



## The Letterpress Project

### Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An interview with Sita Brahmachari

#### **Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?**

I was late to learn to read. I had a wild imagination as a child, like my Mira character in 'Artichoke Hearts' and 'Jasmine Skies' I lived vividly in an imaginary world, painting and drawing narratives from dreams and inspirational landscapes.

My father used to read illustrated stories from a children's adaptation of 'The Ramayana.' As he read the stories I would get lost in the wild illustrations of gods and goddesses riding chariots, with Hanuman forming his monkey army to build his bridge to Sri Lanka. It completely captured my imagination.

One of the first books I read myself and fell in love with was the novella 'The Little Prince' by Antoine de St- Exupery. I especially responded to the voice and vision of the little prince and how the watercolour illustrations revealed so perfectly his way of seeing the world. I think I recognised in it a validation of the way children see the world with fresh, inquiring and sensitive eyes. The Little Prince was such a small figure in a huge world of potential, with a sense of real wonder at the world. He feels all the strong emotions of loneliness, love and friendship that people of all ages feel.

I also remember being given a poetry anthology by my uncle Nirmal Brahmachari, himself a poet, called 'For Your Delight'. I treasured this little collection and read the poems over and over. It began a life-long love of poetry.

#### **Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?**

I was writing stories before I became a fluent reader. I wrote travel journals and diaries. I liked to capture new experiences in words and write down dreams and flights of the imagination. However it never occurred to me that these were processes that authors used, or that one day I could become an author myself. Inspirational teachers feature in many of my stories and I can think of several

teachers who encouraged me at school to join the dots and help me to understand that what I was engaged in was writing stories like the ones found in libraries. When 'Artichoke Hearts' was published one such teacher came to an event and reminded me that she had predicted I would become a writer one day.

Beyond the specific encouragement of individual mentors, I think growing up in a diverse family, sharing and negotiating many cultures and histories as so many of us do, has always been a part of my life and is therefore always a presence in my novels. The diverse landscapes I have lived in or visited as a child from The Lake District to Kolkata, the fissures, mysteries and wonder at different ways of living, belief, culture and being are still what inspire me today.

### **Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?**

One which first of all draws and invites you in, even if you are at first unsure of why you connect to it. Then once inside a narrative, one which provides the space for you to inhabit the story. I love stories written in a way that make me see words anew. For me a successful book is one when you leave the story you carry something of its essence with you so that you feel that it has added to your experience of life. If I laugh or cry or feel deep emotion and empathy with characters I never thought I would feel for, then I think the book's done its thing!

### **Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?**

I aspire to write some of the stories I think I might have liked to have read as a child. I hope that my books could resonate with people of all generations as my stories are inhabited by a cross generational cast of characters and landscapes. I am often told by adults as well as children that they have read and enjoyed my stories. When I write I often picture different kinds of families and how my stories would resonate with them. The tradition of children's books resonating in different ways to different readerships appeals to me. A book can change and grow with the age of its reader. My reading of the same books I read when I was fifteen seem to me now to be wholly different stories to the ones I thought they were.

When I write I often picture the young people I visit in schools or communities, where I also research. I want young people to have stories that connect to our hugely diverse society and connected globe and I think that offering these narratives can have a deep rooted impact on a child's sense of their place in the world... the possibilities their lives may bring. Many of my stories do feature young people in schools and colleges because the school community provides a fascinating microcosm of a society and its potential future.

### **Q5. What future does the book have?**

I think the book as an object with a cover, pages and spine will always be with us. There are certain kinds of narratives that may be better told on screens such as stories that contain games and also interactive stories, but I don't think they replace a book, they're simply different ways of telling

narratives. Of course there's the convenience of reading books on a screen when you're away and you don't want to carry a lot of books, but generally reading from a screen is not for me, even if the screen is, increasingly helpfully, back lit! I like to go into a bookshop and scan the shelves.

The following is heresy to book collectors... skip this bit of the interview! I'm a messy reader. I mark up passages that I love or phrases that resonate, I turn the edges of pages, sometimes my finger prints and tea stains find their way onto a page! Usually, if I lose my place in a book I enjoy the process of scanning through and somehow am satisfied by the bit of my brain that locates a visual memory of where I left off reading. I like old books and I love to find scribbling in margins or coffee stains from an unknown reader. I love illustrated books and am particularly pleased to see that illustrations are appearing more in young adult fiction. Every time a book is read, handed on or kept and treasured it creates a new story about its relationship to its readers. Apart from all that people are looking for ways to spend less time on screens and that in itself will mean that the book is the natural non screen time companion of the future!

**Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?**

I think I'm more of a collector of the memory of reading a book. I connect a book with what was going on at the time of reading it. It's a bit like you connect a piece of music to a person or a special day... books are like that for me. I don't have a burning passion to 'own' a particular book. I love the precious, and to many people of our world, revolutionary idea of public libraries owning books and making them accessible and available to everybody. It troubles me that this precious treasure is being threatened by cuts up and down this country. In essence it means that a book written for every child may never be held and read by a child who cannot afford to buy it.

I am also a big sharer of books and will annoy people by hassling them to read something I have so enjoyed. When you lend books you have to be prepared not to get them back and some of the books I've loved reading have not returned, but I'm assuming that's because they were really loved by the next person but... whoever's still got my copy of 'The Buried Giant' – please give it back!