-the-book answers should be the absolutely last option. Try explaining that to impatient children!

If you want to grow a daffodil, would you plant a seed, bulb, twig or bark? Err...um...? Thinking? OK, try this one. How many keys are there on a standard full piano keyboard?

There are plenty of interesting questions such as these in *Quiz Games for Bright Sparks*. It is a veritable storehouse of interesting quizzes for the inquisitive, always-in-the-need-for-something-to-do 7-9 age group. A good variety of topics ranging from animals, minerals, vegetables to geography will keep those ever-curious minds busy. There are some sections that test arithmetic skills too.

Score boxes given at the bottom of each page are meant for honest users. Once children are done with the quizzes they can cross-check answers from the back of the book and note down their score in the score box.

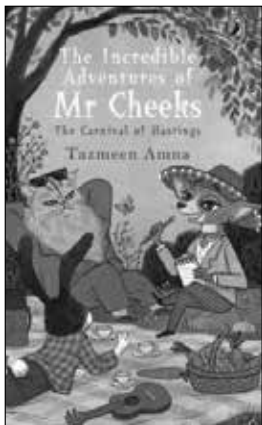
Not an easy task, eh? I am not referring to the cross-checking activity, but the ability to not check the back of the book the minute the child is stumped. Now that would be a discipline worth developing. A little bit of restraint for the right reasons cannot hurt after all, can it? In fact, the author urges children to stop and think when they reach a quiz they do not know the answer to. He encourages children to recall what they know about the subject, and thereby try to arrive at the right answer. He encourages children to ask others if needed. This would give adults a chance to put down their phones and talk to children! Once children finish all the quizzes in the book, they are sure to become trivia champs.

And well, don't think the book is just for children. Regardless of your age, do try the quizzes. Did you know that the quagga, a type of zebra, native to South Africa, has a plain brown back half? Its front half is different. Do you know what its front half is like? Any idea how long a sea turtle is expected to live?

Find answers to all this and more in Dr Gareth Moore's *Quiz Games for Bright Sparks*.

Andal Jagannathan is a teacher by training and a learner in practice, a content consultant by profession and a waste warrior by passion.

Book News Book News



The Incredible Adventures of Mr Cheeks By Tazmeen Amna is a tale of three oddball friends, Mr Cheeks, a dapper tap-dancing Chihuahua, Mr Grey, a grumpy Persian cat who paints, and Hopper, an anxious rabbit who sings, set out to sign up for the talent show at the annual carnival at Hastings, with a brilliant plan to show that it is not only nightingales who sing or the peacock which dances. Read about the exciting journey that ensues.

Puffin, 2019, pp. 168, ₹ 250.00

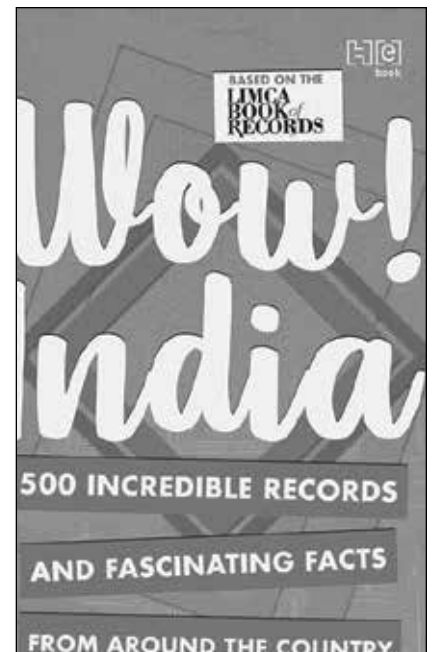
Vir Bhatia

WOW! INDIA: 500 INCREDIBLE RECORDS AND FASCINATING FACTS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

Hachette India , 2019, pp. 233, ₹299.00

'Be amazed. Be informed. Be proud. Above all, be inspired!'

The above line is aptly inscribed in the back page of Hachette India's 2019 record book, *Wow! India*. Books like this are often written for the purpose of documenting and celebrating the remarkable features of a time period and place. Indeed, it is a Herculean task to find a time period or a place more interesting than present-day India, and so the publication of books such as this one is a thing to be grateful for. Covering everything from the media, to the scientific and technological objects of the nation, the book is all-encompassing, and serves to enlighten its readers as to the diversity and extent of India's brilliance.



While the book is framed in small paragraphs, each alluding to a different record or fact, it does not compromise on its detail or educational quality. Providing dates, identities, special circumstances and more, it serves as an adequate supplement to understanding of the Indian existence.

It is perhaps more important now than ever before to release and publicize books that celebrate the history of India, with the emerging generation of millennials looking primarily to the West for its cultural influences. Western music, apparel, accents and slang, and cultural norms seem to be slowly replacing the sense of tradition and history that prevailed in the past. In my personal experience, reading a book like *Wow! India* reminded me of the vibrancy of the country. I regard the future of India with great optimism, more so after becoming aware of the several topics the book covers.

My sole criticism lies in the book allowing itself to become merely an assertion of facts. While the primary focus on the book may be to convey different records and events from the nation's history, it should not prevent itself from also presenting the several failures of the country, in an attempt to *inform* the people, and *inspire* them to do and be better than has been the case in the past. For the book to celebrate the achievements of India in educational and governmental aspects, without at least acknowledging the many shortcomings of both of these departments is deception. Instead of telling readers about the 'first museum of toilets', it would be much more favourable for the book to discuss the failure to inculcate modern and sexual education, or end corruption and religious bias in the government. Only when this is done can the book be appreciated as a true chronicling of the nation.

Vir Bhatia is a Grade 11 student at The Doon School, Dehradun. An avid reader and writer, he is also fond of good music, football, and fun with friends.

Padma Baliga

WONDER KIDS: 100 CHILDREN WHO GREW UP TO BE CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

By Anu Kumar. Illustrations by Mohit Suneja
Hachette India, 2019, pp. 208, ₹299.00

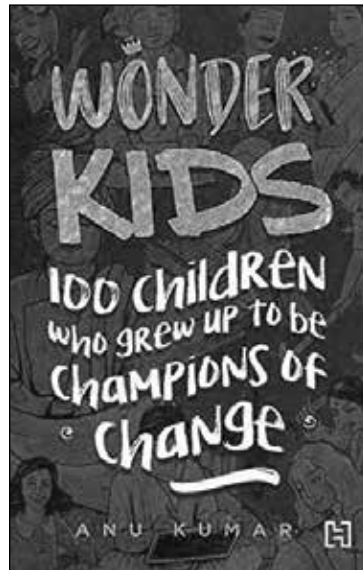
Anu Kumar's book falls under an emergent and popular category in children's publishing, namely collective biographies. Ever since *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo stormed its way into the bestseller lists in late 2016, writers and publishers have rushed to publish short inspiring biographies of famous women, men, scientists, sportsmen, and other achievers.

Kumar's USP is that she locates the beginning of the journey in childhood. She looks at how the child shaped 'a spark, a talent, a curiosity or just a dream' in ways that set them apart from other children and helped them become the amazing people they are. For instance, we learn that Charles Darwin spent a lot of time outdoors as a child, observing insects and other plant and animal life. Or that Ashapurna Devi, born in 1909, taught herself to read and write by eavesdropping on her brothers' classes. Of special interest are child activists like Thandiwe Chama who spoke up for education as an 8 year old, Nkosi Johnson who argued for the rights of AIDS sufferers and Rukhmabai Raut who was married as a child but refused to abide by the marriage.

There is a very eclectic collection of role models to read about—artists, statesmen, writers, economists, sportsmen, activists and entrepreneurs from contemporary as well as historical periods. A distinct majority of them are Indian or from the subcontinent. One can't help observing that a Eurocentric perspective dominates the selection of the other famous names.

Each two-page story is well-researched and illustrated. However, when a person's life is summed up in 300-350 words, however compellingly it is related, it runs the risk of being a compilation of facts. While Anu Kumar with her famed research capabilities and writing skills manages to avoid this danger, one wonders whether it might not have made more sense to focus on fewer achievers and have a more in-depth quality to the work.

Padma Baliga is an English Professor turned library evangelist for she believes that every child deserves to have a reading life.

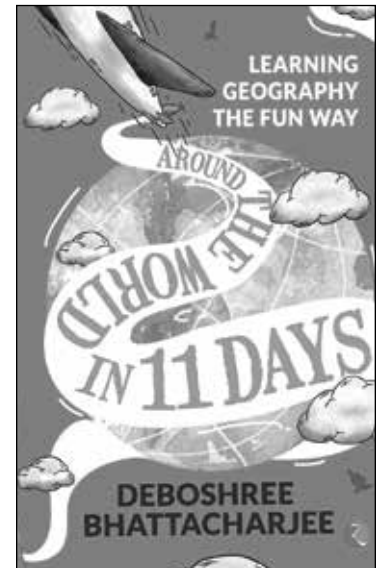


Samiya Keen

AROUND THE WORLD IN 11 DAYS : LEARNING GEOGRAPHY THE FUN WAY

By Deboshree Bhattacharjee
Rupa publications, 2019, pp.144, ₹195.00

The book starts with the introduction of the continents of the world and ends with the lakes of the world. The book takes us on a ride where we can experience many beautiful things around us. Every chapter of the book is as thrilling as the title is. In the first chapter we come to know how the continents of the world came into existence and Australia is home to Monotremes—these are mammals that lay eggs. The second chapter explains how for the sake of administrative and political purposes continents are divided into smaller landmasses called countries. The fact that Australia is the smallest continent which includes only 3 countries whereas Asia which is the largest continent in the world includes 51 countries is highlighted. It is also amazing to know that we belong to the world's largest continent.



In the third chapter the author has made an attempt to explain about the oceans of the world with the Pacific Ocean being the largest while the Arctic Ocean is the smallest and shallowest ocean. Each chapter makes one want to go on to the next to glean more and more information about the world we live in. For instance, did you know that the Ural is the oldest mountain range in the world? The Ural covers two countries, Russia and Kazakhstan. The best part of this book is after reading each chapter you can imagine yourself taking a ride around the world. The thing which I liked the most in the book is we kept on moving from countries to oceans, from oceans to forests and from forests to waterfalls and so on.

We have had experience of different kinds of weather, sometimes hot and at times extremely cold. In the seventh chapter the author illustrates the example of the Mojave Desert in North America which is the hottest desert in the world whereas the Gobi desert in Asia gets as cold as -40°C! The book also shows us how diverse our planet earth is. I would highly recommend this book to everyone. And if you love travelling, then pack your bags and get ready for a thrilling ride with the author.

Samiya Keen is a student of B.A.Hons (Political Science) at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Book News Book News



Tales of Tricks and Treats by Enid Blyton, is a selection of 30 stories, perfect for age 5 and up. From goblin games to never-ending wishes, there's mischief afoot in these fun-filled short stories.
Hodder Children's Books/Hachette, 2019, pp. 336, £6.99, ₹399.00

Book News Book News



Christmas Treats by Enid Blyton, one of the most popular children's authors of all times, is a bumper collection of 29 short stories, ideal for reading aloud, or for children over 7 to read alone! From the proud rocking horse who learns the gift of giving to a snowman befriended by elves, these joyful tales celebrate the true spirit of Christmas.
Hodder Children's Books/Hachette, 2017, pp. 340, £ 6.99, ₹399.00

Shalini Jayaswal Singh

HOW YOUR CHILD CAN WIN IN LIFE: THE DOON SCHOOL'S HEADMASTER ON RAISING KIDS WHO LOVE TO LEARN

By Mathew Raggett

Juggernaut Books, 2019, pp. 245, ₹499.00

'In a world where there is always going to be someone better, faster, stronger, we need to make sure that they do not measure themselves against some impossible yardstick of expectation.'

In this book, author Mathew Raggett deals with simple yet powerful concepts that parents face in everyday lives. Raggett's credentials as a teacher/guide/mentor with over two decades of experience interacting with students across the world, authenticate every perspective that he has on different issues. Be it in selecting the right school for kids or creating a healthy atmosphere for kids at home/making them do chores, to name a few, the author has thoughtfully woven together very helpful tips for parents.

There are lots of pointers for parents to ponder over—the chapter focused on reading talks about a very simple concept of reading aloud to a child and how it yields a lot of value. His narratives are practical as he also goes on to share his perspective on speaking and writing next. There is no doubt on the natural journey that any child has to undergo. However, he makes it a point to emphasize that it is perfectly fine for a child to take his/her own time to master these basics. This narrative reassures many parents who might be worried or concerned if their child does not start talking at a certain expected age. There are thought-provoking ideas that could become conversation starters over tea with fellow parents and teachers and if incorporated in a family's daily routine, can help resolve a lot of issues that the current generation of parents go through.

I particularly enjoyed the part where parents are encouraged to let children 'play'—'about pretending, trying things out and making mistakes without having to lose anything'. The sentiment expressed by the author—the antidote to embarrassment is *that magical combination of curiosity and enthusiasm* that some of our best teachers are able to hang onto got me thinking about how I deal with my children, especially my four-year-old daughter with her never-ending questions about the world around her.

The book discusses parents' endeavour to create that perfect balance of school teaching and healthy home environment. In that journey of constantly trying to get the best for their children, the parents sometimes ignore the most fundamental element which is 'TIME'—the time that we could spend with soon-going-to be adults of the next generation! The responsibility of fuelling a child's imagination by either undertaking a family beach vacation or a mountain trekking lies on us, the parents. A simple chore for them taking care of their belongings, such as a doll or a bicycle, can lead them to turn into fine adults of tomorrow. The 'how' of execution, rests with each family and there is no right or wrong answer to it.

The drill a parent goes through—from finding the right school—to getting the child enrolled is a topic of exasperation for a lot of parents, especially in and around the capital of India, Delhi. It is heartening to see that the author delves into aspects of finding the

“There are lots of pointers for parents to ponder over—the chapter focused on reading talks about a very simple concept of reading aloud to a child and how it yields a lot of value.”

right school, a favourite topic of discussion for any parent of a three-year-old child. What we forget sometimes is that finding the right school is just the beginning of a long process in preparing the child for the future, it is not the end. The book thoughtfully articulates what parents need to consider before opting for one, besides the board the school is offering, the school's infrastructure and extracurricular activities. Parents' interaction with class teachers to understand a teacher's motivation to teach children would also help throw light on what values the school intends to impart to its students. A well-researched work for parents, the book shares tips which could go a long way in deciding whether the school chosen by a parent is the right one for his/her child!

The book challenges us as guardians to give good thought to the notion of choosing the right school—more so from the perspective of a child and not from what the school is offering (read selling).

My favourite part of the book, which I believe would also excite a lot many readers, is the ABCs of Learning! This was a delightful

section, where simple yet critical concepts of growing up are discussed and the author presents a whole world that each child traverses in his/her growing up years. A child goes through the same dilemma that his/her parents would have gone through, even though the times have changed. The onset of technology has changed the outlook for most of us, yet the evergreen concepts of making a choice, collaborating as opposed to competing mindlessly, family having dinner together to bring the day to a close to the day, can immensely help a child understand the nuances of transitioning into an adult.

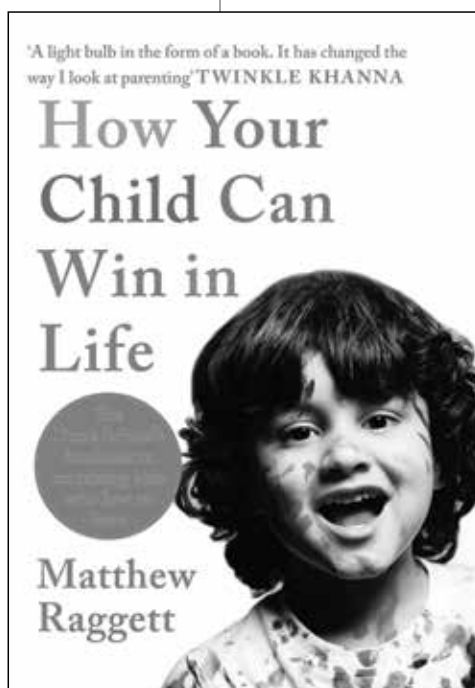
Readers can relate to the simple definitions of integrity and empathy and in fact, these abstract yet dominant themes could easily feature in their conversations with their own children post reading the last section of the book.

As a parent and also as a working mother grappling with day-to-day issues with my kids, the book gave me some scope to reflect upon my own style of parenting.

This is one of those books (though the author mentions the book is not a self-help book) can help ease a lot of difficult conversations between parents and children. It could seamlessly become the talking point of various social media groups (mommy groups, reading clubs and baking classes) that one chooses to be a part of these days to know what is transpiring in the world. For all the wisdom the book imparts on parenting and more, this is a must-read.

A refreshing book with delightful parental talking points!!

Shalini Jayaswal Singh is a senior Corporate Human Resources and Organizational Development Professional, with close to 15 years of work experience. She is currently working with HSBC (Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) and is a mother to two girls aged four and eight years. She loves to travel, read and explore the ever-evolving human behaviour and personality.



Asha Sharma

THE CHILDREN OF TOMORROW: A MONK'S GUIDE TO MINDFUL PARENTING

By Om Swami

HarperCollins, India, 2019, pp. 181, ₹299.00

SPARKS OF GENIUS: HOW TO RAISE A CONFIDENT, THINKING CHILD

By Bela Raja

Rupa, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 165, ₹295.00

Parenting has no hard and fast rules and that's what makes it the toughest job on earth. Parents who say parenting came easily to them are not being honest with themselves, it is by far the boldest and most daring adventure of life!

These two books are definitely useful in guiding parents and reassuring them that there will always be situations and scenarios where it will be really difficult doing or saying what you need to do or say, but in the long run, it will all end up well as long as you maintain the fine balance between being firm but empathetic.

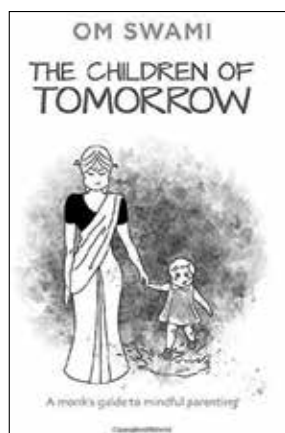
Om Swami's *The Children of Tomorrow* is a light, breezy read with lots of interesting illustrations and numerous examples of real-life parenting challenges and strategies to handle them. The book has several examples from his own family experiences while he was growing up and it also has a long list of articles and books that can be explored for further reading. According to the author, parenting is an art where everything is relative and subjective, and given the right guidance at the right time, any child can be made to realize her true potential.

Quoting from a Danish book on parenting, the author considers

the word parent as an acronym where P is for play, A for authenticity, R for reframing, E for empathy, N for no ultimatums and T for togetherness, and he goes on to describe the relevance of each of these in detail. The book is broadly divided into three sections titled 'Understand', 'Build' and 'Nurture'.

Talking about the prevalence of lying, he says that everyone lies, no one is completely honest. When children or even adults lie, it is mainly to avoid conflict and children start lying as early as at two or three, and this is in fact a sign of their intelligence! But when parents realize that their child is lying, they should avoid a confrontational approach and instead handle the situation tactfully because ultimately it is only love and acceptance that can foster an environment of trust and bonding. Demonstration of anger either by hitting or by verbal abuse will not help discipline a child, instead it will scar the child for life. Children learn a lot by observing others and if the parent shows restraint and thinks for a few minutes before showing the first reaction, it would go a long way in setting an example.

In the section titled 'Build', the author emphasizes the importance of building an identity capital early in life by exposing children to all the avenues and possibilities that life has to offer so that they can make their own calculated choices. Children need to be exposed to reality and there is no point over-protecting them. They also need to be taught patience and perseverance and to appreciate the joys of delayed gratification. Since nothing sets a better example than actions, parents should be mindful of their deeds and more importantly, their words, because relationships can be wrecked by



saying the wrong words at the wrong time. Talking about a few core values of parenting, the author says we can all be effective parents if we are compassionate, friendly and devote quality time to our children. We should give freedom to our children to explore and experiment, experience happiness and joy and wholeheartedly celebrate their accomplishments.

The author says, 'Somewhere, we have to trust nature, have a bit of faith that in this vast creation where billions and billions of life forms are thriving, our children too are connected with the same cosmic intelligence and that they would be guided by their own intuition, aptitude, skills and other forces of nature.'

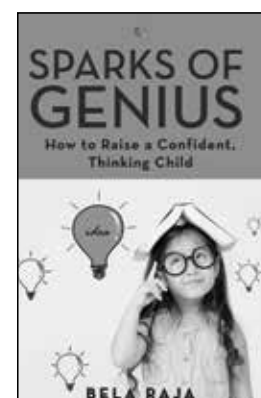
Sparks of Genius is a sensible treatise on parenting and the importance of teaching children to think for themselves and be able to solve problems, in this age of information overload. Since information is always available at our fingertips at the click of a button, retention and memory take a back seat and the ability to make sense of this information is critical for success. The author also emphasizes on how a good sense of security and self-esteem is essential for children to become confident and happy and how parents and teachers play a critical role in this process. Distractions are aplenty for today's children and since thinking involves focusing on one idea or task for a long time, children should be guided by parents on the use of devices like smartphones and rules and restriction should be in place.

The chapter on critical thinking gives an overview of Bloom's taxonomy and how it can be used as a tool, even in a regular classroom to make learning an enjoyable process, resulting in the development of a well-balanced, successful individual. Many simple examples that can be easily used are mentioned and the need for experiential learning as the way forward is highlighted, because an experience is something that is remembered for life. The chapters on movement and learning and memory give insight into the various aspects of memory and emphasize the fact that physical activity enhances cognitive functions and stimulates the brain, reiterating that outdoor games are very essential to refresh both mind and body. Various strategies that can be used to enhance memory are also suggested.

The chapter 'The Teen: A Different Kind of Human' is exhaustive and insightful, covering all major points that parents generally worry about: the teenager sleeping all the time, behaviour problems, boredom and peer pressure, etc., and can help reassure parents that their teenager isn't unique and the most difficult person on earth! Emphasizing on the drawbacks of being 'Tiger Moms and Helicopter Parents', the author recommends an authoritative style of parenting where expectations are high and realistic goals are set but the parents are not hovering around their children waiting to facilitate everything for them. They should instead be empathetic listeners who love and respect their children and are always available to support and guide them when needed.

Bela Raja believes that there is a bit of genius in every child and an expert is capable of drawing out this potential. By using the guidelines and strategies mentioned in her book, the author hopes that every parent can understand her child better and play the role of that expert!

Asha Sharma lives in Bangalore and has been teaching in schools for the past thirteen years.



Debasish Chakrabarty

PAINTING EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD

By Harsingh Hamir and Gita Wolf. Illustrated by Harsingh Hamir
Tara Books, Chennai, 2018, pp. Centrefold+24, ₹450.00

TOYS AND PLAY WITH EVERYDAY MATERIALS

By Sudarshan Khanna, Gita Wolf, Anushka Ravishankar and Priya Sundaram
Tara Books, Chennai, 2018, pp. 111, ₹800.00

Apart from author Gita Wolf, the two books by Tara have little in common. One is a children's introduction to Pithoro, a Rathva ritual art form; the other is a DIY book for children on traditional toys. Yet, such a reduction would be unfair to the two books. In the grand scheme of things, both the books are about the joy of creation, about our everyday reality and using material from quotidian life in the act of creation. It would also be unfair to reduce the two books to a single sentence because of the earthy illustration of Harsingh Hamir and funky graphics of Priya Sundaram. It is difficult to translate the complexity of a Pithoro in words.



For any person who has witnessed an original Pithoro, it is difficult to imagine the miniature figures in earthy reds, black and brown to be representative. However, once one realizes that this is a picture book for children who may have very little understanding of the lifestyle of Indian villages, much less the world of the Rathvas of Gujarat or Madhya Pradesh, the entire perspective seems to change. We understand that Gita Wolf is using Hameer's illustrations to describe the complex world of Rathva imagination. The book follows a simple plot, in fact, Wolf seems to have been inspired by the *vrata katha* tradition for her plot line:

- The village wakes up to prepare for a feast.
- It is a grand celebration.
- The next morning the village wakes up to a disaster with dried wells, sick people and dead livestock.
- They consult the village elder, who reminds them that must have omitted the worship of their village deities, Pithoro & Pithori, in the form of horses.
- The villagers rectify the error by making a grand Pithoro.
- Life comes back to normal.

The beauty and the wonder are captured in the art and the details, for truly Pithoro is an encapsulation of the Rathva life. Each frame captures the earthy nature of village life in its myriad contours—we see a scared cat on the roof; the drummer forcing a shocked guppy-like look on the face of a tiger; the grand feast with the sacrificed cockerels and people bingeing on *mahua*—in fact the double spreads just open up to a polyphony of village voices and activity. The comic-book-like interspersed text helps create the illusion of this polyphony. It is to his great credit that Hamir's images capture and propel the narrative rather than the accompanying words. We realize

the incomplete nature of life, with ailments, diseases and death and are asked to reflect on this with a frame of 'broken' and 'peeling off' Pithoro. The book invites the reader to contrast this incomplete art with the beautiful centrefold of a grand Pithoro. There is a bit of magical folding that captures the essence of Pithoro on the reverse of the folded page and captures the illusion of the frames of the narration.

After all, Pithoro is an art that captures in multiple frames aspects of everyday life of the Rathvas. In fact, in some of the newer Pithoros one finds anachronistic references to helicopters landing, vehicles plying, people with guns hunting game, seamlessly merged with the pristine forest life of tribal Rathvas harking back to a few centuries. In fact, modern Pithoro painting captures India's inherent anachronism, like few other art forms. Not much of this finds its way on the pages of the book, but then it is a picture book for children.

In the spirit of all picture books, it all ends well for the villagers in the narrative and the last two pages of the book allow the reader a glimpse of how a real Pithoro looks on a wall of a Rathva home. It also mentions why and how artists like Hamir are branching out seeking livelihood in a modern world.

The joys of Khanna, Wolf and Ravishankar's *Toys and Play* lies in the simplicity of the crafts and the simple step-by-step illustrated instructions to make them. This is a book for any child and for parents who wish to keep their pre-teens engaged in a world of creativity away from mobile games and *YouTube* videos. Like the engrossing toys, the book is also for parents, who might wish to spend some quality family time with growing children or even read through the last few pages of reflections to arrive at some of their own understanding.

The book is divided into two major sections with an engaging pictorial index. The first and the main section is the making of toys from everyday materials like thread, paper, clay, sticks, etc. This section is divided into five sub-sections: 'toys that make noise', 'toys that dance', 'toys that play tricks', 'toys that move with the wind' and 'toys that need skill'. Each sub-section has its own pictorial index with images of the specific toys. Every chapter (one per toy) has a predictable graphic communication structure with a set of tags:

- 'You will need' for materials required;
- 'How it is made' for the step-by-step process;
- 'What it does'—the outcome described in a sentence and
- 'When it doesn't' for what could possibly go wrong and solutions for the same;
- A game-play instruction with a catchy tag name like 'The Penguin Game' explaining the game; and
- A knowledge box with scientific explanations and possible extension activities and explorations.

The second section (tucked away in the bottom corner of the graphic index) is clearly a section meant for adult readers. They are page-long reflection articles based on the authors' experience at various workshops. Their findings and realizations do make us think and ponder about the decisions we make every day on behalf of our



children. What is touching and engaging about these essays was the keen eye of a social psychologist, a parent and a design analyst all blended in one. The authors comment of the levels of hunger for exploration and ability to digest failure in children of a certain social class. Each essay also dwells on the need for reviving the traditional and more importantly the culture on making perishable toys in a world inundated by heaps of cheap plastic and cast alloy toys that mostly thrive as junk. I found serious merit in their reflection on the need for teaching the value of the process or the journey, to children, in the art of toy-making. The joy is in making and even unmaking and re-making the toy rather than just playing with the completed product—this is so far removed from the present culture of click-swipe-order-throw culture of online gifting or purchase of toys. The greatest lesson perhaps is in learning about the principle of ‘affordance’ that design schools so emphatically teach in India. Charles Eames used the metaphor of the Indian ‘lota’ to talk about the range of activities a humble tumbler allows one to accomplish—from worship to ablution, from quenching thirst to potting plants. Such too is the beauty of the toys mentioned here, the same paper, clay mould, sticks and string can be recycled to make other toys—such grand recipes of mindfulness about nature and survival should not be taken lightly.

