



The Letterpress Project

An Interview With Sandhya Prabhat

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

I remember books from my very early childhood. My earliest memories are being read to, before I began reading them myself. On the day my younger sister was born, when I was about 5, my father got me a giant copy of Enid Blyton's 'Secret Seven'. He would then read to me from it. Their adventures were endlessly fascinating, and I learnt new words like 'indignant' and 'exciting'! This book had no pictures but the words fuelled my imagination.

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

I always loved to draw from a very young age. I also loved to read. After high school, I pursued my Bachelors' Degree in Literature and thoroughly loved my classes. While that was so, I kept drawing everyday, all the time. My parents who observed this felt I might be inclined to study filmmaking or animation, areas that would put together my interest in storytelling and my desire to draw, and helped me figure out my next steps. I then completed my Masters' Degree in Animation from NYU Tisch School of the Arts that had a campus in Singapore at the time. Since then, I've been working independently as an illustrator/ animator for around eight years now. It's exactly what I've wanted to do, looks like, and it's exactly what I'd like to do for the rest of my life.

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

I'm an avid reader and collector of children's books, among many other kinds of books. I cannot resist a good picture book. It keeps any child-like curiosity I have left, alive. I love re-reading my picture books and seeing how image and words work hand-in-hand. As an illustrator I'm constantly studying how a story can be told variously by changing composition, blank space, layout of a page, colours, light and shadow, detail or lack of it, character and shape design. A successful book for a reader, is one where the reader gets so instantly and deeply immersed in the story, from page 1, and seamlessly travels page to page, without noticing all the technical aspects that I described previously. This is the same, for a movie too. If the viewer were to notice a CGI cape of a superhero and not be enthralled by the scene of the superhero flying through the sky, then the CGI is taking more attention than the story and the willing suspension of the viewer is destroyed. I try to keep this in mind, while creating. I create very consciously, applying many technical rules, and breaking many. However, once the pages are created, I try to read and enjoy the book as a reader would.

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

Broadly, yes. In general, I also try to make it appealing to anyone that might experience the image.

A child audience is very honest and will not pretend to be pleased if it is not. Therefore, for children's content, I try to look at the page as a child would. This means sometimes brutally reworking sections, and removing or redesigning pages.

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

I certainly hope not : children's books, at least. I say this since children from a very young age, also enjoy touch and texture. Holding a book and turning pages is as exciting as seeing the pages. Some books go even further and employ textures, pop-ups and other physical devices to make the story engaging.

As an adult who reads a lot, electronic books don't feel the same way as reading a physical book. My physical books come with memories of where and why I purchased them, who gifted them to me and whether they were hand-me-downs. They might have a note or two on their pages. They might have gotten brown with

age. Perhaps they belonged to my family for generations. They smell bookish. The pages feel crisp and new or old and used. And these things add to the memory of my experience of reading the book.

For instance, when I think back about reading 'Frankenstein' one summer afternoon, the weight of the bound white book and the smoothness of its shiny cover come back to me. The book was so bound that it would not keep open unless held open forcibly. I remember how I sat on a swing and spun myself slightly dizzy, while reading, and yet could not stop to get up since I was turning pages so fast, so engrossed. I read the book in one very long sitting, and got up from the swing only when I was done, with the weight of the closed book on my hands and the satisfaction of having completed a mind-blowing story. Would an electronic book add this much memory? Probably not. But would the reader lose much by not having such memories? Maybe not. I'm not sure.

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

I am a book collector and I'd like to own several hundred books. I'm constantly drooling at many. I'm not reading as much as I used to, a few years ago, and this makes me very sad. I hope to declutter my life a little more, and save a lot of time and money to spend on and with books.