

Ruskin Bond Interview

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In spite of having written several adult novels like *A Flight of Pigeons*, *Delhi is not Far* etc, you are primarily depicted by the media and generally known as a children's author. How do you react to that?

I certainly do not mind being depicted as a children's author. Although when I set out to be a writer when I was 17-18, my first novel *The Room on the Roof* wasn't a children's book. It wasn't aimed at any particular age, it was for the general reader, it still is for the general reader, though it is occasionally used in schools.. and then many of my early short stories were written for adult magazines. But I think the fact that some of them were also suitable for younger readers meant that they sometimes went into anthologies of stories that could be used in schools, so my name also became a fad familiar to children and young adults. And it wasn't till I was about forty, so that's about 20 years after I set out as a writer, that I actually sat down to write stories directed at children or meant for children, and that started actually with perhaps the first was a little book called *Angry River* which I had originally written as a story for the general reader, again as a short novel and submitted it to a pub in England and they felt that it was too short for a adult novel and too for a children's book but suggested that if I adapted it or worked out it again they would publish it as a children's novel which is what happened. And then after that I wrote more of something that was not specifically for kids but carried on writing essays and stories and other books. So I am not exclusively a children's writer at all, but I don't mind being labeled as one. And in fact I would think my books for children were probably more successful than the others, you know, commercially.

The Himalayas, and environment, of course, have played a huge role in your writings.. the *Cherry Plant*, the dam being built that destroys the livelihood of people living there, so have you ever put in any conscious effort to promote what is nowadays known as 'Environmentalism'?

I think it happened naturally, you see, when I came to live in the hills in about 1964. Before that I was in Delhi, I was in London, so I had only sort of become closer to nature, nature had always played some sort of role, but it was only when I came to live up here in the mountains that nature began to play a greater part in my stories and writing. To begin with, I wasn't environmentally conscious, in those days, I don't think the very word existed, so it was just it had the touches the way I felt and thought, and now of course now there are so many people who are at least conscious of the environment, what's going wrong with it and what should be right with it. So if I helped in a small way, that fine. So I didn't really set out consciously to (promote environmentalism) though I would certainly emphasize the destruction of forests and diminution of wildlife.

Do you think children's literature can play a role in addressing issues like global warming and even terrorism, and do you also think there might be themes that children's writers should deliberately avoid and not bring it to the children?

Not really, but I suppose its alright to write stories that would highlight issues like global warming, and environmentalism as long as they are not too boring and preachy because you have after all got to engage the attention of the young reader so you do not want the reader to feel that this is a lesson or this is something that It should be done in a subtle manner. And as for dos and don't in children's writing, I suppose you.. the thing is children now also mature very quickly and they jump very quickly from children's literature to adult literature, so did I as a child, and that applies to anyone who reads a lot..

And lots of them actually read them side by side..

That's true and that's fine. But I guess if you are writing a story actually meant for children which might be used in the classroom or which parents might read to their children, you don't have to details in sexual matters and may be extreme violence, other than that I don't think there is much that you should keep away from them, since they are going to get to it anyway.

There is something that I have always enjoyed in your writing as a reader, and that is the use of the supernatural and fantasy in your writings.. I ask this because there is a lobby of educationists who maintain that there should be nothing 'irrational' or 'supra-real' in what a child's mind is exposed to.

Yeah. I see the point too. I have to confess that I just write the odd ghost story for fun, because as a boy I enjoyed reading ghost stories the classics by Emma James and Black Duncan and Black And so many others and still do. And children enjoy them. Kids often will pick a collection of ghosts and supernatural over something else. I think they enjoy because it is a sort of safe fear, a feeling of fear of scariness also knowing that you are not personally threatened. One day, only recently, I met this little girl from school about 10 or 12, she said 'Sir I like your ghost stories, but can't you make them more scary? She said 'They are not frightening enough'. So yes, they are too friendly actually, when you see some of the horror films that come on television, my ghost stories are not at all scary. So I told her 'I try'. So I guess even if they are not taught in school, as recreation there is no harm in giving them to kids. I suppose in a way, they are against the laws of nature.. May be scientifically they are incorrect.

But you do see a place for fantasy in the shaping of the child's mind?

Yeah, it stimulates the imagination and fantasy is very popular now, I am not so good at fantasy, but supernatural, in a way, yes. Also when I run out of people then I fall back on the ghost stories, coz when if I run out of anything, you can always conjure up a ghost.

Relating to stories with happy endings and sad endings for children, a friend of mine told me a story the other day where he went and asked this little girl if she liked stories with happy endings or sad ones, and this little girl replied: "How do I know? I have never come across a story that has a sad ending!"

I guess, yes, but looking back at the classics which were again read by children, though they weren't written for children, they had if not a sad ending but sad or parts in the book, like Little Nell dying in the old curiosity shop, and also say characters that were appealing or loved by the reader would sometimes perish the cause would be.. In Dickens very often, children would die. And in say in Little Women a

family member or an important character would die. Although perhaps at the end you had a happy ending, but there was.. the author also made you cry.

And in several of Andersen's fairy tales and Oscar Wilde..

