

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Since 2010

Vol. 5, Issue-I

February 2014

The Criterion



5th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

Bi-monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

It's a *SMALL*'s World: Children's Fiction in English

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Their world is huge, luckily sans boundaries, bright, intriguing and spontaneous, allowing absurdities of all kinds to exist. Their horizons are fleeting, giving space to dragons, fairies, elves, wizards, goblins and unicorns, to rabbits that talk and broomsticks that fly. Their sense of adventurism make them scale mountains, drink potions that do wonders and imagine frogs that turn into princes. Their world is the world of pure innocent fun. And their literature is as a colour-riot as their world. Perceived as adults in the making, their books deal also with the issues of environment conservation, child labour, differently-abled and relationships – to name a few.

Children's literature in India is a subaltern field, only now beginning to attract its long overdue attention. While literature in English for adults attained an enviable position with the likes of Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya etc winning awards, critical acclaim and giving structure to the literature from the subcontinent, children who had an interest in reading books beyond their prescribed syllabus for decades took doses of Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew, Mills and Boons i.e all work of foreign writers and the translations of *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales* and *Amar Chitra Kathaein* from Indians, leaving much to be desired in the field of children's literature in English in the country. The only significant name and very significant for that matter is of Ruskin bond who has been prolifically and tirelessly writing delightful short stories for children.

For a long time, children books by Indian writers confined themselves to the genres of mystery and adventure, with some historical fiction, school stories and a few biographies in the field of non-fiction. Writers like Arup Kumar Dutta wrote path-breaking books like his environmental mystery *The Kaziranga Trail* (published in 1978) that won first prize in the Children's Book Trust competition for children's writers. Nilima Sinha's *Chandipur Jewels* (1979) and its sequels, also awarded by Children's Book Trust, still mesmerize children. Dutta's work has been translated into Japanese among other languages. Deepak Dalal continue to enthrall the young with titles like *Ranthambore Adventure* and others in the series set in Ladakh and the Andamans. Shashi Deshpande's detective book *3 Novels: A Summer Adventure, The Hidden Treasure and The Only Witness*, Rohini Chowdhury's jungle adventure *White Tiger*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's historical adventure *Victory Song* are among the other titles that have occupied a space in the bookshelves.

The past few years, however, have seen the germination of writers who have started to write enthusiastically for the young readers, raising hope that the genre will soon acquire a promising shape. The success of children's literature festivals has given the much needed boost, diverting the little minds and eyes from the gizmos to the world of words. With the publishers revamping their establishments to form a separate team dedicated to producing substantial reading material with rich illustrations for this unique field, the children today are having a huge variety of books to choose from. Keeping in tune with the variety that marks the genre, the

writers of these books are almost as professionally diverse – surgeons, journalists, biologists, conservationists and engineers.

Today from fantasy to didactic, sensitive to humourous, pure non-sensical fun to myths, folklores and fables – children’s literature has it all. While there is almost always an element of non-sensical fun, the writers are taking care to weave the stories with folklores, history, environmental conservation and humanity and to make the stories distinctly Indian in their spirit. Deepa Balsawar’s *The Lonely King and Queen* simplifies the issue of adoption for the kids and makes it palatable for the young crop. Bindu Bhaskar Balaji’s *My vote counts* introduces world’s largest democracy to kids in lucid English. Mahashweta Devi’s *The why-why girl* is a tale about a curious tribal girl. Mariam Karim Ahlawat’s *Putul and the Dolphins* and *The King and the Kiang* are about the relationship that is shared by men and nature.

Anushka Ravishankar, Paro Anand, T.V Padma, Ramendra Kumar, Suniti Namjoshi and Ranjit Lal are the most prominent names in the field. Anushka who is primarily a writer of non-sensical fiction which is the most preferred genre by the kids switched on a creative spark in reinventing the old stories in *The Story Teller: Tales from the Arabian Nights* while still staying true to the original because as she says they have been “told, retold, televised and made into films” (Vijaykumar). Her *Excuse me, is this India?* introduces the country to the kids who still have to explore much about it through the story of a Western child’s dream about going to India as a blue mouse and wandering through the hustle, confusion, and beauty of urban and rural India, gathering bits of tantalizing philosophical nonsense in its quest to find out exactly where it is. In *Coat Tales* she has picked up her stories from the treasure of Indian folklore and in *Tiger on a Tree*, her tiger frightened by the cry of a small animal, climbs up the tree. The cultural appeal of her books worldwide is demonstrated by the twelve awards they have won worldwide. *Today Is My Day* is a wish-fulfillment day for Tala, a little girl when her imagination takes a big leap and transforms her family and school authority figures, into cows, statues, or anthropomorphic multiplication sign much to her amusement.

Paro Anand is the author of eighteen books for children and young adults. She had been the head of the National Centre for Children’s Literature, India and has been awarded by President Kalam and the Russian Centre for Science and Culture for her contribution to Children’s Literature. Paro has worked with children in difficult circumstances including the orphans of Kashmir and children of poachers in Madhya Pradesh. Her book *No Guns At My Son’s Funeral* took birth out of her own experience when as a resource person with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, she had a chance to work with children impacted by terrorist and separatist violence in Kashmir. The book was nominated onto the IBBY Honor List, 2006, as the best book for young people from India and earned her the distinction of being “a woman who has sought to heal with theatre in Kashmir, and take the message across to many more with her written words” (Subramaniam). It is currently being translated into Spanish and German and talks are on for basing a film on the book. The book is about a young boy, seduced into becoming a terrorist. A follow up novel, *Weed* is the story of the son of a terrorist and his struggle to find an alternate life to sustain himself and his family.

