

“I have always been fascinated by myth, folklore, fairy tales and legends”-

Gita Ralleigh on her debut children novel

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Gita Ralleigh is a writer, poet and doctor. She has published short stories, winning the Wasafiri prize for fiction in 2013, as well as two poetry books for adults, “Siren” and “A Terrible Thing”. “The Destiny of Minou Moonshine” is her debut children’s novel. Currently, she lives in London with her two children and teaches creative writing to undergraduates at Imperial College.

In an interview with Asian Voice, Gita talks about her debut children novel, her South Asian heritage, and the art of writing. **AV: Can you tell us a bit about your inspiration for writing children’s books and what motivated you to pursue this genre?**

I began writing books for children after I became a mother myself and started to buy books for my own children. When I was a child growing up in the UK, I never expected to see someone of my own background in a story and when I searched for contemporary books, the dearth became quite obvious. This has improved recently but South Asian characters are still the most under-represented in children’s books in the UK (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, Reflecting Realities 2022). I also found the books that were being published with South Asian characters didn’t provide what I’d yearned for as a young reader: fantasy stories that sweep you into another world.

AV: How did you address sensitive and complex topic like colonialism in your book?

I think children are capable of far more than adults give them credit for. Early feedback for *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine* suggested I alter the background of a colonial society in case children didn’t understand it. But those readers weren’t thinking of families like my own, families who know about colonialism because it forms part of their own history. I’m pleased that books on similar themes like Sathnam Sanghera’s *Stolen History* and Nazneen Ahmed Pathak’s *City of Stolen Magic* are being published now. India was known as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the British Empire and our shared history extends over centuries. To write historical fantasy and leave colonialism out altogether doesn’t make sense. That said an important principle when writing for younger children is to keep hope alive, which is where my imagination as a writer comes in.

AV: What challenges have you encountered while writing for children, and how do you overcome them?

For younger readers a pacy plot, engaging characters and simpler language are key. Although I have written fiction and poetry on similar themes for adults, I have always been fascinated by myth, folklore, fairy tales and legends, all of which led me naturally towards writing for children. The story I am trying to tell, the age of the main character and the thematic elements I want to include all help me decide who the reader is, and whether it’s best written for adults or children.

AV: As an author with a South Asian background, how has your cultural heritage influenced your storytelling?

South Asia is a huge region of the world with a rich culture, diverse mythology and folklore and an incredible literary inheri-

tance including classical epics to Booker prize winners. Although I was born in London, we often visited India and still do as a family, so it’s always been a source of inspiration. I also studied Indian classical dance (Kathak) as a child and teenager, a dance form where the art of storytelling is very important. I think I would be a poorer writer if I didn’t have this wonderful heritage to draw upon. Although *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine* is classified as fantasy, it has much in common with magic realism. The book’s magical elements are rooted in the myths and culture of Indica, the alternative colonial India of my story world, and are interwoven with its landscape and wildlife.

AV: Children of the South Asian diaspora often seek books that reflect their dual cultural identities. How do you cater to this audience and help them connect with their heritage?

I think historical fantasy such as *The Destiny of Minou Moonshine* allows children with dual cultural identities to see themselves in history, along with providing a fast-paced adventure that children from any background will enjoy. One line people often quote from the book is, “Stories matter... a land that loses its stories loses its way.” Recovering lost stories helps to guide my young hero Minou Moonshine towards her destiny. For any child to fully realise who they are and what their potential might be, they need to understand where they come from.

AV: Have written multiple formats like poems and fiction, how is the writing process different?

I love writing both poetry and fiction, but these are very different arts. Poems tend to begin as the flash of an image, idea or a phrase, which I will often make note of and then return to later and expand on. Poetry tends to be a quieter, more reflective process. For me, fiction develops from a character and their situation. What does the hero of my story need and/or want most in the world? How are they going to achieve it and what obstacles – both internal and external – stand in their way? Discipline is crucial for any form of writing, for fiction I will set myself a daily word count goal, for poetry, I find courses and workshops are helpful in shaping those early flashes of inspirations into the form of a finished poem.

AV: With technology becoming more prevalent, how do you see the role of children’s books evolving in the digital age?

It’s so interesting that many children and teenagers – including my own – haven’t taken to e-readers or audio books in a way that most adults have. They seem to enjoy the tactile quality of a physical book and the escape it gives them from screens. Exploring narratives for other media such as virtual reality, video games or screenplays would be fascinating – though I haven’t yet attempted these genres, I’d love to try them out in future.

AV: Do you plan on writing more children books?

I am currently writing another children’s book for the same age group (9-12) set in the Indica, but with a different lead character – a boy this time. If all goes according to plan, it should be coming out next year. It’s a fantasy adventure with an island setting, which is something I’ve always wanted to explore. After that, I hope to return to poetry and also write more books for young readers.