Both the books from the house of Tara remind us, as adults, what we need to expose our children to, what certain choices could mean, the essence of humility and most critically the celebration of the process, and the lost joy in a world of perishable things which could be re-made and re-enjoyed. For children, well, they are hardbound packages of joy and discovery.

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Aparna Ramachandran

PUPPETS UNLIMITED WITH EVERYDAY MATERIALS

By Gita Wolf, Anushka Ravishankar, Ragini Siriguri, Dhvani Shah and Rohini Srinivasan
Tara Books, 2018, pp.144, ₹800.00

TTrue to its word, *Puppets Unlimited* has a plethora of DIY puppets staring at you, inviting you to get your hands on that coconut shell lying in your kitchen and make an interesting looking puppet out of it. Not just the puppets, but the things used to make them are innovative too, making best use of the waste lying around in the house.

As the adage goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, the first thing that catches your attention in the book are the clear and striking illustrations. Right from the materials used, to the end result of what the puppets would look like, they are explained with pictures in steps and are crystal clear.

Along with the illustrations, the instructions are laid out in an easy to understand, Do It Yourself manner, with modification tips if we would like to try something different. The names given for the puppets are very creative, with some funny ones that caught my



attention like Toothygator, General Cap-Tin.

The coverage of the book is wide, covering a range of puppets from hand puppets, to rod, shadow and even string puppets. Not just making the puppets, but their usage as well is illustrated and explained to a good extent.

The reader is also given a peek into the traditional puppets, how they came into being, and their status today. It leaves us wanting to experience this beautiful art form (slowly fizzling out though), to see the little colourful immobile beings being brought alive by their masters, the puppeteers!

Puppets Unlimited does its bit in bringing to people simple and effective ways of making puppets with objects easily available around us, thus trying to sustain the art form of puppetry. So what are you waiting for? Pick up the book and get started.

Aparna Ramachandran, a mother of two, is into storytelling; telling tales to the most adorable audience, children. She enjoys gardening and feels lucky to have got a chance to learn a lot more in the midst of curious children, being a gardening teacher in a home-school collective!



Subhadra Sen Gupta

INSIDE INDIA: AMAZING HISTORICAL PLACES

By Shachii Manik. Illustrations & Design by Ahmed Sikander

HarperCollins Children's Books, 2018, pp 64,
₹250.00

I usually don't review a book while holding a pencil and an eraser but then this one made me do it. It is a lovely idea too. Whenever we say 'a history book', kids begin to wilt and go cross-eyed in panic, expecting pages and pages of turgid text about long dead people. So a book of puzzles, crafts, quizzes and recipes woven around history is a true winner. And then there is a bright, friendly cover that is jumping with whacky images. Who can resist it? Even then, history means research and Shachii Manik and her team have ranged from the rock paintings of Bhimbetka to the Golconda Fort and a toothless nawab in Lucknow. All the information is seamlessly woven into the activities. Also knowing children, I can see many of them then zipping into the Internet to discover more. Who thought a weird puzzle or quiz on Harappa or Hampi could make Google and Wikipedia popular among ten year olds? The variety of the activities also show that much thought has gone into the book. I laughed aloud at the pamphlet from a temple in Jharkhand full of the most absurd spelling mistakes. Then I was defeated by the codes in the Ashokan edicts puzzle and decided to read about making falooda instead.

Fortunately Ahmed Sikander is an artist with a sense of humour and I loved his illustrations of the fat queen bearing a thali of ladoos and the sweaty gent running away from ghosts. There are also sections encouraging children to write a story or draw a picture and for that you need a pencil. Finally a thought, why don't our history text-books have activities like these at the end of each lesson? It would really make history accessible and interesting for students.

Subhadra Sen Gupta enjoys introducing India's amazing history to young readers, through both fiction and non-fiction. Her *The Children's History of India*, (Rupa / Red Turtle) was specially written for every child who falls asleep over a history text-book.



Neev Literature Festival: Taking Children's Literature Seriously

A Report by Padma Baliga and Vishaka V Warriar

Neev Literature Festival (NLF) being hosted by the Neev Academy, Bangalore since 2017 was this year a sumptuous spread of events that celebrated books and readers. The festival brought together children, authors, educators, parents, and all those who engage with children and children's literature. With the mission of creating readers for life, this year's festival was based on the theme, 'Taking Children's Literature Seriously.'

The two-day festival on September 20 and 21 witnessed an enriching exchange of ideas on issues as disparate as the Kashmir situation, building empathy among children, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, gender constructs, therapeutic power of stories, building imagination and creativity and of course the place of the canon in children's literature. Visitors to the festival could pick from 120 sessions for children, 19 panel discussions, 6 parent workshops, 5 librarian workshops, and a number of talks and face-to-face interactions with a host of authors. Resource persons including writers, illustrators, library educators, publishers, performers and storytellers travelled from across the globe and the country to exchange ideas and engage in thoughtful deliberations and joyful immersive experiences of children's books.

One of the highlights of NLF'19, was when political realities were brought into the realm of childhood with discussions around conflicts between the state and the individual, postcolonial inequities faced by Adivasis and stories from Kashmir. Authors spoke about the power of stories to initiate conversations, sensitize children and give every child a strong self-confident voice. Other panel discussions on topics such as 'Revival of Storytelling', 'Conflicts that Matter', 'Literature that Empowers', 'Local Books Going Global' and 'The Missing Canon' touched upon different facets of reading, writing, reflection, storytelling and multiple other areas.

Speaking about the importance of supporting children's freedom to choose books to read, Donna Jo Napoli, an American author cautioned parents, 'Do not limit a child's choice of books. Let them have the liberty to choose what they wish to read,' At the panel discussion titled 'The Reading Diet' the consensus was that just as a wholesome diet promotes physiological health, a wholesome reading diet is a way to promote psychological well-being. The session

focused on the importance of extending children's literature from happy storylines to the ground realities of our world.

Further to this, in a workshop meant for educators titled, 'Books as saviours in difficult times: how texts teach us empathy.' Gita Varadarajan, author of *Save Me a Seat* said that she would like to motivate educators to use stories to begin conversations with children on complex issues like caste. At another workshop, Sujata Noronha of Bookworm Goa demonstrated the power of a short story in subtly bringing home the grief and destruction caused by communal conflict in our country. Noronha and Varadarajan reminded the teachers and librarians at the workshops that such issues cannot be swept under the carpet without causing further damage. We need to talk to children on these issues without any hesitation in classrooms.

Zai Whitaker, author of popular and inclusive books like *Kanna Panna*, *Kali and the Rat Snake*, and *Andamans Boy* engaged in a conversation with parents about the why and how of helping children become a reader. She said, 'Books are related to social behaviour and teach children how to respond to relationships. For example, with divorce being a big social issue, children are reading about it through many stories and this makes them feel that they are not alone.' When you gift a book to a child, you are not merely giving an hour of joyous reading but possibly helping the child build coping strategies.

A massive white board in the hallway invited readers to record the reasons why they read ('it makes me happy' wrote one child!) while a replica of a whale with its stomach full of plastic waste and cans reminded visitors not to pollute (although the thousands of plastic water bottles and paper cups used at the two-day festival were a self-defeating aberration).

The winners of the Neev Book Award 2019 were Richa Jha and Sumanta Dey's *Machher Jhol* (Picture Books), Shabnam Minwalla's *When Jiya met Urmila* (Emerging Readers), Supriya Kelkar's *Abimsa* (Junior Readers) and Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds* (Young Adults).

Padma Baliga is a Professor of English turned library evangelist.
Vishaka V Warriar is a journalist.

Percy Jackson According to Serena Shah

5 star rating

I was just in my school library and saw the books. At first I didn't think much of it, but then later I saw the first book in my brother's room. I started to read it and I enjoyed it very much. As I read more and more, I discovered that I had to read the entire series of it. The minute you read the first page you get hooked. I was intrigued by the different plots. It is very funny and sometimes you have read it again to get a small chuckle.

It is about a boy named Percy Jackson who is the son of the god Poseidon and a mortal named Sally. He goes on adventures with a satyr named Grover and a demigod named Annabeth who is the daughter of Athena, Goddess of wisdom.

I thought there was something missing in the first book with the paragraph, 'I accidentally vaporized my pre algebra teacher. It was very thrilling but I thought maybe it could add a part saying, "What in the world just happened to Mrs Dodds?"'

But, otherwise I thought everything else was perfect. I spent many hours just reading the books over and over again. I thought every little detail in these books were just fantastic. For example, in the second book, Tyson, who is the main character's half brother, found a monster donut shop! The description of the shop was hilarious.

I think the series is amazing for children to read. You can improve your vocabulary and learn all about Greek mythology, which is very similar to Indian mythology. They have as many gods and goddesses as we do!

Serena Shah is in Class 4B, The Cathedral and John Connon Junior School, Mumbai.

Where is My Story? Voices from the Margins

Anjali Noronha (with contributions from Brajesh and Bali Jagat from Muskaan)

Let me begin with an excerpt from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Dangers of a Single Story*. Because in Nigeria, she had only read story books set in Britain or Europe and all the characters in them were white, her writings as a child depicted nothing from her own life: 'I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.'

Children's literature in India and elsewhere is populated mostly by stories of privileged contexts of the well to do, urban white male in the US or Europe and upper caste in India. A concern about inclusion of all children's lives particularly those of the marginalized, has been growing in the last couple of decades, particularly in the US, Australia and Europe. However, their actual representation in children's books is still abysmal.

'In 2012 the Cooperative Children's Book Centre reviewed 3,600 titles and found that just 3.3 percent of the books published were about African Americans; 2.1 percent were about Asian-Pacific Americans; only 1.5 percent were about Latinos; and, a mere 0.6percent were about Native Americans.'

Children's literature in India has been coming into its own only in the last few decades as is universalization of literacy and education. Universal access to children's literature is a much more recent phenomenon. Most educators and educationists in India are unaware that many who drop out or are unable to read in school because their contexts are not familiar in what they read. Studies have shown that a large number of children not learning to read and not becoming readers, are from the marginalized section, whose contexts are not meaningfully represented in what is published and who, therefore, have not a reading culture.

There have been some studies on representations of females in text-books, but almost nothing about the representation of marginalized peoples—of Dalits, Tribals, Denotified Tribes, Minorities, Displaced peoples, Regional migrants and labourers, those below the poverty line, LGBTQ, differently abled... unfortunately, even awareness that the above categories remain unrepresented is very recent—and the issue of who will tell whose story, whether it makes a difference whether it is being told by the marginalized or by a sympathetic privileged other is hardly discussed. Why is it important that we should read stories of all these people, their struggles, their joys?

According to Freire and Macedo, the ways in which we interpret the word and the world differ according to who we are: 'Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context.'

In an article 'Imagine Yourself a Young Reader in the Margins # Own Voices Three Takes', Ebony Elizabeth Williams talks about the effect of demeaning narratives on children of colour in the US.

Rather than see their self-respect crushed and laughed at in school or public education centres, they prefer to stop reading and drop out.

It is these issues that a unique seminar, 'Where is My Story?' organized by Muskaan, held on 22 and 23 August attempted to discuss and understand. It was unique as it brought together an equal number of writers and artists from both marginalized and privileged backgrounds and developed a discourse on these issues. The detailed report will be available soon. A few books written by young authors of Tribal, Denotified tribes, LGBTQ backgrounds were launched—these were also reviewed by children of the same backgrounds.

The seminar began with a review of a few books which are based on the lives of marginalized children: *Guthli*, *Sir ka Saalan* and *Payal Kho Gayi*. *Payal Kho Gayi* is a book that children related to very well as it has woven the experiences of a girl like 'them'. *Sir ka Saalan* by Khadeer Babu which is based on the experience of cooking a goat's head, was greatly appreciated by the children—as they could relate with the experience of cooking and eating mutton, which is often ostracized—they had felt that people's right to any kind of food

should be upheld. The seminar rightly placed the children in the forefront.

The seminar had established writers from deprived backgrounds—Tribal, Dalit, Denotified tribe, Muslim... present their life experiences and journeys as writers. This session set the tone of the discourse. Some extremely painful and revealing experiences were shared, which people try to shy away from in publishing. Sujatha Suryapalli, a Dalit academician from Telengana, who chaired the first session, was of the view that own voices matter. Privileged empathetic persons must write stories of their alienation from their own and other communities when they work with the marginalized. She brought to light the fact that these stories are not available at all, even less than those of the marginalized.

Childhood experiences were an important part of the discussions. Lakshman Gaekwad, an Uchalya Pardhi, now an acclaimed writer, author of *The Branded*, recounted his childhood which gave a totally new perspective on child beating. He said that as Uchalyas, children were trained to be pickpockets and had to undergo training by relentless beating in order to prepare them to endure police beatings without letting out the names of their kinsmen! The life of the different groups of Pardhis even today, is one where Pardhi children and women are picked up by police. Similarly the ostracization of the Muslim community, more so the Muslim Dalits was recounted by Ali Hussain who shared that despite their community having given up manual scavenging and other related tasks, they are still asked on Eid to collect the ojdj—the intestines that hold the excreta of the goat! Anita, a young Dalit recounted the painful experience of being told off by the mother of an upper caste school friend just because she was a Dalit. The challenge is to reflect these lives in literature without legitimizing oppression.

Khadeer Babu, another award winning author, recounted his experiences as a young Muslim boy, always put down in class till he

Muskaan is an organization based in Bhopal that has been working with urban deprived children for many years now. In earlier days they tried to support children's learning outside schools and mainstream them into government schools. However, their experience of the utter marginalization and exclusion of the children prompted Muskaan to start their own centres and a school in which they emphasized children's own expressions and their writings which are also used to teach and develop writing in children. For the first time they have edited designed and published books in English, written by and about Gond and Pardhi children. The seminar evolved as a launch event for these books and the writers into the world of authorship!

performed the dialogues of *Sholay*—prove yourself by a heroic act to become acceptable! The issue of the disruption of Adivasi life and of nature, was beautifully put by Jacinta Kerketta a young Adivasi poet from Jharkhand, whose poetry has been translated into several international languages. She questioned why it is that the Tribals and the poor are always asked to pay for the costs of development but cities hardly ever get displaced. She stressed that it is not only that the Tribal children will develop if they are encouraged to write their lives, but since the Tribal way of life is the humane way, these writings will show the way to all of humanity for real humane development.

*Ve hamare sabhya hone ke Intezar mein hain;
Aur ham unke manushya hone ke.*

(They wait for us to become civilized And we, for them to become human!)—Jacinta Kerketta

This was followed by a session where authors from privileged backgrounds shared their journeys of writing about the underprivileged and the limitations in doing so. The first two sessions set the dialogue going in a beautiful way. After sessions on illustrations, children from difficult circumstances, children's literature in the classroom, the seminar ended with the issue of whose

morality is used while selection by publishers, how this morality of the upper caste middle class becomes universalized through market considerations, etc. Can the contextualized moralities of the underprivileged find a space too? While writing the story of another, how does one credit those whose lives one is writing so that those lives are not usurped?

All these issues, and more, were brought to the table of children's literature and gave us hope of a world where people like Tasveer and Simran can read Jacinta and Laxman and write stories rooted in their own lives just like Chimamanda!! '... because of writers like Chinua Achebe and I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.'

Anjali Noronha has a background in Economics and has recently retired from Eklavya, Madhya Pradesh, where she has worked for nearly four decades on curriculum development, teacher education particularly on Language through children's literature. She has worked on Social Science and National Educational policies and plans with a special focus on inclusion. She can be contacted at noronha.anjali@gmail.com

Deepa Agarwal

THE LIES WE TELL

By Himanjali Sankar

Duckbill Books, 2019, pp. 140,
₹295.00

Reaching adulthood by overcoming a challenging situation is the predominant theme in Young Adult fiction. This is exactly what the protagonist, seventeen-year-old Irfan Ahmed accomplishes in *The Lies We Tell*.

Irfan seems to have everything going for him. Two wonderful friends, Uma and Rishi, who have been close to him since pre-primary. They have stood by each other through the most difficult circumstances—Irfan's depression after his beloved older sister Sanya's departure, and Rishi's troubled family situation. But as they enter their teens, the relationship between the besties undergoes a shift. The warm, innocent world of childhood, where the three are always there for each other metamorphoses into the messy landscape of sexual rivalry.

Irfan and Uma fall in love and Rishi is sporting about it. Then one day, inexplicably Uma dumps Irfan for Rishi. It is a terrible blow and Irfan finds himself slipping into an emotional abyss. Matters come to a head when a nude photograph of Uma goes viral over WhatsApp and Irfan becomes the only suspect, even though he denies it vehemently. Everyone shuns him and his world spirals swiftly into chaos. It seems as if neither psychiatric help nor his parents' feeble attempts to reach out to him can help. It is only the emails he keeps writing to his absent sister that can hold him together. He accepts his pariah like status among his school friends but alongside his grades fall further and further. The seriousness of his condition jolts his parents only when it becomes obvious to his



schoolmates that he has lost his mental balance. Just when it seems nothing can save him, a tragedy pulls Irfan back from the brink.

The book unfolds in an intriguing manner. The opening scene briefly describes the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack, followed by a WhatsApp conversation and then a first-person narration. This keeps the reader mystified about its connection with the main story. The suspense is very well maintained and it is only when Irfan begins to unravel seriously that you get a hint as to what the cause might be.

Narrative devices like WhatsApp exchanges and emails which provide insights into the characters' emotional life, make the book very contemporary, and also serve to vary the pace.

This book explores the world of adolescent relationships in great depth. The alienation Irfan experiences not only from his parents, but also the school principal, is very true to life. The oft cited Generation Gap is succinctly but effectively captured, as well as the intrigues and entanglements of school life. Irfan's email outpourings are very much in character and so are Uma and Rishi's WhatsApp backbiting. And with Irfan's inner turmoil simmering through the course of the book, teenage angst is all pervasive.

The usual tropes of young adult fiction—losing innocence, alienation, coming of age, etc. exist, though it is not a quest tale with dramatic action but more of an interior journey. The main character Irfan cuts the umbilical cord with childhood when he finally accepts the unpleasant realities of the adult world like betrayal and loss.

Sankar's earlier YA title *Talking of Muskan* was a sensitive exploration of a teenager's same sex leanings. *The Lies We Tell* provides a somewhat different take on fragmenting relationships. It presents the dark side of friendship without any softening filters so it becomes a little hard for the reader to warm to Uma and Rishi. All the same, in the end, a healed Irfan proclaims: 'But I wish us well.' Despite all that happened, despite all the malice, despite all the lying.' It feels like a very generous and mature acceptance of human frailty.

The cover by Priya Kurian is extremely striking and evokes the thrust of the narrative very effectively.

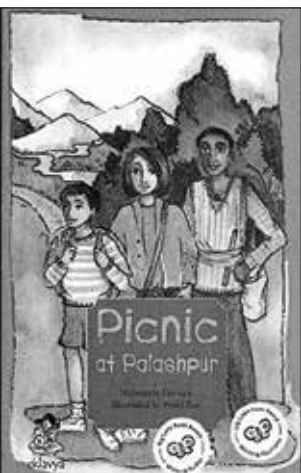
Deepa Agarwal is a writer of books for children and adults. A poet as well, she likes to retell ancient Indian Folktales, legends and myths.

Nivedita Sen

PICNIC AT PALASHPUR / PALASHPUR MEIN PICNIC

By Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Translated from the Bengali by Deepankar Biswas. Translated from the English into Hindi by Sushil Joshi. Illustrations by Proiti Roy. Design by Kanak Shashi. Eklavya, Bhopal, 2019, pp. 38, ₹85.00

Since the 1960s, children's books in the West have tended to 'critically address tendencies to assume that the world is white, male and middle class' (John Stephens). Those children's stories in Bangla that reproduce real life situations, too, have been peopled by the middle class, espoused its values and focalized on the ubiquitously urban and urbane male child protagonist. When there are persons outside this comfortable, complacent, respectable, male universe, the characters are either criminals, or underprivileged children in need of patronage or charity. Sometimes, they are interesting servants, street acquaintances, magicians and jugglers living in the peripheries who lure the children into exciting alternate ways of life. The endings of the stories, however, confirm that these outlets are not viable in the long run.



But Nabaneeta Dev Sen's story is refreshingly different. Sen is a well-known children's writer, apart from being a reputed academic and writer for adults too. This long short story by her is beautifully designed and illustrated by Proiti Roy, and an Eklavya publication that is easy on the pocket. It begins typically with two children on a holiday with their parents who go off on a picnic, described by the blurb to be an 'adventurous trip'. But it is not the kind of adventure one would expect—getting lost, kidnapped or encountering criminals that would entail the solving of a mystery.

The children here do not face any threat to their safety that is happily removed to get them back on the rails of their cushioned lives. In fact, they do meet a criminal, but he becomes an object of their curiosity, compassion, and eventually camaraderie. Initially, he is a sad, blind but somewhat scary figure who claims he lives like an outcast in the unpeopled hill they climb, crossing the threshold of their secure holiday retreat. He eats the flesh of small lizards and birds to survive. Thereafter, he confides in them that he was a Naxalite who got caught robbing a bank in a step towards removing the gap between the rich and the poor. Later, he was blinded by police brutality and managed to escape from prison. Although he has ever since realized that terrorism cannot cure any social evil and has leaned towards being a Gandhian, to the children he is still an ostracized man who was punished for his anti-social act. Yet they not only give their food to him, but empathize with him and promise to come back and visit him. The escapade certainly provides a space for them to rethink their middle class morality, cautioning them to keep such criminals at arm's length. Sen's story leaves room for negotiating a feasible relationship between these characters from radically disparate backgrounds.

It is in its treatment of the subject of the 'other' that the story is at its complex best. Unlike politically correct attempts in western children's fiction to integrate within the world of the text people belonging to other racial identities, ethnic minorities and less privileged classes with an attempt to blur the interface between the

two, this one uncovers an awareness that there is no getting away from the reality of this divide. Although Mangal, the gardener's son who guides them through their climb up the hill, is given the same food and first aid packet as the two children by the parents, and participates equally with them in an effort at naming a meadow at the source of a hilly stream, we are told that he wears slippers while the other two wear sneakers. The blind old man, too, despite the children's well-meaning intention to come back with food for him, suggestive of a potential interaction, continues to live his life of solitude away from the community of decent folk. The children befriend the former Naxalite militant at some level, and in the process, they also overcome any fear associated with his wild pet civet, offering some nuanced food for thought about including within our scheme of things beasts that are not amenable to be tamed. The finale is not really a happy one that neatly rounds off everything in the narrative, but open ended. Without committing itself to a 'lived happily ever after', it promises a growing bonding between two middle class children, the son of a gardener, an escaped criminal living a life of solitary incarceration in an uninhabited space and an undomesticated civet.

The English translation by Deepankar Biswas reads fluently. The Hindi one is a little less smooth, possibly due to the use of some highly Sanskritized words that are not very child-friendly. There is, however, a very interesting word-play. When the children try to name a beautiful spot from which the river Moul originates, Mitul is told off for not having any originality. In the Hindi version, the word 'originality' is interestingly translated as *maulikata*, which resonates with the name of the river. But when the children say that they have come to Palashpur for a change, the Hindi rendition is *Ham yahan badlaav lane waale hain* (We are going to bring about change here). Such little hiccups apart, the texts in both languages are well worth spending a laid back hour over for youngsters who have just learnt to savour the pleasure of reading independently.

Nivedita Sen teaches English at Hansraj College, University of Delhi, and also specializes in Bangla children's fiction.



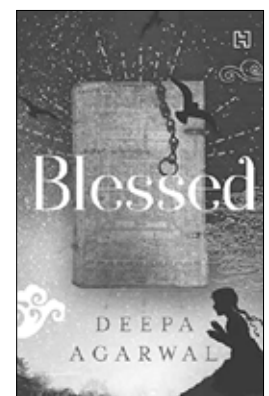
Nita Berry

BLESSED

By Deepa Agarwal. Cover design by Bhavi Mehta. Hachette, 2019, pp. 244, ₹399.00

Blessed is the fascinating story of Selentra, the fourth child of a poor village weaver who possesses an extraordinary gift—she can read the ancient 'forgotten tongue', the Nor-dorok language. 'Selentra found she could decipher the letters and the strange white shapes just by looking at them.' Her urge to do this is overpowering and indeed blasphemous at a time when girls are not supposed to learn to read or write, because of an ancient curse.

Her elder brother Dumor resents her ever since the time she overshadowed him on his First Letter Day, a ritual for boys after which they can go to school. In his eyes, she committed the most unforgivable sacrilege by writing on his white tablet when he himself hesitated to do so.



A mysterious birthmark on the back of her neck makes Selentra even more different. Realizing she is a very special girl, the village priest Tarash hurries off to tell the Holy One about his hunch. Can she be, is she really the *Blessed* Child, prophesied to be born a hundred years before? The Blessed One would save the land from pestilence and ruin at the hands of the villainous Ag-yanees, and free girls everywhere from the taboo of reading and writing, it was long foretold. At all costs, both the priest and the Holy One realize that Selentra would need to be strictly protected from the enemy.

What follows is a riveting family drama that unfurls amidst spells, charms and magic, flashbacks and abduction. An impending Great Battle and the approach of the army of the Ag-yanees leads to a feverish horse ride through the forests to the sanctuary of a desolate hillside monastery. After all, if Selentra is indeed the Blessed Child, she is a prize catch and would need to be taken to a safe place at once. Or, as the Holy One advises, should she be put away? Many twists and turns later, following a hot pursuit through the caves, the book reaches an exciting climax.

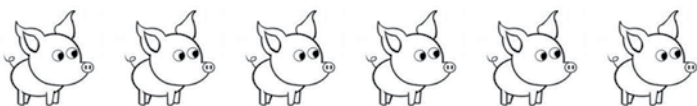
Blessed is a fantasy set in an unfamiliar time and setting. The names are alien, so this story can belong anywhere and anytime. In fact, as the Blessed Child attains her full powers, her role is somewhat reminiscent of the Oracle of Delphi, a high priestess possessed by the spirit of the Greek Gods who could enter the divine realm to solve the mundane problems of earthlings.

The action moves swiftly through short chapters, and the story unfolds smoothly in Deepa's engrossing style. The animated dialogues and beautiful descriptions of the dense forests and winding roads add to the charm.

Author, poet, editor and translator, Deepa has over 50 books published for both children and adults, many of them award winning. She is active in reading promotion and conducts storytelling sessions and creative writing workshops in schools regularly.

Gilded covers are trending in young adult fantasy and if a book has to be judged by its cover, the elegant cover of *Blessed* gives the book a mystical touch and makes it an attractive buy.

Nita Berry writes short stories, picture and activity books, historical biographies and full length non-fiction for children of all ages.



Sucharita Sengupta

FIERCE FEMMES AND NOTORIOUS LIARS: A DANGEROUS TRANS GIRL'S CONFABULOUS MEMOIR

By Kai Cheng Thom

Young Zubaan, New Delhi, 2019, pp.188, ₹350.00

Gender-based violence has taken many forms. One of the worst depredations has been reserved for the transgender community. Awareness about varying gender identities have increased, but mistreatment has not necessarily reduced. *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* by Kai Cheng Thom is a bold and raw novel that brings the tragedy of marginalization of the transgender community, particularly of trans women, to light.

The protagonist of *Fierce Femmes*, who remains unnamed throughout the book, is born a boy to Asian immigrants in the imaginary city called Gloom. She discovers her trans identity early in life, and dreams of living as a woman. Facing both poverty and ridicule, she flees Gloom in her late teens for another imaginary place,

the City of Smoke and Lights, just called City. Here she starts living with other members of the trans community in an area called the Street of Miracles.

Life is far from safe here. The novel paints vivid portraits of the kind of violence brought to bear upon trans women. Faced with ridicule, the threat as well as the reality of sexual violence, homelessness and unemployment, every day is a struggle for survival. The protagonist carries a pocket knife with her at all times, treating the object and its symbolism of defensive violence as her best chance to stay alive. In the meantime, everyday bonds of friendship and love also blossom and die out in this dark world, drawing out a necessary human normalcy.

A fatal attack on one of trans women leads to the formation of a vigilante group of transgenders, who unleash retaliatory violence, and are predictably hunted down by men and police in the City, leading to the murder of a member of the police force. This forces the protagonist to think deeper about using violence, and leads her to confront her own rage. She also analyses her own community, the various roles her friends play, who is aggressive and who is passive aggressive, who is right and who is wrong.