TV Padma’s *Mathematwist* is a collection of stories from different countries in which each story tickles the brain, encouraging problem solving skills with a high quotient of fun. And each is followed by a simple explanation of the Maths behind the magic that dissolves the phobia

associated with Maths and encourages the children to explore and play with the so-considered dreadful subject.

Ranjit Lal brings his robust sense of humour with his good natured adventure-filled books. *That Summer at Kalagarh* has imprints of his long association and love for nature in the story about elephants. *The Caterpillar Who Went on a Diet and Other Stories* brings the issue of juvenile dieting traits. *The Crow Chronicles* uses the crow to make a subtle comment on the power politics that is rampant in the nations around the globe today.

Ramendra Kumar has won 14 prizes, the highest by any writer, in the XVI All India Competition for Writers of Children's Books: 2001 by Children's Book Trust New Delhi, a trailblazer in the field of children's literature. The rare honour of presenting a paper at the 31st IBBY World Congress-2008 held in Copenhagen, Denmark. A prolific writer, his story *The Wise Kanhu* has been translated into Japanese and adapted as *Kamishibai* – the traditional form of storytelling in Japan. The story is performed by the artists of International Kamishibai Association of Japan in different countries.

Sorry Best Friend by Githa Hariharan has ten stories that look at India we live in. And while the story shows suspicion and division that plagues our society, the children have also been provided with many reasons for hope.

Harini Srinivasan's *The Smile of Vanuvati* deals with history in a delightful mystery set around the excavations at Lothal in Gujarat. The story traces Vanuvati, a mysterious doll with an enigmatic smile that has passed through many hands over several centuries and is finally found at an archaeology dig site. Someone is after the treasure believed to be buried there. Three intrepid young children save the national treasure. In her *I'm so sleepy*, a baby elephant has forgotten to sleep and in *Snoring Shanmugam* all that the lion, supposed to be the king of the jungle does is sleep. Worse, he snores. The other animals are frightened, when another lion, Gabbar Singh enters the jungle. The story relates how the animals get the lazy Shanmugam to awake to their defence.

The Forbidden Temple by TV Padma is a collection of short stories set in the past, beginning with India's Stone Age and ending with the nation's struggle for freedom. Each story explores an exciting period in Indian history through the eyes of a young protagonist. Her *Climbing the Stairs* is aimed at young adults and older audiences. Set in India – the India of the 1940's, the novel juxtaposes a teenager's struggle for personal freedom with her country's Independence struggle. Vidya, a feisty fourteen year old, is cloistered in the oppressive atmosphere of her extended family home. When her life is shattered by a shocking tragedy, will she be able to find the strength she needs to battle for freedom on her own?

Vandana Singh is writer of speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and fantasy. Kalpana Swaminathan's *The Adventures of Prince Teentang* is a hilarious story in the fairy tale mode. Nilima Sinha's *Rishabh in the Land of the Flying Magician* is another one in the same mode. Science fiction is a genre that has great appeal for the young and is highly developed in other parts of the world. In our country, the late Dilip Salwi's contribution was exceptional both in the field of fiction and popular science. He not only wrote picture books that introduced the youngest reader to scientific concepts like *The Story of Zero* but also composed many riveting stories for older children like *The Robots are Coming*, *Fire on the Moon* and others. A

more recent addition is a science fiction written by a young author Payal Dhar's fascinating *A Shadow in Eternity*.

The hilarious *Young uncle Comes to Town* by Vandana Singh and its sequel *Young uncle Goes to the Himalayas*. They introduce the rare note of humour into the children's book scene in India.

Since Independence, India has transformed in terms of outlook, achievement and ideals, which has earnestly been reflected in literature, also in children's literature. Books for children have changed from simple stories that are rich in morals and traditions with their base in religion and spiritualism to those that reflect the new changing society and are intelligently exposing a child to rational and well-considered environment with right attitudes in pursuing and achieving goals worthwhile.

The fact that writing for children can sometimes be more challenging than writing for adults is not widely appreciated. The different stages of a child's development have to be taken into account. The writers have to enter their mind space and learn to defy all the confines that infect an adult's mind. Writing for children needs to be a carefully designed, purpose-oriented activity with dollops of fun. This genre with many forms has not received significant attention from critics and literary historiographers.

Also there is a dearth of books to study and record the evolution of children's literature as it attained its present form. A book dealing with the whole corpus of children's literature in English by Indians is bound to be challenging and poses the risk to be an unmanageable task if not handled effectively because of no neat categories and the widely over-lapping hyphenated genres – fantasy, realistic, science-based, informative, didactic, historical, folk, mythical, fables, environmental, nonsensical that it's going to take into account; the bafflingly different age group and thus the variety that it's going to cover, the length of the pieces that it is going to counter, and the vast period it is going to study. It is also interesting to see how writers who themselves have been brought up on a staple diet of foreigner books are writing books rich in Indian content.

Working in the genre of children's literature can be quite aesthetically rewarding and may lead to springing up and then further the development of areas of study in the vista of children's literature.

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