



The Letterpress Project

An Interview With Ashok Banker

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

I was a precocious reader from a very early age. There were always plenty of books around as everyone in my family liked to read. Somewhere around the age of 4 or 5 I discovered a set of old encyclopaedias lying in a back room and began poring over the pictures. I was fascinated by the sections on mythology - Greek, Roman, Egyptian, with no Indian or Asian mythology that I recall - and though I couldn't read more than a few words, I persevered. I began reading full sentences about a year or so later and tore through those mythology sections, understanding some though not all of it. I was in love! The vivid images - mostly from classic paintings - attracted me as well, and sparked my imagination. A couple of years later, I would accompany my grandfather on his evening walk around the neighbourhood and he used to end up on the porch of an old bookstore which sold mostly school and college textbooks. The owner was a kindly old man who let me browse around in the back of the store where I discovered entire shelves and boxes full of old books, some published as early as the 1700s and most from the 1800s. The ones with biscuit paper all but started to crumble in my hands and I learned to be very careful. There were lovely woodcuts and old-style illustrations in them. These were all kinds of books, from classic novels to poetry to children's books. I remember an old hardcover edition of *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley with beautiful color illustrations. I think I owned that around the age of 6 or 7 and loved it to bits (not literally). There were Edgar Allan Poe stories and H.G. Wells novels, and I was probably far too young for them all, but I tried to read them anyway. In Bombay, like most of India, there were (and are) no public libraries to speak of, and almost no bookstores back then (there are a few now, but nowhere near a tenth as much as in any major US or UK city). The only way to get a lot of books to read for a

voracious reader like myself was to borrow them for a small fee from a circulating library of which there were (and still are) several. I began reading my way through entire children's book series, all the usual like Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, 3 Investigators, and comics of course. A ton of comics because I loved the form. Books were and are a major part of my childhood and life.

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

I wanted to do to other people what the stories in books did to me: make me imagine, wonder, be awed, surprised, thrilled, scared, happy, excited. I began trying to write my own stories and poems from around the age of 7 or 8 and by the time I was 9 I was telling everyone that I meant to become an author when I grew up. I heard from an old neighbour who lived next door back then and she said she remembers that every time she would come over to our house, she would find me sitting at the table and writing stories in my notebooks. So I guess I was pretty much on the path from early on!

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

It should make you feel something real, a true emotional response. If it can do that while achieving aesthetic and technical elegance, so much the better. But it must make you feel first. That's the main thing that counts.

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

Yes. I write across several genres - crime, thrillers, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, horror, romance, mythology, adventure, children's books - and each story is told for a very specific readership in a very specific style and vocabulary. It's not a single person or persons, just a regular joe or little jane who feels the same emotional responses as I do for the most part but isn't expecting this particular twist or turn in the story I'm telling. That little frisson of surprise is important and you have to read widely in the category and genre to know what's been done, what works, and so on. It's important to me to add something to the world of books that didn't exist before, at least not quite in that particular form. It has to be a story that only I could write at that particular time in that particular way and to know that I have to read almost everything possible that my ideal reader would or could be reading. A major part of my day is spent reading books, browsing books, or browsing online to find new books (or new old books) in the specific genres and categories I'm currently writing in. American public libraries are such a boon in this regard! I can go through several

hundred books a month, reading several dozen of them cover to cover and browsing through the rest, without paying a dime. It's one of the reasons I moved to the USA.

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

I think the electronic book has already seen its peak and fallen off the perch. The last few years, ebook sales have been dropping, while print books continue to sell very strongly, with certain categories growing robustly. Audiobooks are big and will be for the years to come, with more young readers preferring to consume their books in audio download form while on the move. Hardcover remains the steadiest selling, although cheap paperbacks are on the decline. I think there will always be new ways to consume books, but print books will always be around. Quite simply, it's the most efficient and pleasing delivery system for book-length text ever invented. And it's the most effective way to absorb stories and information, as has been proven time and time again by thousands of studies. Hardcover books are going to be around for a very long time, and so are books.

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

I love books and always keep a small library (a couple hundred books) of favorite titles I like to have around and reread in bits every now and then, but on the whole, no, I don't collect books. Nor is there any one book I would love to own. I used to collect books once upon a time but after crossing several thousand books, it became simply impossible to find anything I wanted at any given time. I do hope someday to have an old-fashioned library, the kind with wood panelling, a spiral staircase and wall to wall bookshelves all the way up to the ceiling, filled with fine leatherbound (or faux leatherbound, which looks just as good and is more humane) texts. There are companies that bind even paperbacks beautifully to custom order and I would simply have my own editions made for books that don't come in fine editions. And for those that do come in collector's editions - like the portfolio sized graphic novel collections or classic antique books - I would seek them out from around the world and possess them. But that's more of a fantasy for the day I become fabulously rich from royalties and movie rights! Until then, I am happy wandering in libraries and knowing that I can borrow and read ALL those books over time. Even the richest collector on Earth can't own THAT many books, can they? Having access to them is just as good. Public libraries are a boon and a blessing, and essential for the mental wellbeing and growth of any child.