One of the techniques that the author uses to show the double life led by trans persons is the letters to her younger sister Charity. These letters describe a life that is safe and mundane, where the protagonist is lying about working in a grocery store to earn a living and taking French classes at night. The fantasy world of normalcy described in these letters are a complete contrast to the heroine's real life, heightening the sense of tragedy. It would be a mistake to believe that the author is trying to evoke pity in the reader. The writing is meant to hold up a mirror to how easily individuals are stripped of personhood and dignity, forcing them to lead dangerous lives, which then triggers a vicious cycle of being further castigated by society.

Yet another beautiful technique is the use of poetry about the knife that the protagonist carries with her. Over the pages of the novel, the author captures the heroine's complicated relationship with and understanding of the knife that symbolizes violence. The object never disappears, only her feelings towards its role in her life are recorded as being simultaneously useful and redundant, never in any particular order.

In the end, the heroine faces her own tumult, and with that she finds herself and her confidence. She also finds love and acceptance, and just when the reader thinks that there will be an ending befitting a romance, the author confounds everyone by not granting such an ending, rescuing the protagonist from the threat of heteronormativity.

This book is a depiction of a dystopian, noir world. Usually, this style of writing is reserved for the world of men, full of blood and gore, set in public places, with a prominent role for the night time. The writing is akin to a horror fantasy, except that it is the most accurate description of an ugly reality. There is no trace of any frothiness merely because the book is targeted at a younger audience, possibly girls. Instead, it explores gender, sexuality, consent, harassment at the workplace, socio-economic and political conditions for trans persons with a clear eye that manages to be both brutally truthful and empathetic. The book is a must read for courageous young adults who do not feel the need to shy away from the dark bits of life.

Sucharita Sengupta is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.



Ektaa Jain

THE PUFFIN BOOK OF HOLIDAY STORIES: AN ANTHOLOGY

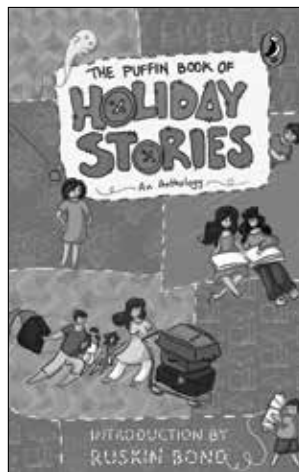
By various contributors. Introduction by Ruskin Bond
Penguin, 2019, pp. 256, ₹250.00

Stories express experiences. Experiences are lived memories. Memories, beautiful or dull, when read back, contain the power of unleashing umpteen emotions. These emotions when expressed well become stories for keeps. However, short stories are always quite tricky. While they can be entertaining and interesting to a large extent, there always exists a fear of them not being able to catch the reader's attention within a short time-span. This is particularly true if your readers are mainly children! *The Puffin Book of Holiday Stories: An Anthology* runs through this difficult sword of creating and retaining interest quite successfully.

The book is a collection of fourteen short stories by renowned writers and enthusiasts like Nayanika Mahatani, Paro Anand, Ruskin Bond, Nandini Nayar, Rabindranath Tagore, Himanjali Sankar, Sudha Murty among others. Ruskin Bond in the introduction of this anthology clearly calls this book an opportunity to 'celebrate holidays with stories about holidays'. The fourteen stories thus collated make one colourful collection of tales that express adventures as well as misadventures, boisterous families as well as solo explorations, intimate friendships as well as quarrels and arguments. The common thread running across these different hues is that of the colour of summer. Summer vacations and the idea of holidays are very close to the human soul. The stories touch these with immense care and sensitivity thereby making the reader a part of them.

While a clever parrot interestingly named 'Carrot' makes for a wonderful entrance at a summer school, animosity of two enemies is meted out by the usage of mango desserts! A little girl with inflamed tonsils dreams and aspires to use vanilla ice-cream as medication and a little boy ends up being swallowed by a snake! Sudha Murty's story specially brings an innocent and contented smile on the face. Expressed in the most coherent way possible, it is a story woven within a story and within a story! Tagore builds up the character of an old man travelling in the same train coach where a group of young boys are getting back to school after the end of the summer vacations. The young and the old meet here. An excerpt from the story of *Life of Uncle Ken* is illustrated by Ruskin Bond where he spends his vacation with granny. Along with his granny is his crazy and weird Uncle Ken. Lubaina Bandukwala has two neighbours raging a war against each other through the weapon of 'Mangoes'. Desserts made of two different varieties of mangoes are being continuously sent to one another. This tussle between the Junagadhi Kesar and Alphonso mangoes ends up being the most delicious and sumptuous fight possible.

One is always obsessed with summer holidays as they pass in a flash just like these tales. The closing bell that rings in the school thereby marking the beginning of the vacations is the moment that leads each child on the path of enthusiasm and excitement. Grandparents shower their love in abundance. Holidays with families are planned. Adventures begin and stories are made. The stories aim to encompass different stages of life. Lasting friendships are made in



some, while passion for life is sought in another. These become all-encompassing tales expressed lucidly in a creative manner. It is interesting to note that the book succeeds in weaving both the young audience and adults into its enigma. Though the book is for children, it is actually for all age groups as there is a child residing in all of us.

Ruskin Bond mentioned somewhere in his interview that India lacks in giving attention to literature for children. The book thus comes at a very appropriate time and with its creative illustrations by Rujuta Thakurdesai makes for a complete holiday trip. In the introduction he mentions, 'This is when we discover ourselves, our own potential, and, more often than not, we'll do it through what we read and write.' According to him holidays are tedious with nothing to read. One should carry three bags full of books wherever they travel. With this anthology, the travel comes to you through different lenses and perspectives. It take the reader on fourteen different rides one after the other. The summer vacation begins, holiday flavour is showered on and tales unravel themselves building up a world of mystery, questions, achievements and above all memories!

Ektaa Jain has submitted her PhD thesis at the Centre for the Study of Social at Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

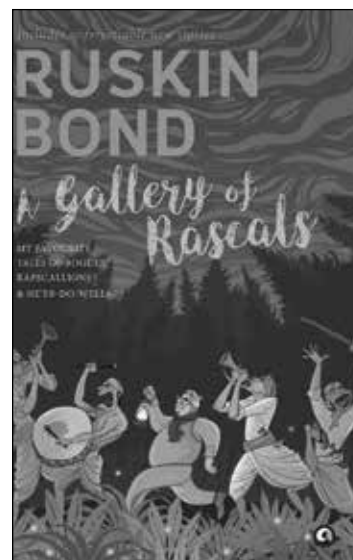


Gulbahar Shah

A GALLERY OF RASCALS: MY FAVOURITE TALES OF ROGUES, RAPSCALLIONS & NE'ER-DO-WELLS

By Ruskin Bond
Aleph Book Company, 2019, pp 208, ₹385.00

To read Ruskin Bond's fiction is to feel the transforming Indian society post-Independence, combined with the inimitable knack of storytelling with which Bond characterizes daily life in a small town. An astute observer, Bond paints a vivid picture of the overlooked sections of the society, while maintaining a leisurely pace with attention to minute details, which reminds the reader of RK Narayan. The short volume contains thirty stories about disreputable and morally suspect characters, as the title suggests. Admittedly, villainous characters are always more interesting than the ones who take the straight and narrow road and the villainy



portrayed in the tales is mostly lighthearted. Some of the stories deal with serious themes, while others are hilariously funny crime tales. In 'A Man Called Brain', Bond portrays a self-obsessed sybarite doomed to a lonely existence with fast approaching old age-painting an evocative picture of pre-Independence India with round cigarette tins and bullock carts. In 'Sher Singh and the Hot-water Bottle', a distiller is able to drive a wedge in the orderly society around him by concocting large quantities of forbidden liquor which is

enthusiastically consumed by the bored residents of the hillside. There seems to be a common theme of aging and decay in some of the more serious stories like 'Strychnine in the Cognac' and 'A Case for Inspector Lal'. Although he professes to be unlike Dostoyevsky in his bid to define the motivations behind a crime, the subject of criminal responsibility is dealt with, albeit always tinged with Bond's characteristic humour. Can criminality be justified in certain circumstances? This moral conundrum is taken by a conscientious policeman Inspector Lal, whose emotions get in the way of his duty when a known child trafficker is found murdered in her house. Such nuanced tales like 'Susanna's Seven Husbands' and 'A Job Well Done', deal with the duality of conventional morality and the very tough choices that an individual has to make in order to survive.

In a book that puts braggarts and murderers together, the author is at his best in the plain simple-hearted stories about the exploits of children. Bond knits childhood memories and local legends into beautiful stories like 'The Four Feathers', where some school children steal a baby mistaking it for an orphan; and 'When the Guavas are Ripe', in which some children strike up an unusual friendship with a watchman while stealing guavas from his orchard. Bond writes about people living on the margins of society—incorrigible drifters—who remain defiantly unreasonable while facing the ire of society. One of Bond's all-time favourites, 'The Thief's Story' is also included in the collection, where the necessity of a life of crime as a result of penury and maltreatment comes to the fore. In some hilarious stories, even supernatural mischief-makers are dealt with, where *prets* and *jinn*s come together to camp in the homes of unsuspecting people. Weaving interesting historical anecdotes with fiction, bond creates a magical atmosphere, at once familiar and unknowable. The forests filled with wild animals and shady ravines filled with trout may not resonate with the urban reader, but evoke an image of a world fast dying or lost altogether. In 'Grandfather's Private Zoo', the author paints a vivid picture of animals and humans coexisting—perhaps casting a nostalgic light on a lost and more harmonious past.

Bond combines social commentary with keen political acumen in 'Voting at Fosterganj', poking gentle fun at the 'rich maharishis and industrialists' who have replaced the erstwhile 'sahibs and rajas' post-Independence. While the seats of power might have shifted, the hierarchy between the powerful and the powerless remains firmly in place; and it seems only fitting to include some politicians in Ruskin Bond's 'Gallery of Rascals'. The author is unsparing in portraying the reality of the society in which he lives but is hardly ever gloomy, transforming the bleakest tales with his unfailing humour. While the stories included in the collection are not particularly aimed at children, Bond's sharp and effortless prose can easily be enjoyed by people of all ages. The barely respectable and morally suspect protagonists hook the reader right from the beginning; as Ruskin Bond shrewdly observes in the Foreword, 'Let's face it. Good people are usually rather dull, especially in literature.'

Gulbahar Shah is a PhD Scholar in the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Book News Book News



The Mahabharata by Meera Uberoi is an abridgement, based on Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the Mahabharata, told in lucid English, using modern idioms, yet wherever possible the metaphors, similes and allegories of the original have been retained.

Primus Books, Reprint 2019, pp. 373, ₹295.00

Manisha Chaudhry

THIS IS ME, MAYIL

By Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran

Tulika Books, Chennai, 2018, pp.124, ₹159.00



The latest book about Mayil Ganesan darts at you with upper cuts and feints that land strong but leave you warmed for having met her. Surer than ever of being Mayil as the title suggests, Mayil writes her diary in prose, in verse, in art, in every way that leaves you in no doubt about where she stands. At fifteen going on sixteen, there is just so much that goes on in her life at home, at school, in her neighbourhood that you follow her somewhat breathless but totally drawn to what she will say next.

It all begins with a break up with the mysterious R where Mayil grapples with wildly conflicting emotions ... 'The Overground Mehil grows quills to adjust to daylight. These are pointy and sharp enough to finely slice some green chillies and toss them in R's face.' ...to 'I wish I could put people inside my laptop. Then it would hang and I could forget about them forever.' Getting over it with a little help from friends, her fragile composure is shattered when Ma and Pa decide to launch a joint attack about her untidy room. Familiar? But spot on. Mayil has her revenge in a poem that ends ...

Eat your diet mixture

Save me a Lecture

I'll learn Responsibility

If you don't gang up on me.

Mayil's stream of consciousness is commodious and passionate. Ma, Pa, Thatha, the dancing sibling, Bones the cat, 'hot' neighbours all flit in and out as Mayil desires, because it is Mayil's life and Mayil's diary that you have the privilege of reading. Not for a moment do you miss other viewpoints because Mayil's hyperbolic, often hilarious, record of how she feels hits bullseye every time. Just as important are Mayil's friends. There are many of them and each of them occupies an important corner regardless of how much space they get. The nicknames and short forms can be a bit confusing but they make up a world that lives and breathes through Mayil's eyes.

Mayil's dear friend Ki gets into trouble with a creepy ex-boyfriend Badri who blackmails her with revenge porn and she is too scared to seek help and forbids Mayil from doing so too. Mayil concurs before she caves (with a little help from err...R!) and finally the adults manoeuvre to set things right. Mayil's relief is not unmixed with some serious self-examination on when she has also been complicit in situations where someone was being bullied. You stand in her shoes



as you read this and it is like a slow release tablet in your system diffusing the compelling idea of learning to take responsibility.

Mayil writes her way to clarity throughout the book. She tries everything to get to the heart of the matter and even her most convoluted outpourings begin to make perfect sense. Her fearless drive to express herself is endearing (and dare I say charming! I'll risk it). Her relationship with Tony and their shared interest in writing is presented with the lightest feather touch. The last verse of his performance poem Do- It- Yourself reads...

*If I'm in a good mood,
I'll do my how-to-show-you're-cool-
around-people-with disability impression
or maybe I won't, maybe I'll just
shake my own hand for not making
this is a let-me-explain poem
for those who were sorry for me
even before they met me,
for those who can't be comfortable
unless they feel bad for me,
for those who don't really see me.*
Mayil sees him and so do we.

Mayil is growing up in a complicated time and proof of that is strewn across her diary. Whether it is her outrage at Vaishnavi's Brahminism getting corrupted by eating an egg or Thatha's 'Hindu' sympathies bubbling forth unexpectedly, all his sense of humour notwithstanding, nothing escapes Mayil's piercing gaze. For the most part, her impatience with cant and her sensitivity ring true.

However, there are occasions when Mayil seems to carry more than she can hold. Every possible issue ranging from sexual harassment at the workplace, solo holidays for women to the disillusionment and self-discovery of her young neighbour with the 'hot' left-leaning husband has a walk-on part. This portmanteau strains credulity at times because some of these leads don't go anywhere much. This gives a slightly uneven feel because the full-bodied pieces are so well etched.

But this is a small quibble in a book that is going to launch a thousand diaries or convert many a reluctant diary writer into a regular. Niveditha and Sowmya have created an absolute cracker of a character and its bursts of brilliance stay with you long after you have turned the last page. More power to them.

Manisha Chaudhry who headed Pratham Books, currently runs her own not-for-profit publishing house called Manan Books in the education sector since 2018.



Chandra Chari

HANA KA SUITCASE: A TRUE STORY

By Karen Levine. Translated from English by Purva Yagnik Khushwaha. Design by Rakesh Khatri. Edited by Tultul Biswas, Seema and Dipali Shukla. Special Assistance by Ambar.

Eklavya/Parag Initiative, with financial support of the Tata Trust, 2019, pp. 88, ₹130.00

As a teenager, one of the innumerable books that I read was *The Diary of Anne Frank* which made an indelible impression on my mind. Six decades later, to



come across the Hindi translation of *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine, and reading it in one sitting, gave me goose pimples.

A battered suitcase with the name Hana Brady 625 gab 16/v 1931 Waisenkind (Orphan) engraved on it is loaned by the Auschwitz Museum to the Tokyo Holocaust Educational Centre set up by an anonymous donor. And thus begins the relentless search by Fumiko Ishiko, a young woman who heads the Centre, to trace the lost life and world of Hana. The child visitors to the Centre and the eight-to-eighteen year old members of Small Wings (an organization set up by a dozen Japanese youth in the belief that the future of world peace is in the hands of the young), fuel Fumiko's passion to somehow re-create the short life of the little girl Hana.

The book must be made compulsory reading in all schools. It has the photographs of Hana and her family when they led a happy life in Czechoslovakia, and pictures and drawings made by Hana when she was in Auschwitz. The long and arduous path taken by Fumiko to retrieve them has been told in a fascinating manner, swinging from the last century to the present, and taking Fumiko across three continents. To say more about this pilgrimage, for one can call it nothing else, would be a crime against the reader. Translated into twenty languages, the book by Karen Levine is being read by thousands of children. It has bagged several noted awards for the Best Children's Book, including the Red Cedar Book Award, UNICEF/UNGARI Award, and the Silver Birch Award.

If Eklavya would like to consider bringing out another edition of the Hindi translation with better quality paper and get up, they will not lack sponsors.

Chandra Chari is Editor, *The Book Review*.



Padma Baliga

99 NIGHTS IN LOGAR

By Jamil Jan Kochai

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pp.288, ₹599.00

Take a deep breath and open this book and journey into a country you have never visited before. If your only knowledge of Afghanistan has been through news clippings, Hollywood and Disney films, or books written by American soldiers, journalists and writers, then you are in for a treat. Jamil Jan Kochai makes us discard the monochromatic lens with which we viewed Afghanistan earlier and shows us a land and people who laugh, squabble, crack

ribald jokes, feel pain, grieve, fall in love, pray and play.

Twelve-year-old Marwand, the first-person narrator, who moved to America with his family when he was six returns to Afghanistan for a holiday. On the threshold of his teen years, he is both an insider and outsider in his mother's family who stay in Logar. They welcome him with open arms and accept him as one of them but Marwand notes that he has forgotten most of his Pakhto and that his digestive system does not agree with Afghan food any longer. In the US, Marwand had learnt about treating family pets with love and, regretting the

times he had thrown stones at the family dog earlier in Logar, he rushes out to embrace it. The dog Budabash bites off the tip of his index finger and a few days later, runs away from the

family compound. Marwand, his cousin Zia, Gul and Dawood his 'little uncles' set out to find the dog. In the process, through a form of nested storytelling reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights* or the *Panchatantra*, Marwand and the reader learn about the history of Afghanistan, the resilience of its people, how their personal and familial history, their lives and their loves are invariably tied up with tribal warfare and the invading Russian and American troops.

In this beautifully written coming-of-age novel, Marwand and his cousins come to understand themselves and their families better, and the reader gets to understand the people of Afghanistan and their beautiful troubled land. The novel is also a paean to memory, for many of the stories are told and retold else they and the people they feature will soon be forgotten. There are stories of reluctant and willing Tajik and Pakhto collaborators, of djinns and women who sang songs and healed the enemy soldiers,



and of children who refused to join the fight but were dragged into it nevertheless. Kochai has created several fully-developed memorable characters, such as Marwand's aunt Nabeela, who runs a successful tailoring and fashion business even while her village has no electric lines running through it.

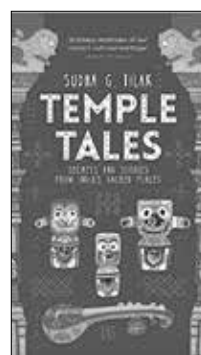
Kochai skillfully intertwines humour and pathos in his debut novel and spans genres with aplomb. The recital of the *99 Days in Logar* appears at times like an epic, while at other places when Marwand talks of a mysterious illness that strikes the family, and of a flood that washes up the bleached bones of the villagers, one knows one is entering the terrain of magic realism.

A unique feature of the book is that it does not privilege the western reader. While Marwand's voice is mainly that of an American teenager, he often makes use of his limited Pakhto and Farsi—and the book contains no glossary to refer to. While the many tales that fill this novel are told in the different registers of the tellers, the most poignant of all the tales is that of how Marwand's father's young brother was killed in the war as a young teenager. The story of Watak's death is told towards the end—in Pakhto. It is as if Kochai were saying on behalf of every non-English speaking person, 'You cannot understand me and my story until you can speak my language.'

99 Nights in Logar works as a crossover novel for its phenomenal canvas and writing style ensure it will find an audience among young adults as well as older readers.

Padma Baliga is an English Professor turned library evangelist for she believes that every child deserves to have a reading life.

Book News *Book News*



Temple Tales: Secrets and Stories from India's Sacred Places by Sudha G Tilak, illustrated by Sharanya Kunnath, opens the doors to treasure troves of lore and legend.

Hachette India, 2019, pp. 186, £ 6.99, ₹299.00

The Book Review Vol XLIII, No 12, December 2019 will be published as a special issue on Digital Shift

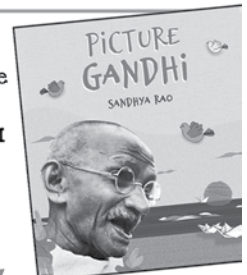
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Rafia Reshi

ADVENTURES OF A PRE-TEEN

By Shaha Ghosh

Zorba Books, 2019, pp. 418, ₹424.00

Adventures of a Pre-teen by Shaha Ghosh is a collection of ten short stories that deals with the adventures of a twelve-year old American girl of Indian origin. Gia, lives with her parents in Berkeley Heights, a neighbourhood situated amidst rolling green lawns interspersed with whitewashed houses.

Gia is a born detective, an adventure buff, fiery and spirited. She along with her friends has planned ahead all sorts of exciting things to be done during the holidays even before they have started. Exciting? Right? Little do they know that they have to be detectives soon enough! Gia and her two friends are popularly known as the 'Rosewood Trio' since they have solved complex cases of varied range much to everyone's surprise and delight in the town. Their sharp minds with imprints of humour has time and again helped them to solve most of the critical cases with overwhelming results be it exposing a wealthy heiress who is a kleptomaniac or nabbing a thief to prevent a shopping complex from getting robbed. Cheers to The Rosewood Trio!

Also, the most buzzing robbery case of Berkeley High was resolved by closely monitoring the suspicious movements at Aunt Anna's House and helping the police in putting the culprit of Rosewood Avenue behind bars. Ahhh! The success story doesn't stop here. Gia and her aunt Ayesha (Bui Pishi) were successful in preventing a terrorist attack at the Carnival that could have caused a million deaths. They help the police to arrest the entire bunch of criminals who had links with a terrorist outfit.

However, what struck me deeply was the stereotypical approach of the author which is quite evident when she describes the terrorist as Azhar belonging to Al-Jamali, a terrorist outfit. This cultural production in literary form which ascribes certain acts and events to a particular religion is what fuels and widens the circumference of hatred and bigotry. Even inadvertent complicity is half the job done for the ominous forces, which the author puts on display. With the prevalence of such needless portrayals, readers at some point will lose interest in the book.

It is also disturbing to see how writers are perpetuating the dehumanized discourse on Islamophobia and risking the coexistence of future generations—the book under review being the case in point. I feel compelled to implore anyone with empathy and integrity to speak up against all forms of injustice from Islamophobia to homophobia.

The next story begins with schools resuming when Gia is taken to Egypt with student delegations from different schools across countries. She is happy to unveil the secrets of the 'Hidden Tomb' with her cousin Agastya. They buckle up to flag off the mysterious adventure and end up rescuing Queen Cleopatra and Mark Antony. Here again the flagrant display of the character sketch of a Muslim officer 'Abdel Rehman' whiffs out Islamophobia. He is shown to be violent and negative which can prejudice the mind of the pre-teen against Muslims.

In the summer, Gia goes to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan with her parents.



They are staying in the Royal Palace as her father is there to work for the Maharaja on a project. Cutting through the dunes, dust storm and dreary sands, she along with her Indian friend Mira, manages to rescue Rajkumar from the clutches of the kidnappers. She also encounters a Cybernaut Martian Zooga and manages to rescue him back to his planet.

In the last few stories, Gia brings laurels both to India and USA in an international swimming competition as both countries do not let her go and want her to represent them. Gia is also compassionate; she manages to build a kennel for a small homeless pup and lovingly names it 'Cheetah'.

The book has certain problematic generic portrayals but can be read once. However, stereotypical portrayals are not good for young impressionable minds.

Rafia Reshi is pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Politics in the department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.



Shreyas Vadrewu

THE CURSE OF ANUGANGA

By Harini Srinivasan

Tree Shade Books, 2019, pp. 296, ₹350.00

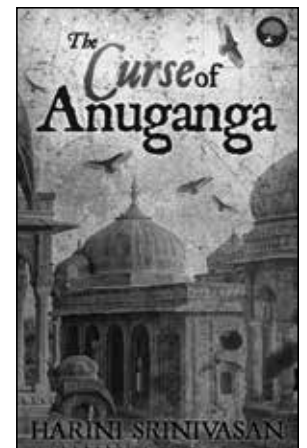
Set in 403 CE in the prosperous town of Nandivardhana (located in modern day Nagpur, Maharashtra), Harini Srinivasan's *The Curse of Anuganga* is a historical thriller that carves a niche for itself by being the first historical murder-mystery I have ever read! Srinivasan cleverly perceives her story's timeframe and weaves a plot around it that is riveting till the turn of the last page.

Written in the third person, the book follows the story of Shaunaka, an intelligent, pensive and self-effacing youth, and that of his foster brother, Ashwini, a gifted goldsmith. Being the son of a renowned goldsmith, Vishunveera, Shaunaka is compelled to continue the family tradition and evolve as a master goldsmith, despite showing neither the aptitude nor an interest in his father's profession.

At odds with his father, Shaunaka's lackadaisical stint at his father's workshop comes to a grinding halt on a day that was to change his brother's and his entire family's life all at once.

On an assignment at a client's house, the two brothers, in a prolonged chain of events, find the client (Vinayashura, a rich merchant said to have royal linkages) murdered in his chambers. The author paints a grotesque image of the appalling crime and dexterously opens up the plot.

What follows next is quite similar to what one would expect two millennia later: the body is discovered, sirens raised, tears shed and the authorities informed. In comes the Dandaposika, Arya Bharavi, an industrious man tasked with enforcing law and order during a time when the Crown's foes are at their strongest, and an attack is



imminent. The turning point of the book sees Shaunaka recruited by the Dandaposika, not just for being an eye-witness, but also for his perspicacity and innate detective acumen. Srinivasan vividly portrays the palpable change in dynamic within the household as the brothers embark on their quest to deliver justice and safeguard the Crown. Her writing style is fluid, and the characters' credibility is indubitable, right from the late Vinayashura's wife's (Devi Tanirika) anguish, to the gravitas of the Mahakavi (Kalidasa), inspired from ancient folklore.

What is astonishing is just how immersive the text is. Her description of the corner house of the Buddhist Quarters, the lively markets with its myriad of stalls and the august palace grounds, all bring ancient India alive in all its grandeur.

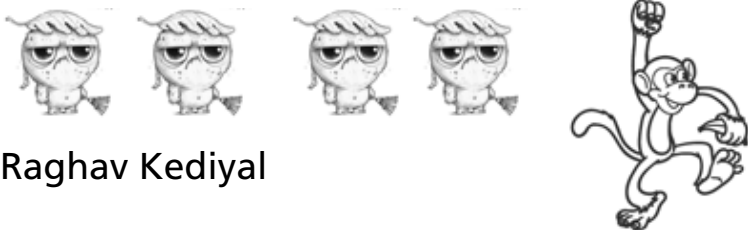
As is the case with any murder mystery, the wizardry is prolonged; investigation commences, discoveries are made and clues are skilfully gleaned. This is especially so in *The Curse of Anuganga*, with each character, scene, altercation and revelation adding to the convoluted jigsaw puzzle that is the 'corner-house murder'.

Shaunaka's spirited sleuthing, coupled with the Mahakavi's valuable inputs, brings us to the capstone of the novel; a final rendezvous with the wife of the deceased Vinayashura, who, after a lengthy soliloquy, reveals the identity of the perpetrator and the mystery that surrounds it: a harrowing family secret spanning three generations and two kingdoms!

Altogether, Srinivasan's book is gripping; its conclusion entirely unpredictable and its characters refreshingly original. It portrays Shaunaka's conundrum in a manner most young men today will identify with; and his mother's apprehension in a manner mothers today will approve of. What distinguishes the book is its historical context, enriching an otherwise hackneyed (yet my favourite!) genre.

The Curse of Anuganga is a must-read for all age groups, from the exuberant pre-teens to the geriatric!

Shreyas Vadrewu, a fledgling writer, descends from a family of writers; his grandfather Ranga Rao was an illustrious writer widely known for his short stories, translations and novels (*Fowl Filcher*). He presently studies in Grade 12 in Hyderabad pursuing Science stream.



Raghav Kediya

KARMA FIGHTS A MONSTER

By Evan Purcell

Duckbill Books, 2019, pp. 159, ₹250.00

Taking place deep within the rustic and breath-taking bounds of the Bhutanese hills and valleys, *Karma Fights a Monster* by Evan Purcell is nothing short of an intriguing and hilarious read. The book revolves around the protagonist Karma, a boy of twelve who, as it appears immediately, is quite brave. The reader is told right from the start that Karma was considered the guardian angel of his small village, Jakar. He has a history of facing vile monsters and terrifying mutants and has managed to come out of all of those situations alive! However, this time is his most daring mission yet.