Yes, yes, so you did have sad stories. And I don't think children object to stories with sad endings.

In Alice in the Wonderland, Alice says "What's good of a story book without pictures?" So where do you see the place of illustration in children's fiction.

Well, very important for younger children just beginning to read. It helps them to open the book look at the pictures and then may be begin to connect the two and then read the stories. You see as with your publications, the books for very young children there are lots of pictures the pictures are all important, and as you get older, drawings are fewer. And even if I am writing a book for adults and if there is a gifted artist who can do a few line drawings and sketches, I would welcome that. I remember when the Room on the Room was published as a book, there were no illustrations. But when it was serialized in the Illustrated Weekly of India of that time, 1956-57, it had lot of illustrations by Mario, their staff artist at that time, and they were very appealing, and I wish when the book was reprinted later on, they could have used some of those. Only might have given the impression that is a children's book due to the customs that we follow. But again, they should be good. Your book can be spoilt if the illustrations are bad. I remember, once a book of mine was illustrated by a person who I think was just beginning to learn to draw, and right on the cover page there was this boy with two left feet! So these kind of things should be avoided. And once again, in another book, I had characters from the 1850s who had been sketched by the illustrator in jeans and T-shirts.

So I guess it would be best to have illustrators who actually go through the stuff and take an interest in what they are illustrating.

Yeah, very much. Yes.

Do you have an age in mind when you are writing a story? And also a story often acquires multiple meanings when a reader goes through it at different times in his/her life. Do you ever try to infuse multiple layers of meanings into a story consciously?

No. When I write I start with an idea and or something that interests me or I want to talk about. It is the reader who generally decides who the book is for. When I started writing I thought I was writing for adults and young adults, but often children found them interesting too. Frankly, I do not quite support the idea of labeling books as suitable for specific age groups.

And regarding layers of meaning, I don't think many authors think of these things in the process of writing. In the beginning it simply flows. It is only those authors who want to make their writing deliberately difficult in order to be taken seriously, who think of these things even when they write. But looking for layers of meaning is something that the critics do..

And students of literature as well..

Yeah, possibly. But I feel reading should primarily be for enjoyment; the rest can come later.

How do you react to your stories being included in the school curriculum?

I usually apologise to children who come up to me and tell me that they have read my stories in school. (laughs). And I try to explain that I had nothing to do with it! But it has been good for me, you know. Children get familiar with my name and if they like my writings. And then they often buy my books! (laughs)

How would you react to the Kipling – Ruskin Bond connection, if someone wants to put it like that.

Actually Kipling was an inspiration, but there were several others like Bates, Maugham, Barrie to name a few, who actually made me want to write. Kipling of course has always been an inspiration. And I always felt bad about the way in which he has been brushed aside as ‘an empire builder’ or at the most been savagely criticized and decried, at least in the 50s and 60s. So I actually wanted to defend him and present him also as an author first and a man who loved India more than many others. I actually have this habit of digging up obscure authors and bring them back into public memory.

How would you react to blockbusters in the book world which make their authors instant millionaires? Say the Harry Potter phenomenon.

I certainly have no problems with it. On the whole I think it has done a lot of good. Something like Harry Potter has brought children who were more interested in TV and computer games back to the book. One day at a local book shop, I saw this little boy who wanted a Harry Potter! He was hardly 3 and surely could not read and his parents tried to reason that with him. But the kid was adamant. Finally the poor parents had to buy him the book. So books like Harry Potter has surely brought about some change in the reading habit of many children..

And these kids will hopefully look forward to more books of this kind now the Harry Potter series is over. Thus perhaps becoming readers for life..

Yes..yes, in a way, of course. And even though there are so many people today lamenting that children don't read and that there are too many distractions like TV, Computer games..

The Internet..

Yes, the internet.. I don't think many people even during the times when I was in school, were actually avid readers. There would usually be just two or three of us who enjoyed reading, even though there weren't many distractions.. just the radio, and even that was not too clear and developed as it is today. So the entire generation of kids during our times did not sit and read books!

So you mean this fuss about ‘children not reading’ has more to do with the current idea that children should read and learn as much as possible.. And it has more to do with the current competitive market, and the anxiety of parents that their kids will be left behind in the rat race, more than anything else?

Yes.. Precisely. (laughs)

What advice do you have for budding authors?

Yes, I keep meeting several children who say they want to be 'great authors'. I ask them to start writing about the things that they see around themselves and not worry if they come up with 'great writings'. I myself never set out to be a great writer and I am sure I am not one. I started writing because I wanted to follow the line of authors like Bates, Maugham, Barry... who excited me. I wanted to tell stories and I am excited about writing still. And about writing, you need to make a beginning and stick to it. It can be very trying sometimes and requires lots of patience. Rejections can be quite painful but they are a part of getting published as a writer one day. So do not lose heart. And if you plan to become a writer do not to pay to get published. It has been one principle of my writing life and I have always stuck to it, that is, whenever I have written a book, even when I was 17 years old, I have expected something in return. Otherwise you end up with books that nobody wants to read and you go about trying to force them on friends and acquaintances.