



An Interview With Chitra Soundar

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

I started out listening to stories and repeating them I think. I think I've always read in both English and my mother-tongue Tamil as young as five or six. I was immersed in the stories from the folklore of India and the Indian epics told in comic book form by Amar Chitra Katha. I think the Magic Faraway Tree made me invent new stories to tell.

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

I actually started as a poet when I was 13 or 14. I wrote in my mother-tongue and then in English inspired by a famous poet from my city. Then I moved on to essays – I was much too opinionated even then and I even won a state level prize during my university days. Stories came much later first as adult short stories. But what I discovered was writing children's stories with uninhibited imagination gave me more joy. And it was more fun because I could read children's books all day long. What better way to spend time?

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

When I read a book and go Wow! It's usually because that book reads amazingly simple. No flowery words, yet deeper meaning. Secondly the simple text and the storyline hides layers you can keep finding in every reading. Thirdly, it makes you feel and think – it inspires empathy and a different viewpoint. If by doing that, they are also funny, that's a bonus.

Some of my favourites include This is not my Hat by Jon Klassen, Shh! We have a plan by Chris Haughton, Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch, Atinuke's Anna Hibiscus series.

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

Mostly I write for myself as a child. My inner self is a 7-year old girl, a naughty, prankster with limitless imagination. She is also serious and thoughtful too. And I remember her well. I also write the story for the storyteller in me – I started telling stories when I was six or so and the story I'm writing has to be a story she'd want to tell.

More recently I also think about my nephews and if they would like to read this book.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I've tried this out with my nephews. The electronic books especially for children might be fun to click for a while. But the interest wanes – the second or third read is not as much fun. The picture book on the other hand is a treasure trove. The turning of the physical page, the reading together, the discovery of an illustrator's joke inside the pages – that will be always from a physical book.

As an adult, I think there is a place for both. I have some books that I've bought in both print and electronic form and I'd like that. When I order an e-book I'd like them to give me the print book as well (yes, of course, for a bit more). E-books are great for holidays and travel. They are great for crime fiction that I would read only once.

I like stories in all forms – books, e-books, movies, advertisements, television drama, audio – there is a place for all kinds of storytelling. I listened to a podcast on Radio 4 with Arthur C Clarke, my favourite sci-fi writer. And I agree with what he said – digital encyclopaedias and big reference books are much more useful in digital form with live content than fiction and poetry.

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

Oh, my flat is overflowing with books. There is no way to single out a book and say this is my favourite. I've special ones that are signed by the authors or illustrators and many of them are my friends. Although I buy quite a lot of new books, I scour second-hand bookshops for a gem.

I did a scan of my bookshelf – there is no way I can single out a book like that. But the one I would mention is Kaziranga Trails by Arup Kumar Dutta – it was a book from my childhood that I tracked down and found in India and re-read it again and believe it or not, it stood the test of time.