Karma finds out that his new librarian, Ms. Charmy, is actually a monster. This completely threatens the peace and harmony in his school. What's worse is that Karma doesn't know if he should reveal

this lesser-known secret to his entire school. He faces the constant duality of knowing that his librarian is a monster; but simultaneously being the only person who knew that. All his fear reaches its zenith when the librarian calls him to her office, and his best friend Chimmi leaves him all alone. The story progresses with Karma coming to realize that the librarian, although a horrid monster mutant from the inside, is actually a pretty sweet person from the outside, and so faces an ever-growing guilt. So, now Karma faces the challenge of deciding whether to be nice to her

or destroy her like he does the rest of the monsters he comes in contact with. It is important to realize that a key determiner of all of Karma's actions is Dawa, a girl Karma has a big crush on! He constantly changes and denies his action if it is not to Dawa's liking. Although I would not like to reveal how this story ends, I would like to say that the end is not only unexpected but also manages to captivate the hilarity that is in line with the rest of the book.

This was one of the few children's books I have read in a long time, and I am so very glad I did! It managed to make me forget the intricacies and stresses of my daily life. At every flip of the page there lies a new challenge, a new decision, a new problem, which makes the entire experience for the reader most engrossing. The use of humour in both situations and in dialogues, leaves you wanting to read more and more. Another aspect that certainly needs recognition is the fact that the author has managed to continuously employ a syntax very much like a twelve-year-old. This added to how realistic the book felt, something that is not common in the fantasy-fiction genre.

Furthermore, the author manages to convey the lifestyle of the Bhutanese people quite well over the course of the entire story.

I would certainly suggest this to all readers looking for a bit of excitement and a book with a distinct panache.

Raghav Kediya is in class 11 at The Doon School, Dehradun. He is keenly interested in debating, reading, writing, and swimming.



Arshi Showkat

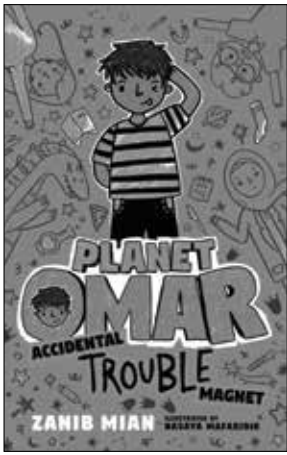
PLANET OMAR: ACCIDENTAL TROUBLE MAGNET (BOOK 1)

By Zanib Mian. Illustrated by Nasaya Mafaridik

Hodder Children's Books, 2019, pp. 224, ₹399.00

Omar has moved to a new town with his family of super-genius parents, tantrum-throwing sister and a little brother who 'has ants in his pants'. Moving entails a number of changes—new school, new friends, new neighbours, leaving behind some old toys and Omar doesn't seem to like it. He gets woken up by nightmares of a teacher who has green slime oozing out of his ears, chasing him and feels snakes in his tummy. Tough spot to be in but he successfully wades through these struggles using his imagination.





On the first day at school, Omar befriends Charlie, who is soft hearted. Omar likes everything about the school, especially Mrs Hutchinson whose curls change shapes with her mood, except Daniel who bullies him and Charlie. Omar calls a dragon, H2O, for help in dealing with Daniel and laughs away his menacing. On the inside, Daniel and his words make him cringe and he is unable to discuss it with his family, particularly his threat that they (Muslims) were soon going to be deported (to Pakistan). This ghostly fear of deportation haunts him till

the end of the book. At home, the family discovers that their neighbour—a grumpy old lady, Mrs Rogers, is not pleased with her Muslim neighbours and keeps complaining about something or the other over the phone. She doesn't like their food or the kids making noise while playing on the lawn.

For Omar, Daniel and Mrs. Rogers are initially the most hostile people he knows. Through these two characters, the book puts forth the popular stereotypes about Muslims in the media and their decimation as the book proceeds. Their transition from meanness to amicability is amusing as well as smooth, and free from negativity. From refusing to take food from her Muslim neighbours, Mrs Rogers happily joins them for Iftaar (Time of breaking the day-long fast during Ramadhan). Daniel is a little rugged but coming face to face with a zombie and having Omar to rescue him changes his heart.

A mix of illustrations and texts makes the book appealing, engaging and triggers a train of imaginative thoughts. Being set in a Muslim family gives room to the writer to describe the day-to-day lives of Muslims and simplifies the practices that are usually seen as difficult to follow from an outsider's perspective. The author, Zanib Mian, has written several children's stories that have Muslim characters. Doing this, she believes, enables her to break the stereotypes against Muslims and create characters that Muslims can relate to. This book was written post rise in bullying of Muslim children at schools in Britain and deals with the subject with extreme sensitivity, making one see the dilemmas children face when dealing with difficult situations through the lens of Omar as well as Daniel. Mian originally wrote the story of Omar in a book *The Muslims* which was thoroughly appreciated and won the Little Rebels Award. This encouraged her to expand the story into a longer novel that had more details about other characters and events.

Omar learns a basic lesson in empathy on his own through his experiences without anyone explaining it to him, making it more authentic. The narrative ties all the open threads towards the end but the style of narration is so exhilarating that it keeps the reader wanting to read more about Omar's thoughts and experiences. The book delivers on its promises to make the reader laugh so hard that snot would come out of their nose. It goes a step ahead in navigating emotions, feelings of children and their decision-making.

The book deals with sensitive issues and will require parents to have their children reflect on the questions it raises in their minds and their experiences which they can relate with those in the book. However, the way the book brings out these issues and the issue of diversity makes it an essential read for children to understand and accommodate those they feel are different from them.

Arshi Showkat is a research scholar at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Her areas of interest include gender and law.

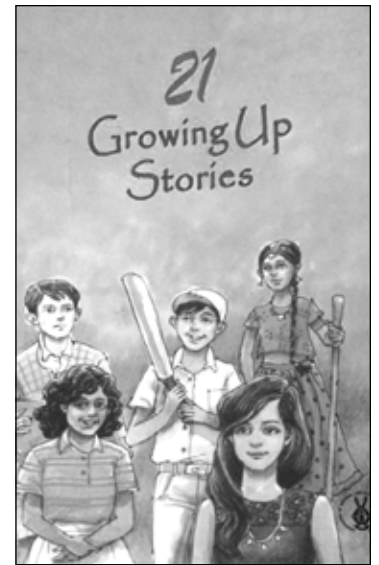
Aradhana Bisht

21 GROWING UP STORIES

By various authors

Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, 2019, pp. 216, ₹250.00

21 *Growing Up Stories* is a collection of short stories that tracks the trials and tribulations of young adults, as they navigate a world teeming with uncertainties and new dynamics. Under the radar are a variety of issues, from self-worth to belonging, from bullying to self-preservation, from coping with loss and grief to adapting to change, to the insecurities triggered by peer pressure. The collection is brought out by the AWIC (Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children) that comprises veteran writers, some of whom have been writing stories for children for decades.



Most of the stories are set in an urban landscape, and a couple or so in the village. In 'The Bully', and 'Howzatt!' the targets of bullying learn the hard way to stand up for themselves, while the bullies seek redemption in humility. 'Lakeside Adventure', 'Bitter Biscuits' and 'Kidnapped' have youngsters showing their presence of mind and energy to escape from potentially life-threatening situations. In 'Changing Homes', two city-born siblings adapt reluctantly to change, whereas in 'Mercury Blue' and 'Sam and Floe', two young girls grapple with self-acceptance. 'Ganpati Bappa Morya' and 'The Case of the Missing Frogs' explore how young adults engage with environmental concerns, while 'Duffer' shows that the distinction between being a 'duffer' and a 'champ' is only a matter of perception and prejudice.

The themes represented in this collection are timeless and universally pertinent. They have and will continue to preoccupy young people. However, the progression and depth of the plot and narrative of most stories is very basic, with the focus being on delivering a specific message, and concluding in a quick fix, the delineation of characters minimal.

Though well intentioned, this collection delivers a pat resolution and recompense. For some young readers, it may provide a sense of empathy and succour, but to others, looking for a more complex interplay of social and personal, inner and outer dynamics that truly represents their reality, it will not be adequate.

The realities, particularly that of the urban teenager and their caregivers, have changed dramatically over the years. The layers added by exposure, either from the opening of global influences and boundaries, or from social media, have caused young people to evolve into über-aware beings, much more conscious of the world and their place in it than those of previous generations. Perhaps it is for another book to address those realities, one that will delve into the subtle nuances and layers of the world and psyche of youngsters.

Aradhana Bisht has worked as an editor with several publishing houses, including HarperCollins, Penguin Books India and Westland. She had also written a book, *Russian Folktales Retold*.

Jaya Krishnamachari

MERI PAHADI VA ANYA KAHANIYAN

Edited by Kusumata Singh
Children's Book Trust, 2018, pp.104,
₹140.00

Meri Pahadi Va Anya Kahaniyan is a collection of eight stories in Hindi for teenagers. All the stories deal with the heroic, exemplary deeds of the protagonists that would certainly enthrall young readers to do similar things if chance arises. The authors have kept the language simple and made contemporary issues interesting for the readers.

The first story in this collection is 'Aaj ka Bhagirath'. As we all know, Bhagirath brought the river Ganga from the Himalayas to the plains of North India after doing hard penance. The protagonist in the story by Sanjiv Jaiswal, 'Sanjay', does something similar to ease the water problem in his village set in Rajasthan where people are having a hard time fetching water from a hillock. The son of the headman of the village resolves the water problem with grit and determination and earns the title of a modern Bhagirath from the villagers.

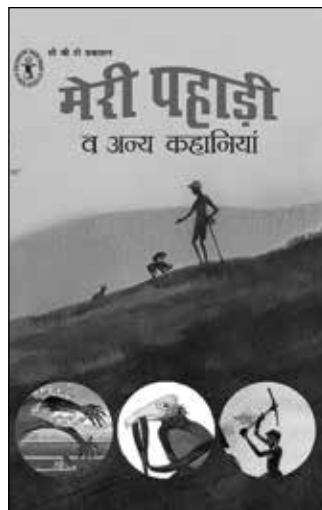
'Roshni ki Nayee Kiran' by Suryalata Jaiswal deals with a boy Amit who raises very pertinent questions about the harnessing of solar power in his class and earns the respect of his physics teacher as well as his classmates. The story then goes on to describe the boy's struggles in proving his ideas and how the teacher helps him achieve his goals despite his travails. The story is a bit grim but an interesting read.

Amitabh Shankar Rai Chaudhary's 'Karbala' set in Peshawar is about the son of an Army officer who is a student of the Army school. It is all about the boy's school life and how, on a day that he misses school, a sudden turn of events leaves him totally shattered. The theme of the story is what youngsters are seeing, hearing and facing in their real lives too, and so it will be of interest to young adults. 'Tho Phir Kisne Bachaya' by Rashmi Swarup Jauhari deals with the courage and presence of mind of the protagonist and his love for and expertise in wielding the catapult. It is very interesting to read how a young boy, home alone with his grandmother prevents dangerous thieves from executing their ill intention.

Sanjiv Jaiswal's second story in this book, 'Jab Tak hai Saans' is about an adventure on a ship and how the sons of the Captain of the ship save the lives of the passengers. Their innovative ideas make for an interesting story. 'Chutti ka Yaadgaar Din' by Deepa Pandey, deals with kindling environmental awareness. It is about young Vasu and his tadpole friend Chotu. Children will enjoy reading it. The next story 'Park Fund' talks about how anything can be achieved if you really have the will and determination. The author Suniti Rawat tells the story of how children in a colony transform a dump heap into a beautiful park. One has to read the story to know how that is accomplished. The last story, 'Meri Pahadi' written by Subhadra Malavi is the story of a braveheart, young, visually handicapped Gurung, all of twelve years who helps our Army to destroy an enemy camp on a hillock on the border.

I am sure that young readers will enjoy this collection of stories.

Jaya Krishnamachari translates from Hindi into English.



Veena Zutshi

DO NAAM WALA LADKA TATHA ANYA KAHANIYAN

By PY Balan, Sara Joseph and S Sanjiv. Illustrated by Satyanand Mohan, Kunal Duggal and Lavanya Mani. Translated from English by Swayam Prakash.
Series Editor: Sushil Shukla

Eklavya, Parag Initiative with support from Tata Trust, Mumbai, 2019, pp. 40,
₹110.00

Balachandran, a student of seventh standard, is poor, and has lost his father at a young age. He and his siblings live in a village. Father Chinnappan, a priest, visits them and persuades his mother to allow him to join the seminary. His mother gives permission and Balachandran's name is changed to Brother Freetus.

Narrated in simple language, the story depicts the conflict and confusion in the boy's mind. He wonders if he will be the same carefree and happy boy once he joined the seminary. He expresses his doubts to his mother who helps him. A good read for the 10+ level.

'Khushboo Aur Badboo' by Sara Joseph is the story of Annie, a very poor young girl who is very cruelly and harshly treated by her teachers at school. Annie is nicknamed 'Kokanchira', meaning a corpse. She is reprimanded and abused for no fault of hers. Some teachers humiliate her by raising questions on her personal hygiene and cleanliness. Annie wants to revolt but lacks the courage.

It is a sad story. The teachers do not realize how impoverished and helpless the poor are. They may have no money but they too have self-esteem. Annie shows her resentment by refusing to have the mid-day meal consisting of evil-smelling rice, as the rich have no empathy for the poor. A must read for the twelve+ age group.

The third story in this collection, 'Shayaja Ki Jagah' by S Sanjeev, is about a young girl who lives in a world of make-believe. While waiting at the local hand pump to fill her buckets for her home, Shayaja stares into space and imagines travelling into space and looking down to see if she can spot her home! She has heard stories of scientists planning a trip into space. She wonders if she would find streams, ocean and fish there. As she day dreams, she is jolted back to reality by her aunt in the queue as it is her turn at the pump. A simple story portraying a typical childhood and the habit of roaming the world of imagination.

The illustrations by the three artists, in colour, though attractive seem rather stylized.

SCHOOL KI ANKAHI KAHANIYAN: TEEN-CHAUTHAYI, AADHI KEEMAT, BAJJI-BAJJI

By Mohammad Khadir Babu. Illustrated by Suresh BV; **PATHYA PUSTAK** By Nuaiman. Illustrated by Chitra KS; **SCHOOL KE DOST** By Joopka Subhadra. Illustrated by Sowmya Anantakrishna. All three translated from the original Telugu.

Eklavya/Parag Initiative, with support of the Tata Trust, 2019, pp. 38, ₹145.00

The first story by Mohammad Khadir Babu centres around a boy in the seventh standard who has to buy his books for the eighth standard second hand from his friends. The boy being poor



bargains with Ramesh who is selling the books. Ramesh asks for three-fourth of the price while wants to pay half price. The manner in which the boy manages to convince Ramesh to reduce the price is hilarious. In the same way, he manages to get notebooks from another friend. He takes out the blank pages of those notebooks and stitches them together, as he has no money to buy new ones.

The colourful illustrations will help the young to visualize symbols like $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, the weighing scale and other measurements.

Pathya Pustak by Nuameen is about Sahir who is rearing to join school like his other siblings. The excitement of wearing a neat uniform, carrying a tiffin-box, a school bag and an umbrella fascinates him. He starts school and has to walk miles to first attend a madrasa in the mornings and then rush to school. He is very fond of his grand-mother who he thinks is the best story-teller and a singer as well. So the busy school schedule and activities at the madrasa make him feel distanced from her and other members of the family.

The teacher tells his students to identify the names of the people illustrated in the lessons to prepare them for the exams. While reading the names out aloud, Sahir adds a Muslim name, Rashid on his own. When asked why he did that, Sahir says there was no Muslim names among those read out. That gives a jolt to the teacher and Sahir's class-mates.

The story is thought provoking. Sahir thinks beyond his years, the illustrations are colourful.

School ke Dost by Joopka Subhadra is a story of two friends, Shreelata and Suvarna, one from the lower caste and the other from the upper caste. To attend the flag hoisting ceremony, they need to go dressed very neatly to school. Shreelata being very poor has no new dress. Her friend who has three sets of uniform, offers her one. Shreelata is hesitant and afraid as she realizes the repercussions. But Suvarna insists and promises to keep it a secret. She packs the uniform in Shreelata's bag without her parents' knowledge.

Both attend the ceremony and Shreelata returns her friend's clothes the same day. Suvarna's mother opens her daughter's bag by chance and when she finds the dress in it, she questions her daughter who tells her mother the whole story. The mother is furious and orders her to burn the dress. Suvarna is very upset and crying bitterly, she runs with the dress to her friend's house.

This touching story highlights how the caste system continues to plague Indian society. This 'different tale' should be read by the young as a wake up call against the iniquities and othering even the young face.

KIKI

Written and illustrated by Antye Daam. Originally published in the German by Carl Hanser (Verlag Munchen, 2012). Translated into Hindi by Tina Gopal. Eklavya/Parag Initiative, funded by the Tata Trust, Mumbai, 2019, pp.64, ₹65.00

The translation of *Kiki* has been supported by a grant from the Goethe-Institut. Antye has to shift to a village from the city on account of her father's job. Initially she misses her old home, her friends and her stuffed toy dog which she cannot find among the packed cartons. But she accepts the change once she joins school and befriends a girl named Berbel with whom she gets to appreciate the green open spaces and the bounty of nature. However, it is with a girl called Kiki that she develops a real bond. Being neighbours, they meet often, play with dolls, make magic juices and create toys. Kiki's

obsession with becoming an archaeologist when she grows up leads her to go on 'digs' with Aantye in the neighbouring fields and collect objects to clean and classify, enough to create a mini museum. They even stumble on a hillock on the remnants of a treasure, with big fat pearls which can be dated back to ancient times.

The tale ends on a sad note with the death of Kiki in an accident. Aantye places Kiki's favourite doll on her coffin when she is buried.

The author, Aantye Daam born in Wiesbaden in Germany in 1965, is the writer of children's books and has won many awards.

Veena Zutshi is a freelance critic.



Aruna Patel Vajpeyi

KAHANI RANJAN KI

By Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Illustrations by Proiti Roy. Design by Kanak Shashi. Translated from the English by Sushil Joshi

Eklavya/Parag Initiative with support of the Tata Trust, 2019, pp. 32, ₹65.00

Ranjan is very weak in maths and fails to clear the examinations for two consecutive years. He gets rebukes from his father and punishment from teachers, because of which he develops a hatred for school.

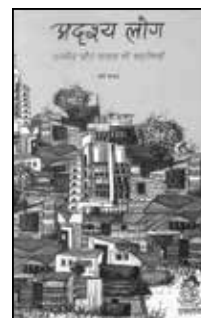
Ranjan belongs to a well to do family of farmers. His father wants his children to take up professions like doctor, lawyer, judge or magistrate. His two elder brothers are regular in their studies but Ranjan is not interested in joining school again. His father is furious but his mother is sympathetic and takes charge of him. She teaches him cooking. He gradually becomes an expert cook. As luck would have it, he gets a chance to work in San Francisco. He ultimately settles down there with a regular job in a restaurant.

The book mostly narrates his journey from Laxmikantpur in Bengal to San Francisco. Without any knowledge of the English language he is left to fend for himself. Detailed descriptions of the air journey like boarding the plane, fastening of seat belt, meals served to passengers etc, give a glimpse of air travel to children, who may not have on opportunity to travel by air.

The illustrations by Proiti Roy are eye catching and will interest the children. Bengali words, mostly proper nouns, that are used have been listed with Hindi equivalents in the final pages.

The story gives a message that succeeding in examinations is not essential to be successful, if one is hard working and interested in doing the job which he likes.

The story is translated from English. Nabaneeta Dev Sen is a well known writer, poet and academic, has won several awards including the Padmashri and Sahitya Akademi award.



ADRASHYA LOG: UMMEED AUR SAAHAS KI KAHANIYAN

By Harsh Mander

Eklavya, 2019, pp.108, ₹180.00

Harsh Mander, the well known social activist, has written twelve stories about deprived and physically handicapped children. They are

neglected not only by the society but by their own families. All of them are real life stories narrated to the writer by the victims of their circumstances. Some of them were brave enough to face the adverse situation by their courage and were able to lead normal lives. Some of them educated themselves like Rahul, Mogalamma and Rajmane. They also helped other victims with the knowledge gained. The corrupt system prevalent in the police as well as the judiciary are responsible for the sufferings of the innocent victims. Many stories are based on the Godhra riots in Gujarat, most of whom were victims of police atrocities. They were confined to prison without trial for years tolerating insults and physical torture.

The book cannot be classified as children's literature, but the young should read it to understand how hundreds of unsheltered young people are fighting for a better life with a lot of courage and hope.

MANYA KI DAHAD (MANYA LEARNS TO ROAR)

By Shruti Rao. Illustrations by Priya Kurien. Translated from English by Varsha.

Eklavya/Parag Initiative, with support from the Tata Trust, 2019, pp. 68, ₹60.00

Manya's school is going to participate in the inter-school drama competition. Shridhar Ali would be the teacher in charge. She selects Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* for her school drama. The students of Class 5 are to act in this. Manya is very keen to play the role of Sher Khan and is sure that she would do justice to the character. But the problem is that she stammers a lot, specially when she is nervous. Her classmate Rajat is a bully and imitates her stammer whenever he gets a chance. This makes her nervous and she starts stammering more. Rajat is selected as the hero Mowgli and Manya is selected to play Sher Khan. Her English teacher and the Principal of the school are of the opinion that they are taking a risk by allowing Manya to play the role. Manya is afraid that the role for which she is so keen will be given to someone else. She decides not to participate as she has to face Rajat quite often in the play.

Shridhar Ali and Ankita, her friend, support Manya and encourage her to overcome her stammering. They along with Manya's parents give her moral and emotional support and on the final day Manya learns how to roar.

The writer has very effectively portrayed the school atmosphere.

KAHANIYA NAYI NAYI

By various authors. Edited by Manorama Jaffa, Virbala Rastogi, Indira Bagchi and Ira Saxena

Association of Writers and illustrators, 2019, pp.108, ₹180.00

It is a collection of twelve stories written by members of the Association of Writers and Illustrators, most of whom are based in Delhi. Among the authors included are Nilima Sinha, Manorama Jafa, Indira Bagchi, Ira Saxena and Girija Rani Asthana. The subject matter of the stories is urban based. Stories like 'Patramitra' by Manorama Jaffa, 'Janmadin ki Bhen' by Shyamala Bhatia and 'Suraj'

by Indira Bagchi touch the softer side of human behaviour. They motivate the children to follow examples of loving and caring. 'Gunehgar' and 'Meri Saheli Roza' narrate how the bullies harass the children and how better behaved children teach them a lesson by their own conduct. 'Bijli Rani', a long story by Nilima Sinha, a tale told in a

humorous vein, is about the travails of growing up in the villages with no electricity and not proper roads, and how the two young protagonists manage to transform their own village by approaching the right authority in the city.

The stories refer to modern day issues of daily living. The language too is simple and easily comprehensible. This could have made for a valid instrument for cultivating the reading habit in children. However, they lack the element which promotes creative and critical thinking in the readers.

AJOOBA AUR ANYA KAHANIYAN

By Rinchin. Design by Kanak Shashi. Translated from English by Sushil Joshi and Kavita Tiwari
Eklavya, 2018, pp.88, ₹65.00



A collection of seven stories by Rinchin, the book under review is dedicated to those who inspired her to write their stories. Some of the stories have been originally published in journals like *Shaikshanik Sandarbh* and the children's Science magazine *Chakmak*. There are two stories, 'Ajooba' and 'Billi Chali Kaam Per', in which the main characters are treated as human beings. 'Ajooba' is the story of Pani (water). It goes to a village, meets the village elders and seeks their permission to stay in the nursery.

Permission is given and gradually the nursery is green with vegetation and flowers. It becomes a favourite place for children and women-folk of the village. They spend their time in the nursery neglecting their duties. Pani becomes the favourite of young boys and girls. They imagine Pani as their lover. The village elders realize the problem created by Pani and decide to withdraw the permission. The nursery becomes dry in the absence of pani. But one plant grows on its own with white, pink and red flowers and on the third day it dies. It grows wildly everywhere without pani and people call it Ajooba.

'Pichhe Chhoota Bhai' is a story of sibling rivalry and one-upmanship. 'Kauvon Se Ghiri Ma' is a story narrated by a small boy about his mother. She is friendly and always helps others. Her husband has deserted her and her family had thrown her out. She lives alone with her son in the village. She is in relationship with a man who visits her daily at night. The women from the village come to her for solace when they are ill-treated by their husbands. The boy does not understand why the villagers call her a bad woman. For him she is a loving and caring mother. This is a lively story of a woman's fight against patriarchal norms as perceived and understood by her little son.

'Kajal' is the story of a carefree girl, not interested in studies, and how life teaches her discipline and a sense of responsibility. 'Billi Chali Kaam Per' is an amusing tale of a woman who treat her pet cat as a human being and how the cat realizes that she has to work, that is catch rats, for her food! 'Laddoo aur Saanp' is the sad tale of Anil who belongs to the 'reserved' category and portrays how the invidious caste system dogs people right from the time they are children. 'Jeet ka Jashn' is the story of a cricket match. However, the natural excitement is overshadowed by apprehensions of a communal riot with its attendant violence and destruction of life and property. Will that happen again, thinks Rafiq, who is watching the match. The story unfolds the reality of India and what children have to accept and live through in this age of 'othering'.

Aruna Patel Vajpeyi, a former Joint Director, Information & Public Relations, Government of Gujarat, is currently Managing Trustee, Media India Centre for Research and Development, New Delhi. She resides in Gurugram.

Gauri Sharma

MANCH KA DAR (STAGE FRIGHT)

By Yamini Vijayan. Translated from English into Hindi by Deepa Tripathi.
Illustrations by Somesh Kumar
Pratham books, 2019., pp. 16, ₹ 45.00

CHALO CHALEIN MAKADIYON SE MILANE (OFF TO SEE SPIDERS!)

By Veena Kapoor. Translated from English into Hindi by Swagata Sen Pillai.
Illustrations by Priya Meenakshi
Pratham books, 2017, pp. 20, ₹ 40.00

FIRST HOUSE

By Nabanita Deshmukh. Illustrations by Phidi Pulu
Pratham books, 2014., pp. 16, ₹ 45.00

LEVEL 3 BOOKS

Level 3 books are an inquisitive mind's delight with engaging tales of discovery which teaches one and all to appreciate the little wonders of life. These thought-provoking books make a simple blend of events for the tender feet to look at things in a different light. They are just the right kind of fuel for a child's level of curiosity with effervescent pictorial depictions of stories for a fun learning process. From soup to nuts, interesting stories promote the inculcation of a compassionate vision towards progressive reflection.



There is much to imbibe from Champa and her passion for singing in the most mundane situations in life. This book revolves around Champa's personal victory in achieving self-confidence by defeating her fear of stage fright. The

Hindi- translation, *Manch ka Dar*, describes her ability to find joy and burst into musical ecstasy at any given point in time. This observant giddy-kipper leaves no stone unturned to start singing praises of Nature and its mysterious ways of existence. But the only obstacle in the way is her perpetual anxiety at the thought of displaying her talent in front of a live audience. Finally, her best friend encourages her to grow through her tongue-tied situation by performing at the annual function. Just like this story, everyone deserves a best friend to grab one's hand from the mirage of insecurities only to soar higher.

Have you ever observed a daddy-long-leg home spider creeping around your bed-side lamp with awe? Probably not, but the bold kids in the next story are on some kind of a quest to survey the interesting whereabouts of all types of spiders grooving in



various environmental set ups. The Hindi translation of *Off to See Spiders, Chalo Chale Makdiyon Se Milne* is an absolutely jolly paean to read. Not only is this short story informative but it sheds light on various kinds of spiders active in their own kingdom of insects while coexisting with us. The fast-paced, ego-centric lifestyles make us forgetful of other tiny beings also present in this world which is why none of us truly think about them in all seriousness.

Another intriguing aspect of this story is the

unconventional career choice

of the elder sister wanting to pursue her career as a forestry scientist because of her sheer passion which fascinates the two curious toddler's eagerness to learn new things from her.

Another fascinating odyssey is of two brothers trying to bring into being a house of their own, *First House*. This parable pays homage to the civilizational shift of Singpho Tribe from cave life to creation of proper houses to live in. It is inspired by the popular folk tale of Arunchal Pradesh justifying the architectural brain-child of a permanent dwelling in that region. It has an exotic element of including advice from almost every wild specie of the jungle from designing a pillar to the roof of their first proper humble abode. Contrary to the arrogant consciousness that makes us believe that human beings are the rightful owners of world territory, this story stands apart. One of the stirring parts about this book is Mithun, the buffalo like creature who is mourning for her dead husband but still suggests that the brothers learn from the carcass of her partner to build a strong house for better security purposes. This might be a little intense for a child to comprehend as to how and why she did this. But the author attempts to draw a mature relational aspect between human beings and other species.

All and all, these captivating page-turners are lucidly written to enhance the thinking capacity of children from the obvious ABC to out of the box concepts intrinsically intertwined with daily lives of people.

When she's not bird-watching, **Gauri Sharma** is trying to complete her Master's Degree in Human Rights from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.



Book News

Book News



Bachpan ki Baatein by Sanjiv Thakur is a collection of memories retold in the first person by some of the world's famous personalities like Charles Darwin, Helen Keller, Salim Ali, RK Narayan among others. It would be of interest to the young adult.

Eklavya/Parag, in association with Edelgive, 2018, pp.124, ₹95.00

Ilika Trivedi

NEELU AND THE PHENOMENAL PRINTER

By Riddhi Dastidar. Illustrated by Anupam Arunachalam
Pratham Books, 2019, pp. 20, ₹45.00

PINTU KO KAISE MILA PAI (HOW PINTU FOUND PI)

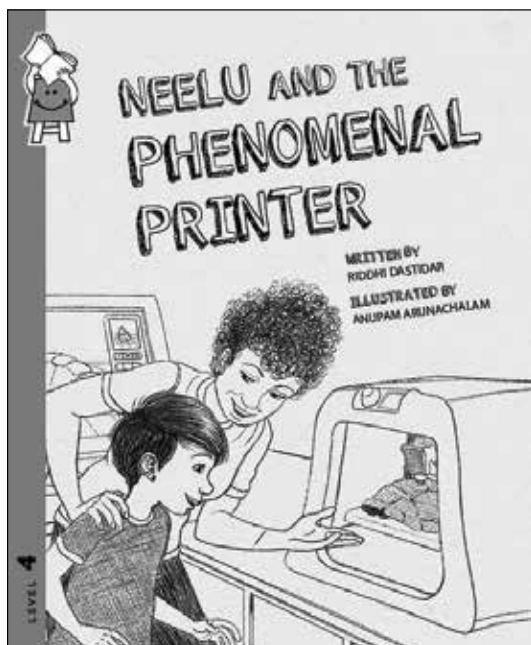
By Sarat Talluri Rao. Translated by Nagraj Rao. Illustrated by Aratrika Choudhury
Pratham Books, 2019, pp. 20, ₹50.00

LEVEL 4 BOOKS

Neelu and her Miru Mashi go out to explore the city and come across sick horses pulling carriages, which gives Miru Mashi a reason to explain how prosthetics and artificial limbs work. *Neelu and the Phenomenal Printer* explains the complicated technology of three dimensional printing in a very simple and easy to understand manner. Not only is this book informative within the narrative, but it also gives real world examples like that of a mouse who was able to have baby mice thanks to 3D-printed ovaries in the USA or Grecia, the Toucan in Costa Rica who now has a 3D-printed beak. These examples really make the reader more aware of the practical applications of a technology, which otherwise seem to be mere fancy words on paper.

This book can inculcate a sense of love and respect for all the unique species around us and is perfect for children who love animals. The sheer variety of animals mentioned and beautifully illustrated in the book, ranging from common animals like horses to sloths (which most people don't even know of in India), makes the book very interesting to read and flip through. In fact, reading this makes one want to go out and spend some time with wildlife.

Colours are missing from the illustrations, which could have made the animals even more eye catching but the images in the book are wholesome despite that. The book mentions two professions that might inspire children to work with fauna, that of a wildlife



conservationist and a veterinarian. Even designers who work with 3D printing are shown which might spark curiosity in a child. All in all, this is a fun and educational book for children which can simultaneously teach the kids empathy and care giving as well.

Pintu Ko Kaise Mila Pai is a children's storybook on the surface but just two pages in, one realizes that it is

actually teaching mathematical concepts. To be specific, Pintu is learning geometry from a teacher named Ahmad and he learns how to use a compass and how to identify and measure different parts of a circle like radius, diameter and circumference. Learning about this

leads to Pintu finding out about Pi and its ubiquitous presence all around us.

The book takes one on a journey with Pintu, learning the basics of geometry and Pi. The illustrations are all encompassing within the storyline and immersive in their presence, but sometimes, the text gets lost within the background colour on a few pages, making it a little hard to read. Apart from maths, Pintu also describes the experience of being

new at school and having no friends for company. Everyone has been in this position at some point of time and can relate to his loneliness and desire for friendship. It is beautiful to see that Pintu feels like an outsider at first but he later makes friends by sharing what he has learnt with his classmates.

One major drawback of the book is that the author is unable to explain a concept that has been included in the book. Apparently, one can calculate the value of Pi using a 'Dartboard Method' and even though Pintu understands and uses this technique, it has neither been explained, nor is it clear to the reader. In fact, any person reading the last page of the story is bound to get confused and will have to look at other sources to understand this concept, mentioned so casually by the author.

Overall, the book is compelling and it will definitely generate an interest in mathematics, especially when kids see how geometry surrounds them and how maths is not just numbers on paper but that this subject is needed to understand nature and human innovations alike.

Both the Level 4 books are educational in an entertaining way and deal with concepts of maths and science in a manner that would intrigue a child and encourage them to look at the world with curious eyes.

Ilika Trivedi is a student of Human Rights in Jamia Millia Islamia.



HINDI - LEVEL 4

पिंटू को कैसे मिला पाई

Nagraj Rao

Aratrika Choudhury

Book News

Book News



Wizards: The Story of Indian Spin Bowling by Anindya Dutta, the first comprehensive book on Indian spinners, is deeply researched, nuanced and richly anecdotal, and fills an important gap in literature on the sport. An essential addition to every cricket lover's library.

Westland Sport, 2019, pp. 454, ₹599.00

Rohini Rangachari Karnik

MISTAKEN MEASURES

By Vaneeta Vaid

Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp. 104, ₹70.00

Bulimia is estimated to affect 6.5 million people... Bulimia is frequently associated with other mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and problems with drugs or alcohol. There is also a higher risk of suicide and self-harm.



Vaneeta Vaid's story about a Class X student named Kalyani who develops an eating disorder due to her obesity is addressed to schools, parents and our entire community that encourages body shaming while laying emphasis on stereotyped physical appearances for girls. With a powerful social message aimed at the physical and mental wellbeing of children, Vaneeta shows just how easy it is for eating disorders to take root in an individual while remaining unnoticed by close friends and families.

The protagonist of this short novel is a shy but brilliant high schooler with few friends mainly due to her 'baby elephant' and slovenly appearance that includes the bad habit of nail biting. Praised by her teachers, especially her math teacher for her good grades, motivation and keen willingness to help her fellow students, Kalyani is proud of the attention. At the beginning of the novel Kalyani's best and perhaps only friend, Simi informs Kalyani that she will be changing schools, rendering Kalyani a social pariah amongst her classmates who jeer at her almost Sumo wrestler-like appearance.

Soon after Simi's departure, the appearance of a new entrant, a handsome Xth grader Amit, causes butterflies in Kalyani's stomach that, as time goes by, also creates in her a desire to reduce her weight. Not knowing how to achieve rapid weight loss, Kalyani resorts to taking her grandmother's laxatives to wash out her system. This is soon followed by bulimic episodes, which leads Kalyani's temper to fray, bouts of sleeplessness and anxiety. Her once admiring teachers now begin to berate Kalyani for her slipping grades. Improved physical appearance cannot compensate for academic non-performance.

The pace at which she loses weight causes her immunity to deteriorate. She begins to have hallucinations, which eventually leads to a nervous breakdown. Kalyani's recovery in the hospital acts as a catharsis for her and her family who are able to reconnect with the help of a counselor. Kalyani starts to eat again and her parents decide to join a support group for individuals with children suffering from eating disorders.

Ending with a speech by Kalyani six years later at her former school about her bulimic condition, the novel reaches out to other children suffering from eating disorders: Take a deep breath and say, 'this food is a treasure I need. My body is a temple for my soul and I need to preserve it, not abuse it...exercise and choose healthy options to have a healthier body.'

Rohini Rangachari Karnik has studied law and worked in the legal profession in India and France. She is now a French language professional.

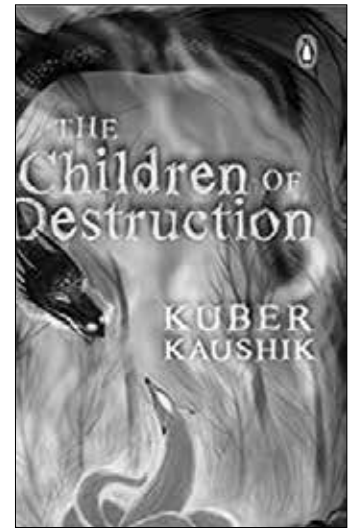
Ivor Ismail

THE CHILDREN OF DESTRUCTION

By Kuber Kaushik

Penguin, 2019, pp. 311, ₹350.00

Children of Destruction is a fantasy novel by Kuber Kaushik. It starts off rather mysteriously and the pace continues to build up, going from the streets of Hong Kong to the Hindu Kush and then Nepal, giving the reader a snapshot of each of the characters in a moment of power: Alice, the gawky girl from Hong Kong fighting off hellhounds in the street; Adam, a genetically engineered superhuman fighting off commandos of a shady commando organization; and then Tao, the blind and telekinetic Nepali mass murderer killing off members of a sort of Nepali Mafia/Junta crossover. The characters are remarkable in their own right, and Kaushik manages to weave an occult web that intertwines all of them and their lives.



However, despite having a strong foundation of elementals, alternate reality and mythology Kaushik fails to develop these fundamental ideas of the story sufficiently and leaves them wanting in many areas. He does infuse the story with doses of sarcasm that often help to ease the tension and load of the storyline by providing light moments after heavyweight scenes. Side characters like Kit the vixen and Adam's rather inept brother Kharsan help to act as spotlights on the main characters' talents but are rather lacklustre in themselves even though Kit is a talking fox. Plenty of action is provided by the rather shady commando group that most of the new stories dealing with the occult seem to have. The narrative is bolstered by how Kaushik effectively links together the characters in a subtle yet convincing manner and shows how even in real life, things that on the surface seem unconnected and abstract can actually share a very deep connection that just requires you to look deeper to find it. He also shows the reality of each great civilization, ruler or way of life—immortality and longevity. This is in fact what each of us strives to be, maybe not so much in the physical sense, but immortal in the memories of others, or as succinctly put in Hindi, *Naam Amar Rahe*, or (Our) name should be immortal. Despite all this though, he still adheres to the clichés of a bumbling sidekick to an almost perfect hero (Adam's brother Kharsan) and the son taking revenge for the killing of his parents on Tao among others.

Kaushik weaves together a compelling narrative that makes the reader really think that there is actually another world linked to our own, one where talking foxes and telekinetic killers are all real. He also makes you think about the world of ours in a new perspective, one that is entirely new, if not a bit chilling. This novel on the surface is a lot like a run-of-the-mill alternate reality novel, but it also has a lot of promise, as its way of looking at such a theme is refreshing and different from what most others have to offer. I would say that if you are into such stories, this is well worth a read.

Ivor Ismail is a Class 10 student in The Doon School, Dehradun, interested in literature and the world around him.

Deepa Agarwal

POPS!

By Balaji Venkataramanan. Illustrations by Twiggy
Duckbill Books, 2019, pp 100, ₹225.00

Unlike your other classmates, you have an incomplete family because your Dad is just not there. You only know him as a face in the photographs in your mother's wedding album. For some unexplained reason, he doesn't like you and your mother and left soon after you were born. You begin to feel that you must have committed a sin to be punished. Worse, you have to lie to everyone that your father lives in America.

Seven-year-old Arun is growing up full of hatred for the father who abandoned him in this cavalier fashion.

Then, one day, this father reappears unexpectedly and tries to forge a bond with him. Naturally, Arun is bewildered and resentful and refuses when The Man wants to be called 'Dad' or 'Pops'. The monthly meetings ruled by the court create a lot of turmoil for him. However, little by little he recognizes that his father is trying hard to win him over. And some empty spaces in his life begin to fill up.

Pops! is the heart-warming account of one very significant year in young Arun's life. It is narrated in first person, which provides the reader with a realistic depiction of a seven-year old's emotions and his responses to an extremely challenging situation. Arun's everyday life—home, school, holidays and the hopes and aspirations of a child his age are presented with empathy and humour as a backdrop for the dilemma, which is skillfully woven into this routine. Torn between what his elders tell him at home, and his visceral response to the strange, bearded daredevil of a father, Arun slowly learns how to negotiate the complicated world of grown ups.

The poignant situation of an abandoned child is feelingly sketched. When the father who has so far been an unknown quantity decides to re-enter his son's life Arun's fear is palpable in these lines: 'And there he was. The Man. Standing right above me. I stood like a deer in front of a tiger in the Discovery Channel video.'

Arun had felt the lack of a father keenly, but accepting The Man is tough and this is what makes this book true to life. Broken families may have become more common in our country but divorce and separation are still thorny topics to deal with in children's books. By letting Arun tell his own story, in his own language, the author brings Arun's predicament very close to us.

The ending arrives somewhat abruptly but Arun's problem has been effectively resolved. He need not bluff any longer when he has to write about his father in class. Everything is still not perfect, but there is more veracity in his existence. He does not have to make up stories about his missing father and has learned to love Pops.

There is, however, one jarring note. While the other characters appeal in their own situations, it is hard to build up empathy with a father who expresses no regret for his desertion and uses inducements



to win his child's love. True, he has very little time to make an impression, but enticing his son with an iPad or the gift of an expensive bicycle which the mother has been trying to make Arun earn by doing well in his exams, feels like his values are somewhat askew. First, he abandons his family and then he thinks material goods will make things right. Again, when the mother sensitively decides to spare Arun the ugly scenes at the Family Court, the father chooses to meet him in the commercial spaces of the mall, rather than the park as suggested by the grandfather. Arun may prefer it, but it is another place where his father has scope to buy his love.

All said, however, the book is a good read. The cover design is very attractive too and the small sketches in the corners of each page tie in beautifully with the narrative.

Deepa Agarwal is a writer of books for children and adults. A poet as well, she likes to retell ancient Indian Folktales, legends and myths.



Asfia Jamal

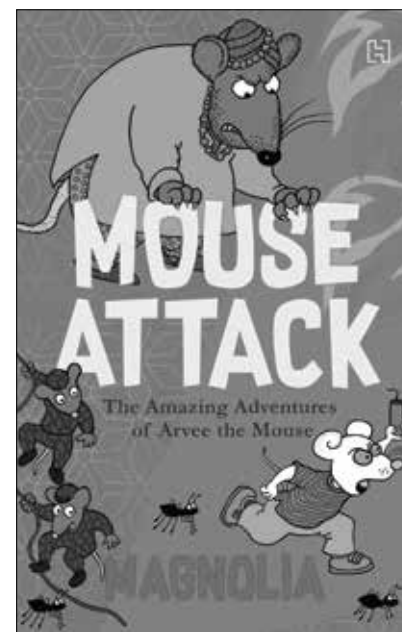
MOUSE ATTACK: THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF ARVEE THE MOUSE

By Magnolia (Manjula Padmanabhan). Illustrations / design by Magnolia.
Hachette India, 2019, pp. 177, ₹399.00

Mouse Attack is surely a window for children to enter into the world of fascinating images woven grippingly by Magnolia. It holds you tight with its enthralling narrative and lets you walk into the world of Arvee, Ellie, Mo and Pasha. Peeking through the eye of a mouse brings an interesting perspective of the human world as well as the small animal world. It thrills you with its one after the other incidents and succeeds well in keeping the suspense and adventure one looks for in juvenile fiction. All the 25 chapters try to firmly clutch you but one cannot stop reading after 'Midnight Message'. This book is altogether an action-packed read with crisp chapters and cute illustrations but might restrict a few enthusiastic readers due to its fairly high price.

Arvee the scholarly white mouse brings his sophisticated laboratory experience into the life of underground mice submissive to their fate and horrifying past memories, not only to lead a resistance movement but also to explore his innate identity as an animal. It is difficult for Arvee to grasp all the difficult realities of animal kingdom beneath his human's house and deal with the differences his skin colour has created. Meanwhile, in the world of little creatures, where 'different' is quite a synonym for 'enemy', Stringer being the leader of the family keeps his kin safe from the 'different' experiences Arvee has brought to their lives. On the way to smash the dichotomy of slaves and masters, Stringer doesn't even realize when the 'difference' camouflages itself with the resistance against oppression and emerges as solidarity amongst all the mice.

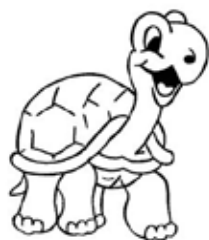
An uprising against rats by rebel mice might introduce the idea of



revolution amongst the young readers and usher the power of organization and methodical work. The storyline effortlessly takes readers to the way of shedding differences and organizing for the larger good of the residents of Paradise Villa. It is quite fascinating to delve into the system of ant network, mantis and lizard ride and the rat world.

Our protagonist Arvee will not fail to intrigue his readers with his character of a researcher, who is keen to study human habitation, the moment he enters into one. His mindfulness at various critical situations will let the reader appreciate his character, for he always seems to reflect on his readings, and professional training. Readers will be equally fascinated by Ellie, Toon and the gang and Pasha for their interesting character sketches.

Asfia Jamal is a young professional in the field of education associated with Eklavya Foundation. Children's literature is her newfound love and she thoroughly enjoys immersing herself in it.



Tultul Biswas

MOUSE INVADERS: THE EXCITING ESCAPADES OF ARVEE THE MOUSE

Written & illustrated by Magnolia (Manjula Padmanabhan)
Hachette India, 2019, pp. 240, ₹399.00

Uff! There's a mouse in the house. I can see it scampering on my kitchen platform, behind the gas stove, then jump down lightly and scurry under the door, under the wooden crockery shelf—almirah, under the wooden stool on which my mother prefers the fridge is kept so she doesn't have to bend down too much. It then darts across the passageway to quickly reach the cover of the telephone table and is safely transported to the bedroom—which has my mother's and my daughter's clothes hanging around all over! Hah! It has been evading the Pest Control India glue-pad that I've been placing along its everyday path for the last 3 days. Drat! How do I catch a mouse without killing it?

And now this book called *Mouse Invaders* has been sitting on my table waiting to be reviewed! I read it last week. I first read the first one, *Mouse Attack*, and was introduced to all the characters and their characteristics. Strangely, while reading *Mouse Attack*, for some initial parts I was reminded of HG Wells's *The Country of the Blind*, and the subtle ways in which the process of otherization takes place in society. It does take place every day, all around us, only waiting to be noticed. And yet, in *Mouse Attack*, it slowly and softly leads to acceptance, to building of a camaraderie faced by a stiff life-threatening situation, where the 'difference' becomes a tool to fight the oppressor, the Ratlord called Pasha.

Mouse Invaders is chronologically situated a year later. The lab-turned and now house-mouse Dr. Arvee is back from a world trip with the human family that has taken it as a pet for the little girl (Mo) in the house. The book starts on a positive note—the white-fur mouse is back from a long trip and yearning to meet his brown-fur friends with whom he was able to fight the subjugation and tyranny of Pasha last year. On returning, he gets to understand that one of the young female mice who he is keenly fond of has self-taught herself to

'rite'!

But the bright side of the story is soon overshadowed by the dangers of a black cobra looming large (which is given away by the book cover too) on the mice colony. And the ridiculously oppressive rules and regulations enforced by a band of shrews on the mice on the pretext of keeping them safe from the snake.

The two strongest points I marvelled at all along while reading the book were, firstly the minute details of the body movements, the calls, the habits and mannerisms of the animals.

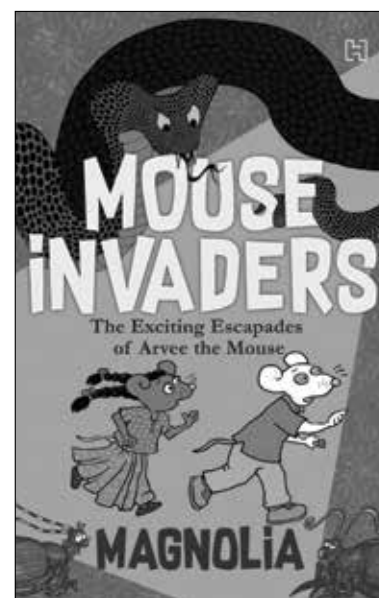
Magnolia manages to transport us into the world of mice. You can feel, almost experience the cramped spaces, the darkness and dampness of the garden living spaces, the beautifully imaginative tree house of the rebel gang, the pensive fear in the air. Secondly, characterization of all the involved mice—young and old, the snake, the shrews, the rat-lord, the few humans, the ants, the roaches, the flying mantises—all are amazingly crafted. If only the proofing was done better, the reading experience would have been so much more smooth. One doesn't expect such small glitches in a book priced prohibitively on the higher side.

At times, cruising along the depths of mice world, I was reminded of *Watership Down*, but then not quite. The intensity of the threat looming large from outside did not match the internal strains and stress-points that are felt by all of us in life, and more so when we are in the rebellious teens. This story manages to capture the external tensions and worries quite well, but largely overlooks what would have been naturally the internal or even inner turmoil. I hope Magnolia would write more of the series, and with each book the weave of literary tropes as well as the plot thickens.

The book offers some interesting philosophical nuggets too. For example, on page 49, the author describes Arvee's mental state thus: 'The next couple of hours were an ordeal for Arvee. He knew that whatever was being done was supposedly for his benefit. Yet not one had bothered to find what he really wanted. There's nothing worse, he realized, than being forced to accept an unwanted kindness. It makes an animal aware of how little he is understood by the very people who love him and whom he loves: one of the loneliest, most desolate feelings in the world.' I am sure many a teenage reader would be able to relate with this state of mind straight away.

Then on page 159 Arvee says: '...Freedom is a very strange thing. It's as precious as life itself, and yet the only time we become aware of it is when we no longer have it.' You will find many such small bits of wisdom strewn all over the book. I am sure that would make the book—more than a one-time page turner—a friend you go back to, to find more!

Tultul Biswas is a lover of books and has worked for over two decades in the field of children's and educational publishing with Eklavya. The effort here has been to make books that portray child characters who reflect the agency and resilience that children often show in real life. Currently she is engaged with Eklavya's Teacher Education, Outreach and Advocacy work area, engaged in designing and implementing learning opportunities, workshops, short courses and field interventions for teachers and grass-root level education activists. She lives with one foot in Bhopal and the other in various places in MP.



Sandhya Gandhi-Vakil

ANNA DAITYA/FOOD MONSTER

By Meenu Thomas. Illustrations by Oindri Chakravarti. Translated by Nagraj Rao

Level 1, pp.12, ₹35.00

BUSY ANTS/KAAMKAAJI CHEENTIYAAN

By Kanchan Bannerji. Illustrator: Deepa Balsavar. Translated by Poonam Srivastava Kudaisya

Level 1, pp.12, ₹35.00

THE BODY BUILDERS

By Supriya Nair. Illustrations by Shivam Thapliyal

Level 4, pp.16, ₹45.00

THE MYSTERY OF THE CYBER FRIEND

By Zac O'Yeah. Illustrations by Niloufer Wadia

Level 4, pp.24, ₹55.00

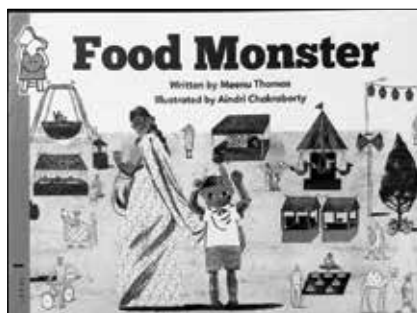
ANTARIKSH MEIN MAKKHEE

By Ashima Freidog. Illustrations by Fahad Faizal. Translated by Nagraj Rao

Level 3, pp.16, ₹40.00

All published by Pratham Books, 2019

The five books that are reviewed below and the many others that I have read before, makes me wonder at the spectrum of quality that one finds in Pratham Books, as they range from excellent to mediocre to simply substandard..



Before reviewing the five at hand let us quickly look at Pratham's classification of reading skills:

1 *For children beginning to read/ read aloud:* This level needs to be visually gripping and have a read aloud quality, apart from the obvious—a good story, a story that the child would want to hear again and again.

2 *Learning to read:* Again, visual appeal is very important here along with very simple vocabulary—short words and simple sentences. This would be the story teller's challenge—tell a good story in the simplest words possible. It is also a good idea to keep space in the structure to explain words that are difficult.

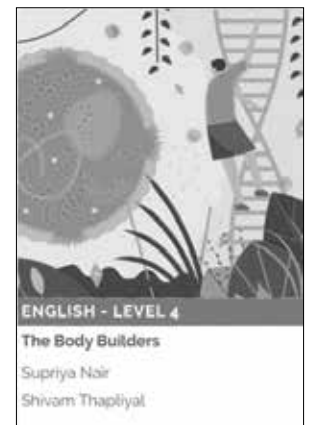
3 *Reading independently:* I would assume that the average age in this level would have children between the ages of 7 and 9. They would have the ability to understand new concepts if explained simply and interestingly.

4 *Reading proficiently:* One would presume the age group in this category to be 9-10 to 13.

In today's age of ease of access to information, the writer would have to have a very good idea of what kids of this age would know. An understanding of tween and teen psychology would be needed to grab their attention. The range of pre-knowledge is so wide that there is a danger of making your tale too childish or too adult.



Anna Daitya is a simply written and well translated story in Hindi. It tries to teach shapes via food items that we eat. It is not very clear why the author deemed to call them monsters. It might have been interesting to give that honour to the boy in the book. It would have ended the story more dramatically, with the crunching and crackling sounds being made by him. It would have also made trying new foods an exciting aural adventure for the young 'readers'. As this is a level 1 story, and as some foods are region specific and need explaining, many children will have no clue what sound a *patishapta* or a pomfret makes. Nonetheless, it is a sweet story, well told. The use of Gyotaku printing is wasted in a level 1 book. The book simply mentions what this technique is in two sentences in the back page



blurb. The reader would have to look it up to understand the technique if they want to explain to the child.

Busy Ants/Kaamkaaji Cheentiyaan is an English-Hindi bilingual book. This read aloud book on ants talks about how ants travel silently, use their sense of smell to find food they like and avoid danger (like soapy water). It tells you how despite being tiny, they are strong and how they can reach food through the tiniest gap. The story ends with a picture of an ant hill and the final closing line, 'Believe it or not, hundreds of us live happily in a colony.'



Why is this book called *busy ants*? There is nothing especially busy about most of the activities described in the book. As for *Kaamkaaji Cheentiyaan* in Hindi, *Kaamkaaji* is not a child's word. It is not even accurate. It is normally used to denote business-like or professional, not busy. Be that as it may.

In a small 12 page book the first page is wasted on making the fourth ant the narrator of the story and again another one to show the narrator ant wanting to get skates to move faster. Making the story anthropomorphic has not made it more interesting but has in fact sacrificed space that could have been used for other interesting facts about ants. The most disappointing part is the ending which does not explain what an ant hill is and how they make it (which would definitely justify the title *Busy Ants*.)

There are so many facts about ants that are interesting and totally accessible; the fact that ants really work together to move and transport food, material to build ant hills, how female ants are worker ants and do all the work, how there is a Queen ant and lots of male ants whose only job is to make baby ants along with the Queen,

The story is disjointed and inane. I doubt whether a child would ask for it again and again unless it is to see the illustrations which are the redeeming part of this book.

The Body Builders is in English and attempts to explain the concepts of DNA and Genetics to children who can read proficiently, which would be roughly children above the age of nine or ten. There seem to be a couple of assumptions made while writing this book. First, that the reader has the knowledge and understanding of terms employed in this book, like organs, organisms, cells, building blocks, blue print, to name a few. Second, it assumes pre-knowledge of what cells are. The author gives an example of a pomegranate to explain what organs and cells are. This does not explain how cells merge,

multiply or divide.

The beginning is very promising with a child noticing the growing genetic similarities between his baby sister and the rest of the family. After that it gets lost somewhere trying to connect this to DNA. The author gets distracted describing DNA and its spiral noodle-like shape and its similarity to a blueprint of a house and stating how the two strands of DNA denote genes from mother and father. This is confusing to a child as it does not explain how the baby in the story has features like brother, mother, maternal aunt and grandmother. The story ends with a nice touch about the need to be healthy to allow DNA to do its work.

In short a great idea well begun and well ended but with the most confusing middle which is the real subject matter of this story. It is not simple enough for children who are being introduced to the subject and too simplistic for those who have already learnt a bit about this in school. The illustrations are good.

The Mystery Of The Cyber Friend in English deals with the need for caution while enjoying the social media on cyberspace.

This is a well-written book of great relevance. It is about a thirteen year-old girl who appears to be first generation computer literate and falls into the trap of befriending an unsavoury man posing as a thirteen year old girl on social media. The plot is skillfully developed and characters of the protagonist Shree and her aunt are robustly etched and are very believable. A story with a happy ending, it brings home the many cyber safety points that should be kept in mind while using social media. It also brings home the importance of confiding in a trusted adult when in doubt or in trouble.

The illustrator has obviously not been very particular and the features of the teenager and the aunt keep changing and the teen keeps fluctuating in the same time period between two plaits and one. But the story is gripping, so this does not really detract.

The last book is in Hindi and called *Antariksh Mein Makkhee* and is about Fruit flies, informative, well written and well translated. New knowledge is well balanced with an entertaining story line. In this story, two Fruit flies travel into space with a young space scientist so that she can study them. One fly is a male who loves to fly high and the other is a female who loves to pose and posture. The writer has not cluttered the story with scientific and biological facts but has explained them in very simple language at the end of the book. Here is a story where anthropomorphizing the insects works to add humour and body to a true story. Even the names given to the flies, Droso and Phila are playing on the scientific name of the Fruit fly, *Drosophila*. The illustrations are very sharp and capture the humour in the story. Just a couple of observations: The poor Fruit flies are housed in a bottle without apparent ventilation. Any child who has ever tried to capture an insect in a bottle knows that providing food is not enough. Without air they would surely die before reaching space.

Sandhya Gandhi-Vakil has been involved in writing and telling stories for children, translating stories from English to Hindi and selecting films for Children's Film Festivals. She combines craft with story telling and performance for children and teachers.



Priyanka Bhattacharyya

AMMAMA'S SARI

By Niveditha Subramaniam
Tulika Publishers, 2019, pp. 20, ₹165.00

MOUSE AND BEAR

By Nandini Nayar. Illustrations by Suvidha Mistry
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp. 16, ₹50.00

THE MAGIC OF CURLY WHORLY

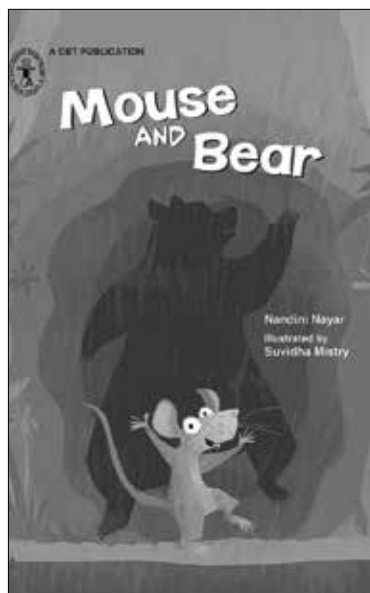
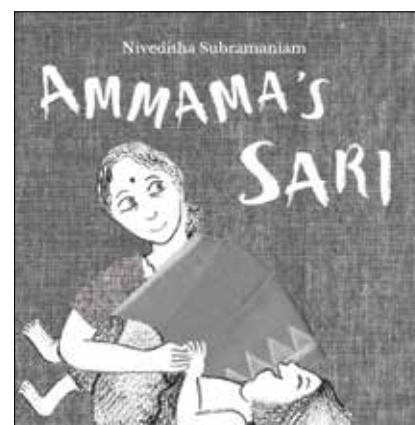
By Santhini Govindan. Illustrations by Priya Nagarajan
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp. 24, ₹60.00

FLYING WITH GRANDPA

By Madhuri Kamat
Duckbill Books, 2019, pp. 74, ₹199.00

A poem should begin in delight and end in wisdom.' What Robert Frost says of poetry holds true for children's writing too, I believe. The four books under review all have different audiences they might appeal to, though they all have elements of both delight and wisdom.

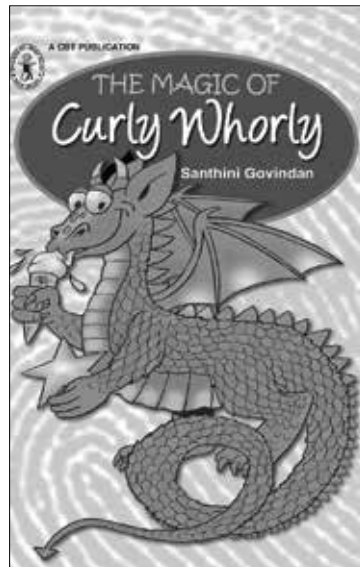
Niveditha Subramaniam's *Ammama's Sari* is a beautiful wordless book appropriate for children between 0 to 100. Please acquire it whether or not you have children in your life. It captures the essence of the Indian design philosophy of affordance of everyday materials and objects—the very antithesis of the modern affliction of 'use-and-throw'. Subramaniam mounts exquisitely textured fabric collages that evoke the texture and feel of a Sari. Ammama's never-say-die Sari will not bow out because of a hole in it—it will serve the family in other avatars—as a curtain, a baby-sling, a companion for a pet...I recommend this book as a souvenir to be gifted to even adults when you go visiting other cultures. In many ways, this gem captures the soul of a culture that respects its resources and materials, and expresses love for relationships and family possessions in unusual ways.



Mouse and Bear by Nandini Nayar and lovingly illustrated by Suvidha Mistry is a prize-winning book in the Read-Aloud Books/Picture Books category in the Competition for Writers of Children's books organized by CBT. It reminded me of the life lessons in Julia Donaldson's *A Squash and a Squeeze*. A Mouse who lives alone in a tiny house that seems to have space only for him learns a few things about sharing and accommodating a companion when Bear decides to become his Plus 1. The delightful and quirky illustrations will draw young

readers again and again. The diction and syntax are extremely accessible to young readers as well, and you can be assured that your emerging readers will return to this simple yet profound tale on the value of companionship again and again.

The Magic of Curly Whorly is yet another tale of companionship, though of another order. Written by Santhini Govindan, illustrated by Priya Nagarajan, is a heart-warming tale of a young dyslexic girl named Amira who struggles to read and write, and consequently faces bullying in school. Amira finds solace and refuge in drawing and colouring, and one fine day a brown smudge on paper sends out a baby dinosaur who must be fed, taken care of, and even put to sleep! The imaginative storyline weaves together delightful details of the things that Amira must draw in order to feed and take care of the dinosaur she names Curly Whorly, along with positive and supportive information on dyslexia. Young children can be inspired and reassured that dyslexia does not stand in the way of achievement or influence: Amira tells her classmates that greats like Galileo Galilei and Albert Einstein suffered from the condition as well. The magical dinosaur leads Amira through a journey of building a positive self image and turning baiters into friends along the way. I loved the message of the story, though I would have liked the narration to be a little less text-heavy. The text may be daunting to dyslexic readers themselves. That said, I would recommend this to any adult who hopes to raise empathetic readers who must learn to respect all kinds of abilities on their way to adulthood.



The final book under review is a delightful Duckbill book by Madhuri Kamat called *Flying with Grandpa*. Kamat weaves a heart-warming tale of a Parsi family that must take care of Grandpa who possibly has a form of dementia, and manage the growing-up pains of young Xerxes Wadia who has to become like JRD Tata to please his demanding mother. I loved the finely etched detailing of the Parsi way of life: the excitement around Xerxes's Navjote ceremony, Parsi pride in JRD's superlative achievements, and the values of 'humate, hukhate, huravaste' meaning 'good words, good thoughts, good deeds' in their daily lives, amongst other nuances and vignettes. The book will appeal to younger readers and their adults alike (I caught myself swallowing a lump in my throat twice),

especially in descriptions of the utterly charming relationship between Grandpa and Xerxes with all their make-believe games and adventures to escape, even if for a little while, the regimented life that Sonji, Xerxes's no-nonsense Mum (and Grandpa's daughter) has decreed for them. The conflict in the tale is simple: Sonji believes that her senile

father might be a bad influence on the happy-go-lucky Xerxes, who must chase grades instead of butterflies if he has to go beyond her husband Noshir's bakery. Poor Xerxes wants Grandpa to take the pilots' eligibility test if that will help matters. Read the story to remind yourself and young ones the place of grandparents in their lives. Read it also to remind yourself that along with ambitions, a family must chase the simple joys of everyday bonding. If Xerxes can believe that he can be like both, the legendary JRD and his precious Grandpa, then there is hope yet for our young ones walking impossible tightropes between the pushes and pulls of home and school. Niloufer Wadia's sensitive illustration adds a valuable dimension to this warm tale of the emotional core of a family that must learn to accommodate all kinds of hopes and dreams.

Priyanka Bhattacharyya lives with 2500 trees, 515 schoolboys, and two sons of her own on the Doon School campus. She also teaches English there.



Vivasvat Devanampriya

THE VILLAGE WITH A LONG NAME (LAMBE NAAM WALA GAON)

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Suvidha Mistry
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹60.00

CHHUTKI AND CHEERO (CHUTKI AUR CHEERO)

By Manjari Singh. Illustrations by Prashant Soni
Eklavya Foundation, 2019, pp. 8, ₹45.00

HOT JALEBIS (GARAM JALEBI)

By Vir Bala Rastogi. Illustrations by Ankur Mitra
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.15, ₹60.00

SONU AND MONU'S BALL (SONU AUR MONU KI GEND)

By Savitri Singh. Illustrations by Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹50.00

THE PERFECT CHAIR (SHANDAR KURSI)

By Nandini Nayar. Illustrations by Saurabh Pandey
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹60.00

BEST FRIENDS

By Asha Nehemiah. Illustrations by Subir Roy
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹60.00

THE PLAYFUL WIND

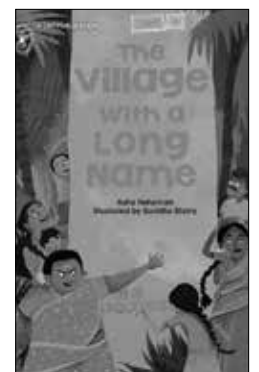
By Santhini Govindhan. Illustrations by Vandana Bist
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹50.00

THE NEGLECTED SEMICOLON (BECHARA ARDHAVIRAM)

By Nabanita Desmukh. Illustrations by Ajanta Guhatakurta
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp.16, ₹50.00

The books reviewed are bi-lingual titles published in English and Hindi in 2019.

Hot Jalebis is a story which depicts the crazy rush and dangers of an Indian street. A young boy is told to bring jalebis from the nearby *jalebi* stall. He is repeatedly reminded by his grandmother about the crows and eagles that swoop down suddenly. He also has to



overcome a temptation to eat the *jalebis*. Beautifully illustrated by Ankur Mitra, it tells us that every warning, every advice, however small must never be ignored. This book as it captures the values of obedience in a fun way, and also gives readers a taste of the famous Indian sweet, the jalebi.



Chhutki and Cheero is a story which depicts the fears of a little girl, whose mother tells her a fairy is going to come to meet her, but instead, Chhutki encounters a creature whose contrasting fears enables them to help each other get over their fears. Accompanied by fascinating, flowing illustrations by Prashant Soni, it tells us that every fear, however little, is significant. It shows that even fear can make friends. People might buy this book to tell their children that even if they are afraid of the dark, they are not alone, and there might be others who might be scared of something that they aren't.



The Neglected Semicolon is a story which revolves around the semicolon, an important but unnoticed punctuation mark. For readers who are beginners, this book will introduce you to new punctuation marks, such as the curly question mark, the explosive exclamation mark and more. With the help of colourful illustrations by Ajanta Guhathakurta, the story portrays the fact that no matter who you are, no matter how small your job, you are always contributing to a bigger cause. People should buy this book to teach this life lesson to their children, and of course, to

teach children basic punctuation, so maybe they take a better approach to grammar.

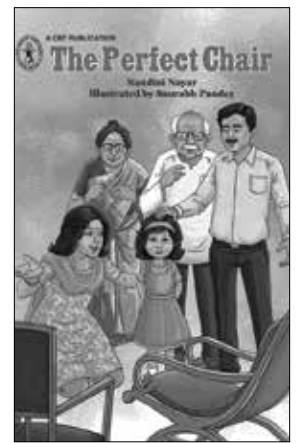
Sonu and Monu's Ball is a story which shows rivalry between siblings. The older sibling gets a bigger ball than the younger one and the younger one resents this. He is angry about the situation. The next day, their aunt turns the tables on Sonu. The otherwise fantastic illustration does not match the storyline here. It shows Sonu looking bewildered, but the text says that both boys are happy. Maybe the author was trying to say that the older one, being thoughtful, realized that the size of the ball doesn't matter, rather the game does. But for a young boy, size always matters. On the whole, the story might appeal to beginners at reading, but the morals are rather confusing.



The Perfect Chair is reminiscent of Goldilocks, but it gives a lot of details about chairs that different people prefer, the different kinds of chairs for different purposes. With detailed and brilliant illustrations by Saurabh Pandey, the story shows that for small children, there is no place better to sit on than a mother's lap.

The Village With a Long Name is a story about a village which has

ridiculously long names for all places. The letters require envelopes that are extremely long. People get confused between *Ladoo-dadoo-jangri-jalebi-kalakand-gulukand-peda-beda-pettai* and *Kabbaddi-babbaddi-khokho-tohkho-bambaram-sambaram-saddagudu-chaddagudu-nagaram*. But after a mix-up, the prompt and decisive village head, who is a lady, orders signboards to be put up every way possible. This does not help either. Supported by brilliant illustrations by



Suvidha Mistry, the story tells us that instead of signboards, people should chat more, communicate through words and interact with one another. Children would be delighted at the long names and beginners would see it as a challenge to get it right at first go. Forget beginners, even veterans would find it difficult. Disclaimer: Best results when made to read aloud by adults.



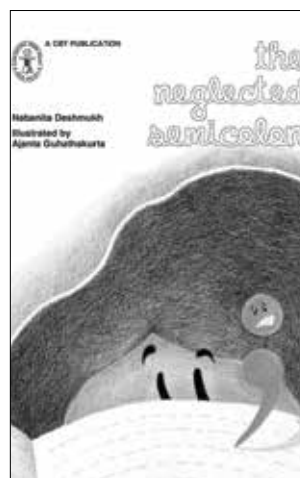
The Playful Wind is a story that speaks about the power of the omnipresent wind. It shows

the creative as well as destructive power of the wind. It shows how important the wind is in our life. The excellent line sketches of the wind by Vandana Bist show he is always invisible. If there was no wind, life would be hard, very hard. There is, to some extent, a rhyme in the story, which shows the constant rhythm of the wind.



It shows us that no matter how great your job, however busy you are, playing a bit will lighten up your mood. People might want to buy this book as their children will find it good fun to read, and they might try to make the sketches.

Overall, it's a good book, and I highly recommend it.



Best Friends, while being about two puppets, is also about pushing one's own limits, being creative, and having faith in ourselves. Two poor puppeteers tell stories with their puppets that had been handed down by their grandparents, but when one of the puppets gets stolen, they're forced to make a new one, and make new stories for it, which pushes them out of their comfort zone. In the end, a little girl, who found the lost puppet, and got attached to it, gets an

unexpected gift from the puppeteers. The story ends in an act of kindness, which reunites the puppets. Lively illustrations by Subir Roy make this a beautiful book to get.

All these books have a Hindi translation.

Vivasvat Devanampriya is 12 years old, and studies in Grade 7 at The Doon School, Dehradun.

Andaleeb Wajid

NEHA AND THE NOSE

By Ruchika Chanana

Duckbill Books, 2019, pp. 88, ₹199.00

UNLUCKY CHUMKI

By Lesley D Biswas. Illustrations by Anupama Ajinkya Apte

Duckbill Publishers, 2019, pp. 65, ₹175.00

Homegrown middle grade fiction in India is on the rise and thankfully so! *Neha and the Nose* written by Ruchika Chanana brings two young detectives, one with the brains and one with the, um, nose, into the scene, where they uncover the truth about various mysteries like who stole the Sadanand Sharma Trophy for Extramural Excellence or who was stalking Harini, the head girl.

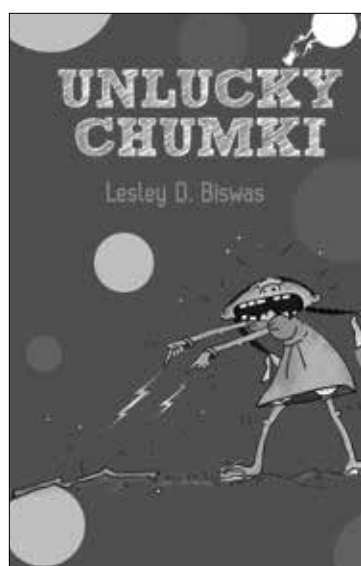
Johan, or the Nose, tends to become overly dramatic when he is using his nose to sniff out clues, become either Shakespearean or Sherlockian in his speech (and sometimes Chairman Mao too!), and while Neha rolls her eyes at this, she indulges him because together, they can work better at solving mysteries. Filled with nose-y puns and several other synonyms for 'nose', Neha and Johan are the school's undisputed crime solvers who sometimes tend to disagree about their roles as detective and sidekick.

A serious mystery comes their way when they discover that the warden of the girl's hostel has been attacked but instead of being allowed to solve it, their detective talents are directed towards solving the ghostly occurrences that are taking place in the girl's hostel. Johan has a crush on the school's queen bee Sarika who 'had somehow achieved a look that was natural in an Alia Bhatt sort of way.' He thinks solving the hostel poltergeist problem will make him appear more manly before the pretty Sarika and Neha thinks it's just a waste of time.

The events that follow are as convoluted as the trail that the Nose likes to follow but it still hooks you in as the two intrepid detectives try to solve several mysteries within mysteries, all while still in uniform (err...school uniform). Neha's no-nonsense attitude is a foil to several giggly girls she interacts with in class, and her ambition to have a career solving crime makes her think she is superior to the others but there are also moments of realization when she feels she may have judged Sarika too harshly.

A page turner that only stumbles whenever Johan breaks into his flourishes about his proboscis (funny in a wry sort of way to older people but could possibly elude the target audience of middle-grade readers), *Neha and the Nose* is irreverent and never takes itself too seriously. This is an utterly refreshing read, and one that's probably primed for a sequel or a series.

Heavy subjects like superstition and discrimination against the girl



child are distilled into an easy-to-understand story that is in equal parts charming, funny and heart-warming. Chumki is a young girl who lives in Bagmandi, a small village in West Bengal's Purulia district. An infuriating Dadi who blames her for everything that goes wrong, a mischievous brother who hates going to school, a loving mother who is pained at seeing how her daughter is treated and a baffled bua who gives Chumki a whole lot of convoluted reasons as to why she is considered unlucky, make up a huge part of this Hole book by Duckbill.

Ten year old Chumki doesn't have friends because the villagers and the children in school believe that she has a 'magic tongue' and she can curse people. Things are not helped along by her little brother who has convinced Chumki's classmates that she can turn people into vegetables. However, he has a change of heart and comes up with a plan to help erase the 'bad luck' associated with her. It involves a mango orchard and its surly caretaker and a whole group of kids who want to enjoy the juicy mangoes without being chased away from there.

Without ever talking directly about the unfair treatment meted out to Chumki, especially by Dadi who forbids her from going to school, the author makes the readers feel Chumki's pain and her confusion at being denied her basic right to education. The rural setting, the many different characters, the delightful illustrations that try to incorporate the 'hole' in the book where possible, make the book immensely readable.

Andaleeb Wajid is a Bangalore based writer who has been writing books for adults, young adults and children for the past ten years. She has recently published a romance novel called *A Sweet Deal*, published by Fingerprint.



Apoorva Raje

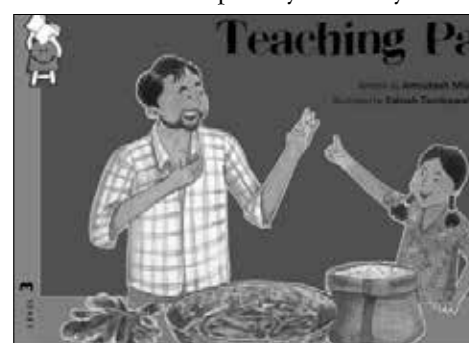
TEACHING PA

By Amrutash Misra. Illustrations by Zainab Tambawallah

Pratham Books, 2019, pp.16, ₹40.00

Teaching Pa is the story of Diya and her father, unfolding how she managed and succeeded in teaching her father, in spite of his efforts to skip the maths sessions. It is sweet of Diya to decide to teach her father and make all the efforts to make it happen. Another interesting thing is how she makes use of pea pods, and other examples from kitchen that her father is familiar with. The concept blends well with the theoretical knowledge and its implications in real life, thereby facilitating conceptual clarity to the young readers. Pa's constant attempts to run away from the math classes was something I enjoyed the most. Isn't it something all (well, most) of the young readers and even us can relate to?

I loved how it portrays a family that believed in sharing of



responsibilities, including the one concerning kitchen and cooking. This is something new that I am discovering in recent picture books where both the parents are shown sharing chores and giving a subtle lesson in gender equality. Pratham has

introduced this book for level 3 readers i.e., those who can read and make meaning independently. Keeping the reader group in mind, the language and difficulty level of the vocabulary seems appropriate. The 'Do you know' section at the end is another interesting read.

However, in spite of these strengths, the story has scope for improvement. Somehow, it fell short of keeping me interested while reading. It seems that the story has been shaped strictly keeping in mind the format that Pratham has been following, and perhaps it affects the flow of the story. Also I feel that the story rather goes flat without much scope for engagement and excitement.

Apoorva Raje is working with the editorial team at Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal. She loves stories and listening to songs.



Rama Raj

THE POLKA DOT UMBRELLA & OTHERS: A COLLECTION OF 12 SHORT STORIES
Children's Book Trust, 2019, pp. 20, ₹105.00

The *Polka Dot Umbrella & Others* is a collection of 12 short stories, each dealing with aspects of life. The stories touch upon various challenges life throws at us and how to overcome them as in, 'Dance of Victory', 'A Mentor Called Dadu' and 'Singular Problem'.

These stories tell the children how to change your shortcomings to your advantage without sermonizing — be it limping, being very short or having hearing impairment.

You never know how lucky you are unless you step into another person's shoes, Anamika finds out. The habit of writing a diary helps Tara to introspect and find a true friend is Sushmita.

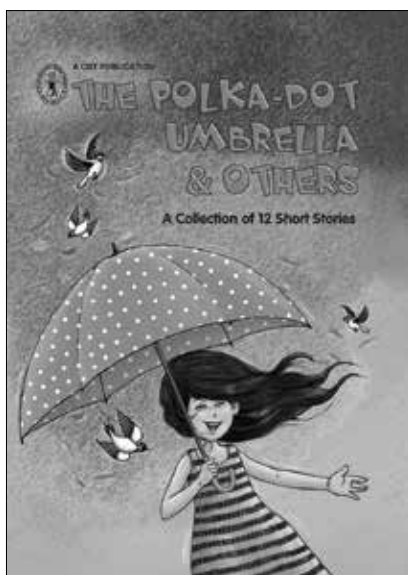
Not listening to your parents can land you in serious trouble, Chamlu and Chibu find out in 'The Circus'. In 'Polka Dot Umbrella', Nirmala, a poor girl, with great difficulty manages to buy the umbrella she had been longing for—a prized possession, but she sacrifices it to save a puppy from drowning in the floods—which shows her compassion towards animals.

Had I been in Renuka's place I wouldn't have rewarded Jay for his misbehaviour, in 'The Final Goal'.

Courage, presence of mind have been aptly depicted in 'The Girl With a Curly Hair' and 'Kesar Devi'.

Parents' support, guidance and encouragement go a long way in inculcating a positive attitude and perseverance in children. Each story is narrated in a simple and interesting manner. The book is ideal for children in their formative years (9-12) in building character, confidence, compassion and values.

Rama Raj is a freelance critic.



Kavita Tiwari

I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND

Mini Shrinivasan. Illustrations / design by Shubham Lakhera
Tulika Chennai, 2019, pp. 24, ₹165.00

I too didn't understand this way...

What attracted me first was the title of the book. It made me curious to know what it was that was not understood. There are probably very few books for children that have titles with a negative word in them.

This book is about a mentally challenged child Manna. It is about three things that happen to Manna in school. School, which is a place of friendship, playing, sharing and loving, is also where there is bullying. Manna doesn't understand when some children are being mean and sarcastic to her. She doesn't understand that she is bullied, nor why.

I liked three things about this book. The first is the way in which Mini Shrinivasan take us on a journey of one day into Manna's life. Very beautifully and subtly, she has posed the important and sensitive question of the self-identity of mentally challenged children. People with vision impairment or hearing impairment or other physical challenges know they are challenged. But what about children like Manna who are mentally challenged? How do they perceive the world and themselves in it? Maybe the fact that Manna doesn't see herself as challenged is why she doesn't understand what is wrong if she takes a long time to understand things. Perhaps that is why she so easily accepts that she doesn't understand something. I think the writer is trying to say that we too should SEE that there is nothing wrong in taking time to understand things.

Secondly, Manna has been shown as a strong and joyful character. Nowhere does Manna seem helpless and weak. And last, but not the least, are the beautiful cover page and other illustrations by Shubham Lakhera. The illustration of an upside down cheerful girl forces us to think differently about the mentally challenged.

I would say that the book should be read not only by children but also by adults.

Kavita Tiwari is associated with the editorial team of the children's magazine *Chakmak* published by Eklavya. In her leisure time she loves to read books, listen to music and spend time with her daughter.

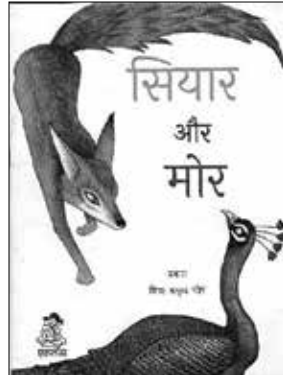


Indira Bagchi

SIYAR AUR MOR

By Prabhat, Seema, Deepali and Apoorva Raje. Illustrations by Maukh Ghosh
Eklavya, 2019, pp. 20, ₹60.00

This never ending beautiful folktale is an all time favourite of children. The greedy and cunning Jackal and the colourful peacock were friends. Both decided to prepare a special meal of Dal Bati (a special dish of Rajasthan). Once it is ready, the peacock goes for a bath and the greedy jackal eats up the entire dish prepared by both. When the peacock shows his anger the jackal eats the peacock. Later he eats the old woman, the calf, the bear and ultimately he eats the elephant. Now his stomach is so bloated that he is unable to move. He comes to a river and drinks a lot of water along with the fish and the alligator swimming in the river. The jackal's poor stomach cannot take it anymore and it bursts open. Result: all the animals come out and run away from there. The cunning jackal lies on the road with his stomach open. The tailor bird sees him like that and as is her habit, she starts stitching him up and the story goes on.



A beautifully illustrated story. The visuals of the animals inside the jackal's stomach are fantastic and kids will really enjoy them. The language is simple and flows smoothly. Children get introduced to different animals and the tailor bird. They also learn about the Rajasthani special dish of Dal Bati.

HAO HAO HUPP: A COLLECTION OF CHILDREN'S POEMS

Compiled and edited by Teji Grover. Design by Kanak Shashi
Eklavya, 2018, pp. 60, ₹130.00

Hao Hao Hupp is a cute collection of entertaining poems for children. They are read aloud poems for the very young. The rhyming words like baniya, suthania, dhanian capture the attention of the child. The poems about birds and animals inculcate the love for animals in children. 'Narangi Rang ki Narangi' introduces colours and 'Kitni Lambi Hai Sadak' is a concept poem. There is humour in 'Pathashala'. Thus this collection is also making learning easy and enjoyable. These are very helpful to teachers as their teaching aids. Teji Grover has done a good job by collecting these poems by eminent poets and authors and reaching them to children and their teachers.



RAJA BALUSHAH AND RANI RASMALAI IN MITHASPUR AND OTHER ADVENTURES

By Prashant Pinge. Illustrations by Priya Kurien
HarperCollins, 2018, pp. 144, ₹350.00

This book is full of entertainment, adventure and magic. The title itself is fascinating and lures the reader to read on. 11 year old Arjun and 9 year old

Anindita go for a boring vacation to their grandmother's house. But to their surprise it turns out to be a grand adventure after they consume an enchanted laddoo and are transported to the magical land of Chamatkar Nagri. Starting with Mithaspur, where Raja Balushahi awaits his fate at the hands of his arch enemy Kroordas, the children are thrust into one exciting escapade after another. The language is simple. The illustrations, comprising line drawings, are beautiful and attractive, especially the illustration of the palace of cards looks fantastic. The switchover from Chamtkar Nagri to Manav Lok has been done cleverly but at times the situations look similar. Finding a hidden letter in every story tends to decrease the element of surprise in the story.

This collection of stories will be appreciated by Indian readers but may not have a global appeal as the names of the sweets and also the characters named after them may not be familiar to the readers from other countries. Words like Makkar, Kroordas, Banjarvan Petumal may not mean anything to some of the readers. At times the story creates confusion.

But the author deserves a pat for his choice of names befitting the characters and maintaining a flow in the stories. A good and captivating collection of stories for the children of this age.

Indira Bagchi is a retired teacher. She writes for children in English and Hindi. She has done her Masters in Sanskrit, History and Education. At present she is in the Executive Committee of The Association of Writers and illustrators (AWIC).

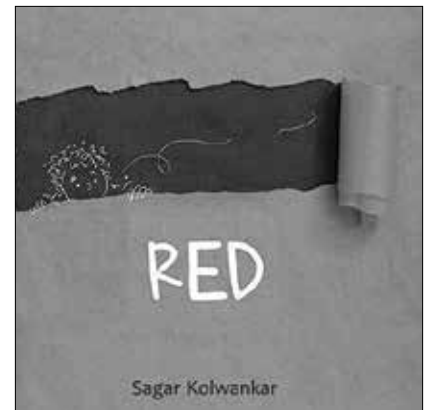


Snehal

RED

By Sagar Kolwankar
Tulika, 2018, pp.30, ₹200.00

The very first thing that catches one's attention is the black torn part and a child peeking through it on an otherwise bright red cover picture. The story uses the colour palette beautifully as the book starts with a boy running alone on a muddy road with a beautiful yellow background followed by him finding a bright RED kite. He flies the kite up high in the strikingly blue sky which in the next few pages turn into dark shades of blue and the beautiful bright kite named RED is replaced by dark red war planes. The use of similar tone of colours for depicting war and peace is innovative. As the war ends and bombing stops, the boy finds the whole ground red but the boy still picks up his kite and draws a smile on it marking a new hopeful beginning that the sky would never be angry again.



Overall the story uses the colour palette methodically to show the contrasting situations. However, I feel that the space reserved for the text could have been used more efficiently, the font size of text could also have been made a point or two larger so that it would pop out more as compared to the illustrations on the adjacent pages. The story is an emotional ode to children residing in war-torn parts of the world which ends with a hope for a better future.

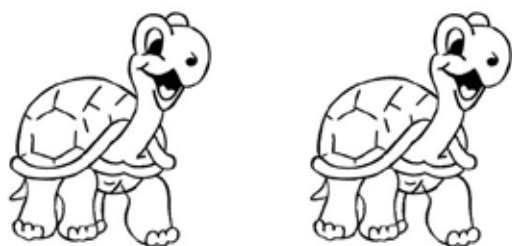
BIG RAIN

By Gayathri Bashi, Illustrations by T R Rajesh
Tulika, 2018, pp. 26, ₹175

Big Rain is a book that takes the reader through the floods of Kerala. With pretty realistic illustrations and simple one sentence texts, the book captures the journey of floods from rain that's beautiful but then lots and lots and lots of rain causing lots and lots and lots of water. This increased water caused more problems and sadness, but then there was help and hope which helped everyone to overcome the disaster but with a promise of remembrance. The book is perfectly crafted for young learners who learn about natural calamities like floods and earthquakes from media sources around them but couldn't make sense of them. Through well-defined illustrations it does a conscious effort to make children aware of how floods affect people, lots and lots of it. The book ends on a reminder that nature is something that needs to be preserved with precautions because the wrath of it is something that humans can't cope with. As the book carries less text it allows the readers freedom to think and imagine, but gives it a direction.

Overall the book is a well compiled set of pictures and could be used to give an introduction about floods to young learners.

Snehal is with the Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal.

**Ira Saxena****CLOUD EATER**

Written and illustrated by Chewang Dorjee Bhutia
Tulika, 2019, pp. 24, ₹245.00

An unusual folktale of a giant-girl with rare characteristics of North Eastern hills. In a nutshell, it is a story of a mighty giant girl who likes to swallow clouds for fun. Banished by one village for the damage she caused she saves another from being submerged in rain by eating the rain clouds. The girl tramples over the gender stereotypes in a natural happy environment.

Most folktales, perhaps originating from the heart, hold the capacity to appeal to the depths of the heart that provides them with the essential distinction of crossing into global vistas. This one told in simple verse performs the needful to please gratify the sentiments. It is a typical old-world style folktale presenting the ups and downs of conflicts and acts of goodness at the same time concluding in peace and contentment. As in most folktales, a simple plot contains an



undercurrent of virtues and eternal humanity prevails. Most remarkable are the unique illustrations which are predominantly imaginary, out of ordinary perspectives and artistic in content. The scenes of the North-Eastern hills of India are depicted beautifully in picturesque compositions and produced effectively. A delightful production by Tulika.

SO JA ULLOO

Picture books published by Eklavya & Parag
(Tata Trusts), Illustrations by Bhuri Bai
2018, pp. 32, ₹80.00

As you pick up this book, the sticker of an award on the top corner of the cover catches your attention besides the portrayal of owls in the colourful illustration. It is the Runner-Up for Publishing Next Industry Award.

Most Eklavya publications are appropriate for the rural child, here too, the concept is simple and easily understood. A variety of day birds in their natural habitat chirp in their own inimitable voices troubling the night bird—owl. Disturbed by the noise while trying to catch a wink during the day, the owl screams loudly at night waking all the birds.

Illustrations is the most striking feature of this book. All the compositions are done in Bhil folk-art, usually adorning the walls of the huts of village using simple combinations of dots and stripes. They are conspicuous, emphasizing the beauty of folk art elegance. In a picture book for children, a point of concern could be whether the child reader can read the art and relate to the different figures of birds and animals that look very different in reality. Maybe not, but within their unsophisticated surroundings of the countryside one should not forget that children possess a unique capability of absorbing abstractions and relating them with the real. Moreover, the fascination of colours and appreciation of art connects to natural flair. In its simplicity, all the configurations have an aesthetic appeal and very attractive. The book owes its charm to the art-work and design.

MACHHER-JHOL: FISH CURRY

By Richa Jha. Illustrations by Sumant De
Pickle Yolk Books, 2018, pp. 40, ₹350.00

This is the Hindi translation of the original book in English published by Pickle Yolk Books.

Primarily the pictures in a picture book are the first to attract attention when inadvertently the observer begins to mentally form a storyline from the details in the picture. Gorgeous double spread illustrations of a buzzing city with minor and major details of the scenery in shades of ochre build up an artistic canvas arising curiosity. Every page presents a beautiful painting in bold brush strokes over minute details which become lifelike and move on the pages along with the characters and the story.

'Machher Jhol' is the sensitive story of a young boy who dares to go out in the humdrum of the city to get fish curry, 'machher jhol', for his ailing father. It moves interestingly from one step to the next with a surprise packed in at the end, one that wins the heart, arousing a





mixture of feelings and heroism. In that one moment, the entire adventure and all the sequences portrayed in graphic detail acquire a new meaning that are emotional and fulfilling. It is a lovely story told with utmost restraint for it neither becomes exaggerated nor theatrical. The author has excelled in simplicity and precision.

The entire book possesses a classic touch in the placement of brief text on an elaborate cityscape that tends to stall the reader's attention to scan the minor details of the illustration before proceeding on with the story. Besides the visual impact, the book is soothing as well as heart-warming.

LAL PHOOLON KI KHUSHBU PEELI

Written and illustrated by Bani Prosonno Eklavya, 2019

This is a collection of short rhyming pieces on animals and aspects of a child's world is supported by photographs of pretty non-figurative vague collage like arrangements of diverse material like ropes, pans, flower pots, buckets, stones and leaves.

As such the book does not create any impact on the young mind because the presentation of rhyming words are neither poetic, nor do the illustrations lend themselves to clarifying the purpose of presentation. I do not think that there is any connection between the title and the reading material inside. While creating a book for the pre-schooler, it is essential to bear in mind the comprehension level of the young reader. In familiarizing concepts and creating mental association of things in a child's world, clarity of ideas and simple approach is of utmost importance.



PYARI MADAME

By Rinchin. Illustrations by Shivatmika Lala Eklavya, 2019, pp. 24, ₹55.00

In my opinion this book is unsuitable for the format of a picture book by all standards. The story is for older readers who can read fluently and grasp complicated plots. First of all, it is extremely wordy for the intended age group of the readers and a story shoots across the comprehension of children.



Although it is a touching tale of a girl who is unable to go to school owing to circumstances, political and social exploitation, the style and contents of a sensitive situation is rather mature. The story is derived from lengthy letters written to the school teacher. For the picture book readers with limited vocabulary and fragmentary understanding of complexities of life, the story as well as the concept of the tale is beyond their grasp.

Simply illustrated in images from nature and actions in the text, the pages are dominated by the long letters. The prose is tedious with complex expressions including some language inaccuracies.

Ira Saxena Ph.D. in Child Psychology, is the author of innumerable books for children.

Nalini Kalra

THE GRAND STORY OF IKLI CHOKLI

By Vinayan Bhaskaran. Illustrated by Rajiv Eipe Tulika, Chennai, 2018, pp. 49, ₹165.00

As parents we want the best for our children and as the role entails, we guide them along the initial stages of their journey in life. But kids being headstrong do not always give their parents a patient hearing. This concept has been portrayed beautifully by Vinayan Bhaskaran. Sometimes it is best to let children learn from their mistakes which help them grow into better human beings.

Through the medium of Ikli Chokli, a street dog in the by-lanes of Karim Nagar, Vinayan takes the young reader through the escapades of this ostensibly brave and bold dog. In order to be different and always stay in the limelight, Ikli Chokli enjoys a dash in muddy puddles, drains, dirty ponds and all the mucky places he can see around much to the chagrin of his mother who worries endlessly for her young pup.

To his credit Vinayan weaves his magic as the readers are filled with awe, revulsion and laughter at the activities of this talking dog but at the same time leaves them feeling sorry for him. Written in a simple and easy to understand manner, the book will make the young readers chuckle at the stuff Ikli Chokli believes in and learn from his old age wisdom as he himself learns from his experiences.

The cover of the book shows a big white dog who seems to have an enthralled audience and it makes one wonder about the mystery that lies within the pages. Rajiv Eipe's illustrations make the story seem real with the expressions on Ikli Chokli's face and his body language bringing the character to life.



ADVENTURES OF THE HUMONGOOSE FAMILY

By Zai Whitaker. Illustrated by Niloufer Wadia Tulika, Chennai, 2019, pp. 83, ₹195.00

Giving human voices and thoughts to a family of mongooses is Zai Whitaker's perfect way of delving into the minds of humans and all that dwells within. Change is the only constant in life and humans are quite adept at adjusting to new places, things, challenges and whatever it is that life throws at them irrespective of the apprehensions or initial inhibitions that they may have.

Gundu and Keeri Humongoose are tired of a quite life in the forest and wish to explore new lands—the city life in their case. So they pack their bags and set off. The book takes the young readers on a journey of the unknown, the thrill of seeing and learning new things and living through the inevitable adaptation that comes in the wake of this exposure to the unknown.

Gundu and Keeri portray a perfect balance between patience and spontaneity; wisdom and superficial knowledge and above all the willingness to try out new things as against a desire for status quo. Lessons of trial, team work and love which hold together the bonds within a family at the nuclear level and the community on a larger



platform form the core of the book. Keeri is shown as someone who has made up her mind but just because she once blurted something in opposition to what she actually desires, she waits for Gundu to firmly state it—to which she then agrees albeit sheepishly. On the other hand, even though Keeri seems to be the smarter one, more observant and knowledgeable, Gundu knows her well enough to smartly manipulate her and bring her around to not only seeing but also agreeing to his way of thinking. This actually makes one wonder as to who the smarter one is.

As the family size increases, their children reflect the doings of the young ones who apparently listen to their parents but love playing truant and at opportune times seem to just 'forget' the teachings as having merely 'slipped their young minds'. The story beautifully weaves around the feelings of apprehension and fear in the face of an imminent loss, of remorse, guilt and finally, all this bringing the family together in order to ward off the threat that hangs over the family.

The story of the humongoose family depicts various human emotions in a subtle, clear and easy to understand manner with which children and adults alike can relate.

Niloufer Wadia's illustrations of this family are clear in every detail. Each member's character, thoughts and feelings at any particular point in the story is reflected in the pictures. The cover of the book shows the entire family and leaves the thought in the minds of the readers as they open the pages—parents shall always be impressed, zapped and proud of their kids whilst kids, well they shall always do what they do the best—just be kids!

Nalini Kalra, a lawyer by profession, an avid reader with a passion for healthy baking, a freelance writer, likes to talk about topics of interest to the general populace. While serving the IAF, she pursued MBA (HR), Journalism and a diploma in creative writing from UK. After leaving the IAF she has continued to study Child Psychology and Counselling Psychology.



P Shubhangi

MOTHER STEALS A BICYCLE AND OTHER STORIES

By Salai Selvam and Shruti Buddhavarapu. Translated by V Geetha
Tara Books, 2018, pp. 67, ₹400.00

A collection of eight stories narrated by a daughter as woven by her mother (amma) during their relaxed casual conversations. The stories are from amma's own childhood. The imagery built by the stories in the Indian set up seems closer to home. This genre of stories may work well with grade school children who love to listen to real stories from the lives of adults around them, perhaps 9+ years old but maybe the stories would need to be a little juicier. Overall, the stories seem light with a friendly undertone. The rendering is plain and close to reality but for the same reason could sometimes fail to grip you instantly. The mother seems to be, at times, helping her child get another perspective on certain things she fears or despises like darkness or insects and at other times encouraging her spirit of adventure through simple pictures of the enchanting ways of a village life.

Illustrations are neat and primarily use intricate line work in black

and white with a flash of blue, occasionally, here and there. They cover the details of the running story following a style of crowded detailing. The index page is interesting.

Something is needed to make the title pages stand out from the rest of the illustrated pages. The language is simple and very pleasant. The articulation is fine and effective to help one draw clear pictures in the mind. The font and spacing is pleasing and gives the reader an experience of ease. The monotony of the black text is often cut with a flash of blue text or with interesting depictive typography in many places. The attractive book cover, warm coloured and good quality paper and neat illustrations add to the looks of the book.

The first story 'Mother Steals a Bicycle' renders a real-life situation where amma takes a guest's cycle out for a ride without a clue as to how to ride it. The story takes you along well but abandons you with an abrupt ending. It seems as though the author has chosen to end it this way deliberately to leave the reader with the spirit of adventure without concluding the story. But unfinished real-life stories are usually not appreciated by most children in real-life, really! In 'Mother With Her Gang', amma describes her routine fearless journeys through the forest to her school.

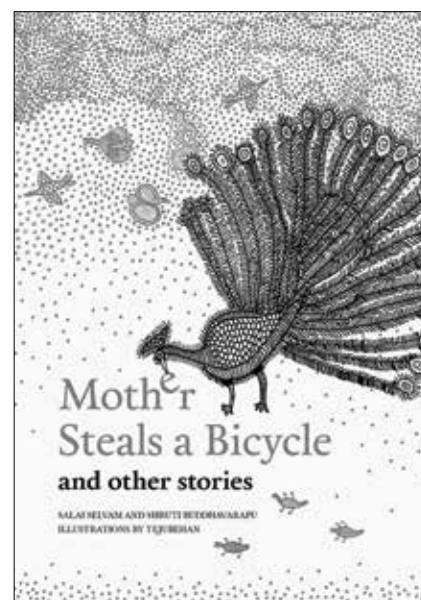
'Mother Learns to Swim' tells us all about how amma taught herself to swim as she draws nice pictures of her village life. 'Fussing Over Insects' is a very short story where amma tries to present briefly the beautiful and interesting side of insects to her daughter who dislikes them. She tells her about the cicadas making music, dragonflies announcing the rain, the fireflies lighting up a place, etc.

'Following a Peacock' has been rendered beautifully from start to finish. This perhaps is the most appealing real-life story that amma tells. 'In Playing with Shadows', amma describes all the fantasy games she plays with her own shadow. This story does bring to light that it is probably a pity of today's times where we are in a hurry to 'teach' children. Perhaps, we could do good by them if we let them live in the wonder of the things around them and make discoveries for themselves.

'Mother Plays With Make-up' portrays the simplicity and charms of living in a village during amma's childhood days. With the last story, 'Mother Loves Dark', amma presents the brighter side of darkness.

Overall, the simple stories have a pleasant rendering, but a little more spice would have helped make it more engaging for young readers.

P Shubhangi is a practicing class teacher for the past six years and drives the pedagogy at a homeschool collective in Bengaluru.



Chandra Chari

KITTOO UDAN CHOO

By Harshika Udasi. Illustrations by Lavanya Naidu. Translated from English by Bharat Tripathi.

Eklavya. Parag Initiative with support from the Tata Trust, 2019, pp.76, ₹65.00

The book under review has an interesting publishing trajectory. Originally published by Duckbill Books in English titled *Kittu's Terrible Horrible Very Mad Day*, the background to this tale is supplied by yet another tale: of a silent revolution taking place in the Panna National Tiger Reserve in Janwar Kaisal, India's first rural skating park. The brain-child of Germany's Ulrike Reinhart who heads the Janwar Kaisal Community Organization, the non-profit organization is transforming the life of the rural folk. Children come in droves to the State Park set up in 2014 for children to learn to skate, to dance and paint. A unique feature is the rule of the park: 'No skating board if no school' and 'Girls First'.

Kittu the lovable protagonist of this tale is left behind by his chaotic extended family on a trip to the tourist spots of Madhya Pradesh. Lost and found by an ice-cream vendor and his family, how does Kittu deal with his plight? The twist in the tale lies in a skateboard. Can a disabled boy with one leg missing learn to skate? Or not? The Eklavya team is to be congratulated for translating and publishing this page-turner of a book. The illustrations complement the text with verve and joy.



PISHI AUR MAIN (PISHI AND ME)

By Timira Gupta. Illustrations by Rajiv Eipe. Translated from English by Deepa Tripathi

Pratham Books, 2019, pp.16, ₹45.00

This Read-Aloud book for level 2 readers first appeared on Pratham Books' digital platform

Storyweaver. A touching story of

the relationship between little Chutku and Pishi, his aunt, this will appeal to toddlers, particularly when they see pictures of treasures that Chutku manages to fill his little jar with. One little quibble about the illustrations: the faces of people appear too much like caricatures.

CHASHMA NAYA HAI: COMPILATION OF CHILDREN'S WRITINGS

Illustrations by Shubham Lakhera

Eklavya, funded by the Edelgive Foundation and Parag Initiative, with support from the Tata Trust, pp.56, ₹75.00

A compilation of thirteen stories selected from the diaries of children, this interesting tale of a journey provides a window to the world of children. The attempt here is to look at the creativity of the young through a new lens, and hence the title. All the stories in the book were



first published in the children's science magazine *Chakmak*.

The stories included in the book are written by children ranging from age nine to sixteen years. Predictably, being selections from diaries, most of them are descriptive, and narrated in a stream-of-consciousness flow. The length of the selections is uneven, but overall, they make an interesting read. Sibling rivalry, angst about being made to sit in class-rooms, the day-to-day mischief-mongering and then getting into trouble are all recorded in the entries. But underlying the purely descriptive narratives, in most of the stories, unknown to the writer in her innocence, pop out just a sentence or two which highlight patriarchal dictat or a mother's instinctive standing up for her daughter against it, or the natural anxieties in a child's mind which s/he finds difficult to articulate.

This is an experiment in compiling children's writings which is worth emulating.

APNE BACHHON KO KAISE KHILAYEN (AUR ISKA LUTF LEIN): YUVA MATAON KE LIYE MAZEDAR RECIPES/VYANJAN VIDHIYAN

By Dr Tabinda J Burney. Translated from English into Hindi by Manju Khanna

Niyogi Books, 2019, pp. 200, ₹395.00

The author who has a degree in medicine from Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi, and currently working in the NHS in the UK, being a mother of two daughters, is undoubtedly qualified to have written this book. With a full time job and yet fully committed to providing healthy, nutritious food for her youngsters, Dr Tabinda Burney has literally cooked up, page after page, a storm of delicious recipes. A little different from the normal, day-to-day diets of Indian households, she presents recipes for soups, tasty vegetarian dishes, healthy snacks, new ideas to fill the school lunch boxes, and of course, festival food from all over India.

The recipes cater to all stages of childhood, starting with babies and toddlers to a year and onwards. New mothers as well as working mothers would find this book a treasure. And, if the book is picked up by a child, the different recipes for smoothies alone would have her clamouring for them to be tried out by their mothers!

Chandra Chari is Editor, *The Book Review*.



Ruchi Shevade

AMMACHI KI GAJAB MACHINE (AMMACHI'S AMAZING MACHINES)

By Rajiv Eipe. Translated by Rishi Mathur. Illustrations /design by Rajiv Eipe

Pratham Books, 2019, pp.15, ₹40.00

This book takes me back to my children's literature classroom; 15 enthusiastic and excited faces, happily reading out the story from story weaver's website on the big screen, trying to notice the literary nuances, simultaneously getting formally introduced to the components of children's books. It has been over a year since the day, and the memory is fading day by day. But what is still fresh in mind is the utter pleasure we all had while reading it.

Sooraj is hungry. He requests his *Ammachi* (grandmother) to cook something for him and Ammachi agreed, on condition that Sooraj



should help her.

The entire story is based on the event of how both of them together prepare coconut-barfi from scratch. And... what an action-packed, eventful process it is! Each step that she follows in the process is an interesting insight into our daily encounters with simple machines.

Ammachi's... is an interesting example of how an author can transform an ordinary event into an adventure!

Ammachi! A Malayalam word for grandma. Such an affectionate word! For someone like me who spent the entire childhood in grandparents' company, stories like this are sweet reminders of all the fun we had together.

Apart from the emotional connection, the story has a few more strengths. A grandma who lets and makes her grand-'SON' help her in the kitchen! Isn't it a breakaway from stereotypical portrayals of grandmothers, adamant on keeping the 'boys' and 'men' of the house away from the kitchen?

Another thing that appealed to me was how Sooraj is portrayed; a dark-complexioned, curly-haired young boy. Against the conventional preference to fair-skinned main characters? Otherwise too, illustrations throughout the book are lively and expressive.

Let's talk about the Hindi translation by Rishi Mathur that we have for the review. Honestly, when compared to the original story, the translation seems to lack a naturalness and flow in the language. The kind of words and verbs used in the story don't seem to be a part of day-to-day vocabulary; same is the case with the way sentences are structured. This may have happened in the attempt to ensure an exact translation.

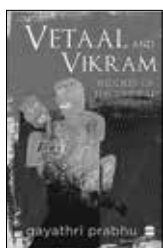
In spite of the joy I had while reading this book, there is a slight concern about the possibility of mismatch between the targeted reader group and the kind of discussion the book initiates i.e., the concept of simple machines. It is allotted to the level 2 readers—those who can identify simple words, and with the adult's help can learn new words. Will a child from this group be able to understand the scientific concept that the story is based on? Or would they be willing to know the scientific explanation given at the end?

The explanation does not really discuss the processes used in the story in detail, connecting them to the scientific principle followed by each of them, but merely identifies them as simple machinery, informing about the types and terminologies used for the same.

But should this be a concern in deciding whether to pick this book to read or not? My answer is No.

Ruchi Shevade is part of a reading programme initiated by Eklavya in Bhopal and Raisen districts. The programme, *Padho, Likho, Maja Karo* aims to nurture and encourage the habit of reading in the community.

Book News Book News



Vetaal and Vikram: Riddles of the Undead by Gayatri Prabhu is a playful retelling of one of India's most celebrated cycles of stories. The narrative of King Vikram and the Vetaal is located within the *Kathasaritsagara*, the eleventh-century Sanskrit text. HarperCollins, 2019, pp. 208, ₹399.00

Sudhir Chowdhry

PAYAL IS LOST (PAYAL KHO GAYI)

By Maheen Mirza and Shivani Taneja. Illustrations by Kanak Shashi Eklavya and Muskaan, Bhopal, 2019, pp. 20, ₹75.00

The book, which is also available in Hindi, primarily targets those who are beginning to read. As the name suggests, the conflict in this story revolves around a group of friends looking for their lost friend, Payal. The nature of the plot/conflict of this story makes it an ideal read for the target audiences. Whilst being simple, the topic is intriguing enough for a child to read until the end of the book.

Another important aspect of the book is the illustrations included in it, which do possess an element of abstraction along with being evocative. The illustrations create a vague image of the written story, the details of which are more or less dependent on the reader's imagination. As a result of this, the reader exercises his/her imagination, which is a commendable quality of the book, keeping in mind, the target audience of those learning to read. In other words, it allows visual learners or appeals to the visual sense of the readers, allowing them to sharpen their reading and comprehension skills. In this way, it is largely capable of fulfilling the purpose it is likely to be bought for.

The usage of Indian names and words such as 'Mama' and 'Chacha' appeal to the Indian audiences. A simple and sweet conclusion is likely to appeal to children, making it an ideal read for those willing to learn to read.

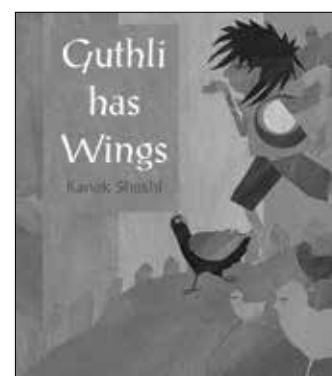
GUTHLI HAS WINGS

By Kanak Shashi
Tulika Books, Chennai, 2019, pp. 24, ₹165.00

Guthli has Wings is an interesting depiction of a rather sensitive yet immensely significant issue in today's world gender identity. The book does a commendable job with conveying the gravity of the issue being addressed through a simple plot, which spans over 20 pages.

The book targets young readers (above the age of 6). It makes a sincere effort to introduce the idea of gender identity and freedom of choosing one's gender to the readers. The book includes various evocative illustrations, most of which depict Guthli, which allow the young readers to keep track of the plot and visually connect with it.

The story progresses as Guthli refuses to acknowledge her mother's assertion of her being a boy. Another interesting observation is that Guthli is presented as a normal girl as the pronoun 'she' is used while referring to her until her mother calls him 'son'. The story is based on a fundamental distinction between sex and gender, and effectively conveys the significant role played by the idea of choice in establishing the concept of gender, which is independent of biological features. The depth in which the issue is explained is, in my opinion, ideal for the



targeted age range.

The structure of the story is smooth and effectively communicates the plot and other literary details. Character and conflict introduction are well-nuanced and increase the overall appeal and quality of the text. As a result of these factors, the book is a good option to consider when advancing the level of reading in beginner readers. The price, however, could be considered high for a children's book.

THE ADVENTURES OF BIPOB THE BUMBLEBEE VOLUME 1

By Abhishek Talwar

Puffin Books, 2019, pp. 33, ₹199.00

The book encompasses three separate stories pertinent to the same protagonist: Biplob the Bumblebee. Targeting children aiming at building their level of reading, the book does a commendable job in introducing various scientific phenomena such as rainwater harvesting and pollination, while allowing the young readers to build their reading skill by reading various complex sentences. The structure is such that it allows a smooth advancement in the reading skill, which is a rather significant advantage of the book.



The illustrations by Sonal Goyal provide great assistance to the young readers to visually connect to the plot and understand the broad concepts being introduced. The illustrations simplify the concepts introduced and range from scenic depictions to flowcharts, serving a wide variety of purposes.

The book combines scientific phenomenon and fictional plots in a commendable way. The relatively high price is unlikely to dissuade consumers from buying up this product. Moreover, it should also be considered that the length of the book and the utility of the book are both more than various other books that fall under similar genres and categories.

The book introduces certain words that would be complex for the targeted reader group, allowing them to fulfill their purpose of boosting their reading skill. Apart from this, the character of Biplob is established as a kind and humble creature through all three stories. The reader's attachment to the protagonist continues to develop through the various challenges faced by Biplob.

All in all, the book is recommended to young readers as it allows them to boost their reading skill while learning about new ideas.

WHILE THE MEN WENT HUNTING, WHAT DID THE WOMEN DO?;

WHILE THE WOMEN WENT HUNTING, WHAT DID THE MEN DO?

Both by CN Subramanyam. Illustrations by Pragnya Shankaran / Kanak Shashi Eklavya, 2019 & 2018, pp.18 each, ₹40.00 & ₹30.00

Challenging the common notion of hunting being the work of men, the book by CN Subramaniam combines pictures with possible interpretations of the same. The book mostly shares the author's experience of exploring sculptures in various locations, which include Chhattisgarh's famous Bhromadev temple and Vijaynagara in Karnataka.



The book adopts an informative tone, wherein the author describes his experience of exploring sculptures in various locations across the country. Pictures are used extensively throughout the book, showing interesting sculptures explored by the author. Most of the

text, either introduces the reader to the book or accompanies the photographs with possible interpretations or general information about them.

The companion volume, *When the Women went Hunting, What Did the Men Do?* is an exploration of what women in the Stone Age did based on rock paintings.

The books aim at young students developing an interest in history or humanities, on a broader note. The formatting of both the books, too, is commendable. Pictures are well aligned to the information, and the reader is comfortably able to refer the information, while closely observing the pictures. The relatively large size of the pictures allows the reader to make close observations.

Sudhir Chowdhry, a student of Class 11 at the Doon School, is currently pursuing the IBDP curriculum, and interested in the sciences and economics. He actively participates in extra-curricular activities like debating and dramatics. Due to his keen interest in dramatics, he has been able to nurture his skill in appreciating literature in various ways. He takes part in various voluntary activities, including those related to community service.

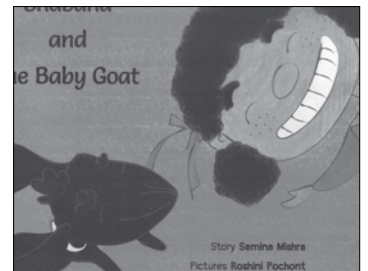


Shivnarayan Gour

SHABANA AND THE BABY GOAT

By Samina Mishra. Illustrations / design by Roshini Pochont

Tulika, 2018, pp. 28, ₹175.00



It is natural that the children develop a connection with animals around them. Some of the studies have even said that the kids actually love animals more than toys. In the process of emotional development of children, animals play a vital role. Hence, they are often attracted to the books with animals in it and it adds to their fascination when they encounter those, which they get to see daily around them. I have read *Shabana and the Baby Goat* again and again and even attempted to have a look at it from the point of view of readers it was written for.

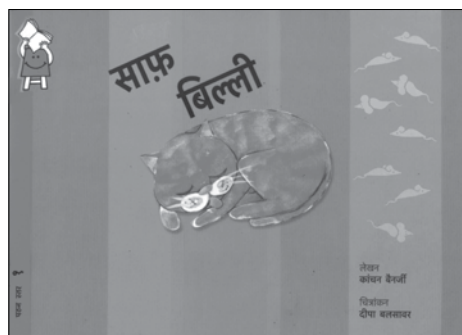
This is a story of two best friends; Kajari, a baby goat and Shabana, a four years old girl. Right from the day she was born, Kajari and Shabana have been with each other, growing up together. Often, children develop a close bond with the pets and animals living in around their houses, like cows, dogs, cats, buffalos. We might even find them conversing seriously with the animals as if both the parties can understand what the other says.

The book let's us peep into the day-to-day activities of a goat. Both of them are just happy being with one another. But these happy days end soon, as Kajari develops a troublesome habit of chewing whatever she comes across; food, pages of books and even Phuppho's burka. Then everyone is set on mission to stop her.

Roshini's illustrations are just lively! Shabana and Kajari's happy faces surely attract readers. But I feel that, if the names of the characters would have been different, and not Shabana or Phupphi, thereby avoiding and breaking away from the typical community stereotypes. However, the story has already managed to do this to a large extent and they are visible especially towards the end. I must say that this book has the quality of attracting both; children and adult readers.

SAAF BILLI साफ बिल्ली

By Kanchan Benarjy.
Illustrations / design by Deepa Balsavar
Pratham Books, 2019, pp.12,
₹35.00



We are aware of how children and animals share an emotional connection.

Children particularly like books with references to animals and animals as characters. The one that we are talking about here is *Saaf Billi* by Kanchan Benarjy. The central character of the story is a cat. The story unfolds about how a cat looks at the world around her.

Commonly, when children explain about their conversation with the animals, they can also tell what the animals talked to them. In such cases, we can imagine how exciting it would be for them to read a story narrated by an animal. With its interesting plot, the lively illustrations by Deepa Balsavar add on to the effect.

Something that bothers me about the book is that it leans somewhat towards informing children. Take for example, when the cat says, I don't need to be bathed, I clean myself. I feel that when children read books, they just want to enjoy reading it and such a way of introducing concepts might just hamper the joy they take in reading. In the case where one wishes to write a book particularly focusing on cats and their habits, one should rather consider information as genre, rather than as fiction, so that the readers will be more aware of what to expect from the book.

The plot is indeed creative, but it still has a lot of scope to be better.

Shivnarayan Gour has been working with Eklavya for more than fifteen years. He is mainly involved with the book development team of the publication programme, and with the reading initiative programme of the organization.

**Deepali Shukla****A HOME OF OUR OWN**

By Megha Aggarwal. Illustrations by Habib Ali
Tulika, Chennai, 2019, pp.28, ₹175.00

A book with an interesting cover! This was the first thought I had, soon as I held the book. It seemed kind of like a bioscope, introducing us to all the characters. Children with wide smiles, lying on the ground, looking at the sky. The vibrant green and yellow background adds to the happiness. The floating clouds indicate connection to dreams. Another interesting thing about the illustration is how it tells us about the social context that these children come from. The following page has drawings of home made by children.

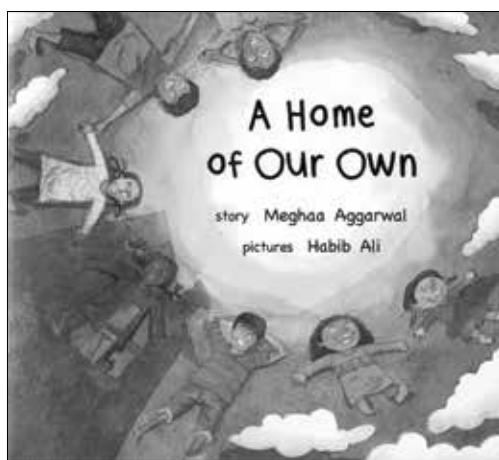
What defines a home? Is it just the bricks, walls and roof and nothing else? Is that really how children perceive the idea of home? Or do these drawings reflect nothing more than following the stereotypical urban idea of a home. Habib Ali's illustrations, however, are nuanced and detailed.

But there's something that I was rather upset about. On one page,

a character finds boxes with leftover food thrown in the dustbin outside the restaurant. I find it to be little problematic. Food wastage is a big issue in our country, so if you can show the reality in pictures, then it will give readers a chance to think about such a serious issue.

Let's talk about the story now. It's about the children on streets, perhaps all within the age group of 7-10 years. The story is about those kids who are part of the urban society, managing to live on their own. As I read through the story, I kept wondering about the thoughts on home these children may have in mind. How do they perceive the idea of home? Is having a home a part of their concerns at all? Or is it something else?

The stories of street children get little space in mainstream children's literature. Hence, while bringing in their experiences in a book, one has to be aware and sensitive of their lives and the endless struggle they face. There is always a trap in the process. Rarely do we find a real, honest reflection of their lives, without any idealized and glorified picture or attempting to propagate sympathy in readers' minds. Quite honestly, I feel that even this story has fallen victim to this. For example, when Dulari is handed over old, broken utensils as a payment for her job. This incident rather reflects helplessness, which leaves the person with no choice but to accept things as they happen. But what about the strong personalities these children develop to fight with the daily difficulties? Shouldn't they too be talked of in the story? Another character, Sunahari is a dark-complexioned little girl, with her pig-tails hanging in the air, wearing an old frock with a darn. I feel that this is a stereotypical image of the poor, especially propagated by the cinemas. But, through the medium



of picture books that gives a lot of space for innovative illustrations, shouldn't we try and break away from them instead of reinforcing them?

Tulika has published stories reflecting lives of children from different backgrounds like, *Kali and the*

Rat-Snake, Why Why Girl? Guthli has Wings and so on, that have built up an expectation as well as a tradition of multi-layered, nuanced, reflective stories. Well, this book has a long way to go, to reach the mark.

In between all these conflicts and contradictions, the book indeed draws our attention to a few critical issues. There's an illustration of a *chauraha* in the city and a couple of pigeons sitting on the cable. There are cars everywhere, but not even a single tree! Isn't that a serious issue?

Finally, what appealed to me the most was the connection and cooperation all the characters shared. It is beautiful to witness them running around collecting things, all just to create a home for themselves!

Deepali Shukla loves reading, especially children's books. An enthusiastic photographer and storyteller, she is associated with publication programme of Eklavya Foundation for more than ten years.

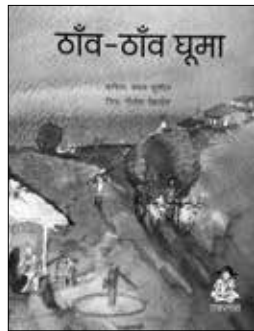
Kamala Menon

THAV THAV GHOOMA; NANGU NANGU NACH; MERI ZOYA CHALI GAYI; SCHOOL MEIN THATHA

All four by Richa Jha

Eklavya/Parag Initiative with support from the Tata Trust, 2018, pp. 12, pp. 32, pp. 40, pp. 12, ₹25.00, ₹90.00, ₹85.00, ₹25.00

Thav Thav Ghooma is a special book which can be opened up to be a running poster with a continuous drawing of a village, its pond and fields. The story is simple and describes the fields and homes. The book is ideal for the six year old where teachers can read it aloud and the children can repeat as they like. A lovely book for tell and speak activities.



Nangu Nangu Nach raises the question of why one needs to dress up unlike animals who have fur and can walk about freely. A little girl asks why she needs to dress, and her grandmother explains that those who see us must feel comfortable. Well, the idea seems ok, but she asks why she cannot be free. This book is illustrated with sketches and birds in light colours and pleasing to the adult eye.

Meri Zoya Chali Gayee is a sad story. Yet she has faith that little Zoya is always with her. She finds a friend in Dhara. Soon Dhara, Zoya and Noor play together with faith and good will. This is a beautiful story and both children and adults would enjoy it. It reinforces our faith that our loved ones are always with us.

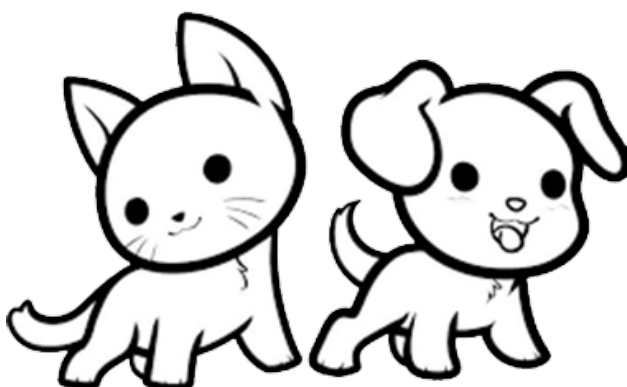


School Mein Thata is about how children feel awkward if their families look different. That never wore trousers and seemed different. At last came grandfather's day and Thatha came to school with the little girl and told a story. No one cared what he wore. The short notes are very interesting but hard to read. In all, a fun book, the language is easy and there is a lot of space to add more to the story.



The books have fine art works of different genres.

Kamala Menon reviewer and teacher, is an ex-Principal of Mirambika Free Progress School.



Vinatha Viswanathan

PEANUT VS THE PIANO

By Yashodhara Lal

Duckbill Books, Hole Books Series, 2018, pp 65, ₹175.00



Peanut goes for piano classes and while she is happy enough when she begins them, she finds them a drudgery now. Her resentment against piano practice and being made to take piano exams make her hatch a plan to put an end to it all. Her teacher is disappointed, but when her mother discovers the devious way in which Peanut has been avoiding piano practice, her classes come to an end. When Peanut's mother decides to sell her piano, Peanut realizes that her piano was not the monster she had made it out to be. The night before her piano is to be sold, Peanut is unable to sleep. That is when she discovers a plot to rob her neighbour. Peanut and the piano are united as heroes, and all ends well.

This was a book that I didn't want to put down till I read it all. The overall feeling was one of an Enid Blyton adventure. The English names of two of the children, Peanut and Pickle, and Peanut learning the Spider's Web on the piano both added to this feeling. Yashodhara Lal is a skilled story teller. And this book has everything a young child will enjoy reading—a good plot, pesky siblings, the tyranny of a parent, friendly dogs, villains and a happy ending. And it all comes together very smoothly. But I was left wondering if the ending of the book, that has Peanut going back to her piano, was a nod to parents.

The illustrations in this book are necessary to the reading of this tale. They are well-placed and make this story more enjoyable to read. However, Shreya Sen has made the characters look rather stereotypical. Peanut has long straight hair, she and her mother seem to be a bit 'better-looking' in comparison to Jain Auntie who is in a negative role. The robbers as well are nasty-looking, unkempt men with raspy voices. This was a bit unfortunate.

Overall, a good read.

Vinatha Viswanathan is an ecologist by training, works as an editor and science communicator at Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal. She enjoys spending time with her cat, her daughter and watching TV serials.



Sajitha Nair

AMRA AND THE WITCH

By Arefa Tehsin. Illustrated by Chetan Sharma

Duckbill Books, 2018, pp. 65, ₹175.00



Inspired by a true-life encounter of Raza H Tehsin, this book is a fun read. The entire book is like a window through which you are watching one day from the lives of Amra and Veerma, two young boys, with their usual mischiefs, worries and innocence. The book doesn't really give us much background about Amra and Veerma's lives and families directly but it is the subtle mention of them and things surrounding them which gives away the background and helps us to imagine the

characters. Illustrations are a big help for this. The emotions of the characters, their features, their personality, everything which is being spoken about or not in the story, is all there in the illustrations.

The fact that it is a true-life encounter can be felt in the way conversations take place between these two friends. My favourite part of the conversation from this book is when Amra asks Veerma why he did not wait for his best friend before running to try and escape from Thakur, but he did not forget his tyre. To this Veerma replies, 'Everyone has a best friend. How many kids have a tyre? And besides, you could run on your own from there. My tyre couldn't.' The reason this line of Veerma's is my favourite is probably because I might have answered the same. It somehow makes Veerma's character more human which is another interesting thing about the book. It is like one of those movies where the side character of the movie seems more interesting than the lead character. Though it might not be the intention of the author, still because of the title of the book, Amra automatically becomes the lead character.

Another unintentional glitch in the book is the frequent breaks in the story. For example, at the beginning itself, the story starts with the witch but suddenly it disappears from the third paragraph and re-appears only at the end of the first chapter. Now, this might have been interesting if there was some connecting thread between the first two paragraphs and the third paragraph. These sudden breaks occur in the story in quite a few places. It is as if the story has an unstable pulse: the lines going up and down and up. It may be good to keep the story unpredictable, but it is very disturbing for binge readers who as soon as they open a book, think of themselves getting into a boat ride flowing with the river of the story. So the unnecessary stops in between the start point and endpoint might not be so pleasant.

The storyline, characters, emotions, 'aha' moments and language are all relatable and a kid might enjoy the book. Especially the climax of the book which I am trying my best not to disclose. If I review this book as an adult, I will rate this as a more than average book. But as a kid, I might just enjoy the whole book and go bonkers laughing at certain moments. This conscious choice has to be made by the readers as soon as they pick up the book.

Sajitha Nair is working in a children's science magazine *Chakmak* published by Eklavya. She is a daydreamer who loves binge-watching and binge-reading.

Lovis Simon

YOU CAN'T FIND ME

By Jemma Jose. Illustrations by Jemma Jose
Pratham Books, 2018, pp. 24, ₹50.00

Which child doesn't love to play? One of the first memories that came to my mind on seeing the title was about my childhood where I used to play hide-and-seek with my siblings. Games are one of the best mediums to connect with children. It is however, unfortunate that as we reach the state of adulthood, we become quite lazy to play as we tend to stereotype the idea of games to be attached

with children most often. *You can't Find Me* by Jemma Jose explores the child's thoughts of being good at hiding



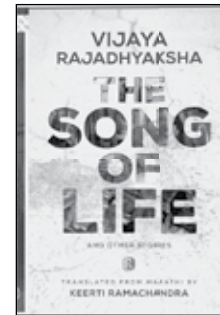
wherein she asks the readers to find her from the places that she visits. Mia, the protagonist, is an enthusiastic girl who claims that she is best at the game of hide-and-seek. The writing in the book is in conversational style which the reader will definitely find amusing. The plot of the story revolves around the protagonist visiting markets. Mia visits various kinds of markets such as the vegetable market, fruit market, flower market, textile market and fish market wherein she asks the readers to spot her. Mia gets annoyed as she gets to know that the reader spots where she is hidden. The highlight of the book is that it is activity based which bridges children's reading ability with visual skills. It asks the reader to spot some of the materials mentioned on the left side of the page. The book has been quite well designed in such a way that the things are relatable for the child and her/his surroundings.

Lovis Simon is with the Eklavya Foundation, Bhopal.



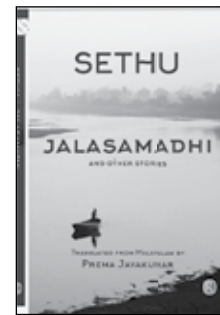
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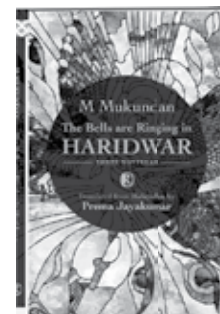
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'A. Sethumadhavan (Sethu) is easily one of the best contemporary story-tellers in Malayalam. At a time when stories have begun to vanish from narratives growing abstract or turning into superficial experiments with local idiom, Sethu continues to engage the readers with tales that often seem like fables, stories that you can hardly put down once you begin to read them... The stories examine the nature of relationships, states of solitude and the mysteries of life and death in vastly different ways as only Sethu can.'

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'Mukundan's *The Bells are Ringing in Haridwar*, when it came out in Malayalam, conversed with a generation that was confused by life and its lack of certainties. This was the period of existentialist modernity. The writer's experiments in that genre of literature impressed the readers by their simplicity and accessibility. Mukundan indeed signalled a new wave in the aesthetics of Malayalam literature. The Mahe stories in this collection are immensely rewarding and bristling with life.' – N.E. SUDHEER

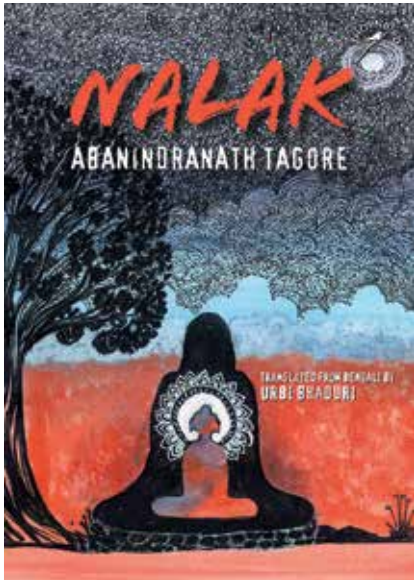
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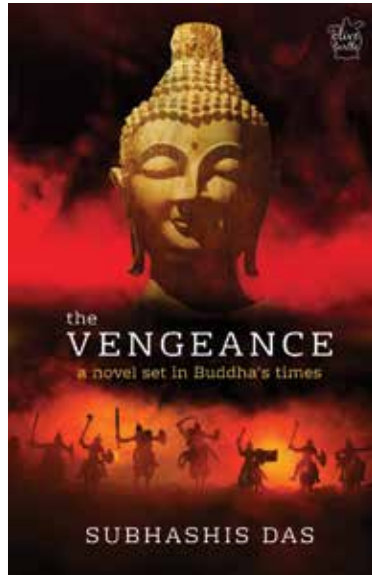
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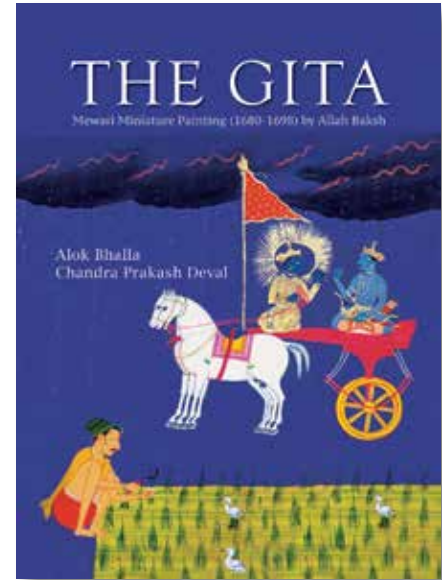
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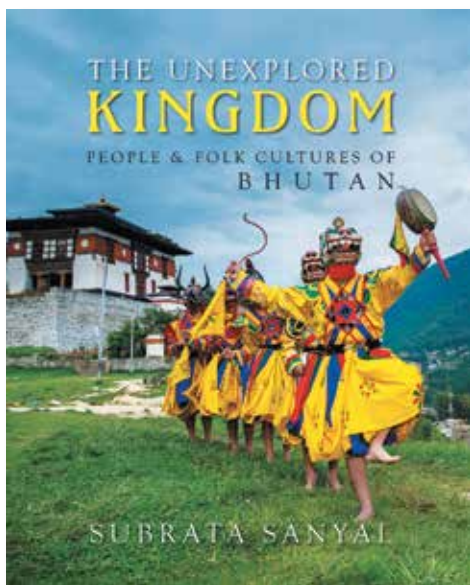
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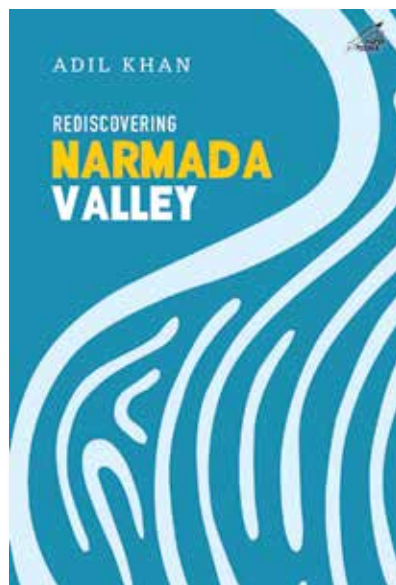
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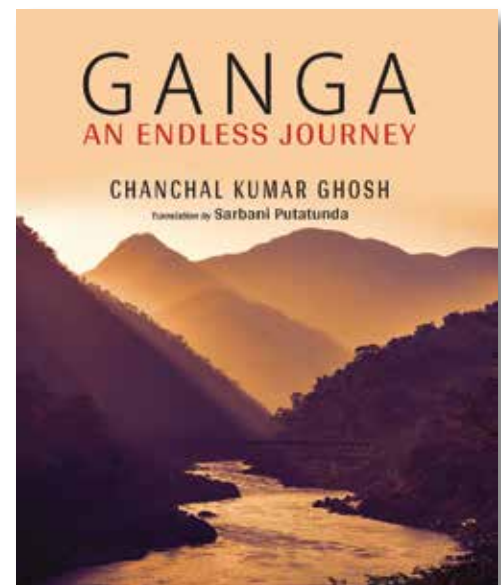
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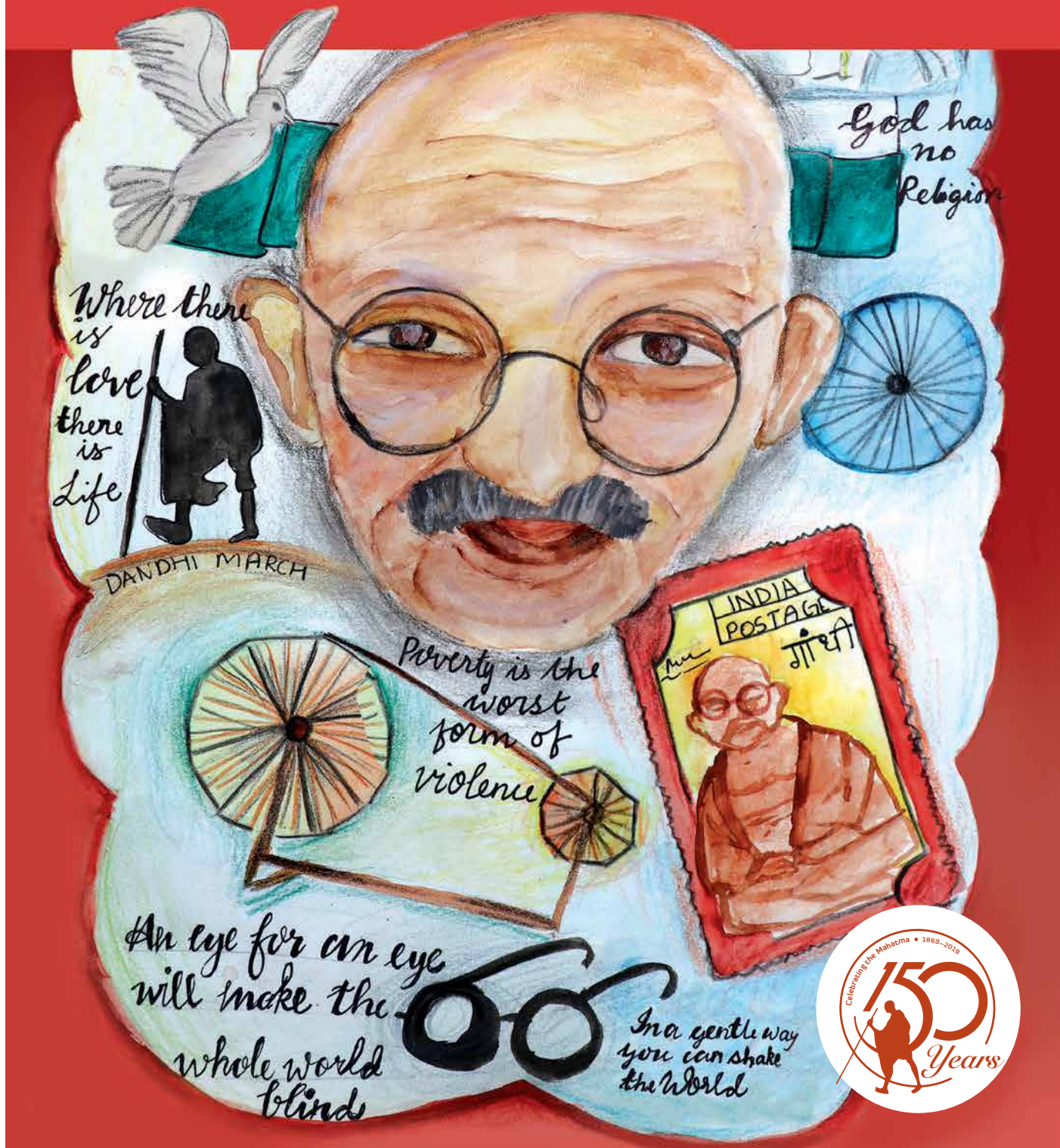
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