

WRITERS MOSAIC

Kiran Millwood-Hargrave

In conversation with Roopa Farooki

Roopa Farooki: Hi, I'm Roopa Farooki.

Kiran Millwood-Hargrave: Hello, I'm Kiran Millwood-Hargrave.

RF: And we are sitting here in beautiful sunny Oxford, overlooking Wellington Square, because Kiran has very kindly come to talk to us about her work. I am incredibly excited to talk to Kiran. She is an astonishing, inspirational writer. She exploded on the scene a few years ago with her first middle-grade children's book, *The Girl of Ink & Stars* and, having won numerous astonishing awards which I can see litter up her sitting room and are beautifully decorated by her cat, who hops around them, she has gone on to write two more amazing middle-grade books: *The Island at the End of Everything* which is about leprosy and butterflies; she has also written *The Way Past Winter*, a story that feels almost mythical about a land that has been cursed by permanent snow. And on top of that, she has also started writing young adult fiction, and adult fiction. And I suspect her heart remains with the children in middle-grade, because she is now committed to write four more middle-grade books. Kiran, welcome to the RLF and to our interview. I am so pleased to speak to you.

KMH: It is wonderful to be here. Thank you for talking to me.

RF: I really just want to start off asking about the start of your journey.

KMH: So, I'm not one of these writers who grew up always knowing that I wanted to be a writer. I actually wanted to be the first woman on Mars – [that] was my earliest ambition, but I did always read. And if there is one piece of advice I can give to any writer – you might have heard it a hundred times because it is true – it's to read as much as possible, as much and as widely as possible. Because only by reading can you learn what sort of writer you want to be. And it is wonderful to be talking to you here, just by Wellington Square, because this is where I started my journey, truly started my journey as a writer. I sat down and told my husband: I am going to write a novel. And he laughed because it was April Fool's Day, 2013, but I actually did finish that novel, and on April Fool's Day, 2014.

RF: I remember reading one of your dedications that he had said, 'Ooh, you can't finish a novel.' And you said, 'I suspect, my love, I have broken just that. [Laughter]

KMH: Exactly yes. His disbelief very much aided my belief.

RF: I think it is a fascinating journey to go from poetry and playwriting to writing for children, I think one of our most important audiences. But the thing that really fascinates me about your work is that, from the poetry of yours that I've read, which covers massive themes of death and loss, and the attempt at redemption, that you actually take those themes through into your middle-grade fiction.

KMH: Definitely, I didn't make a decision to write books that would be considered dark, but I have always wanted to tell stories that I believe would lead children through life. And life is not all sunshine and rainbows. There are wonderful books that deal with sunshine and rainbows, but I have always been attracted to books that feel like they can guide me through the more difficult times of my life. Books have always been my comfort. I was bullied when I was at school, and I always had my nose in a book. I found enormous friendships within books and seeing my favourite characters go through these enormous trials and tribulations, and the worst of the world, but emerging the other side, stronger, and better people, and kinder people.

RF: So, in a way, the books provide a second-hand experience. Whereas, if you have lived through it once, you feel that you can cope with it as you go out into the real world. You feel as though you are armed with those tools and that experience.

KMH: Exactly, that's what I want my readers to feel.

RF: And was [it] difficult selling this through to your agent and your editor, perhaps...? Because in your books the children must have such heart and be so brave – these are children who are bravely dealing with the loss of siblings, loss of parents, with a friend in danger and, in some cases, with quite sinister world forces. So, is that something quite hard to put forward, to an agent, to an editor, to say: I want to write these sort of 'big' stories?

KMH: I think so long as you stitch hope in alongside the darkness, there aren't many editors who would stop you from doing pretty much anything. [Laughter] But I have been incredibly lucky. My agent, Hellie Ogden, she was always incredibly encouraging. You know, we share the same love of books. We both loved books with enormous themes like *Noughts and*

Crosses by Malorie Blackman, like *The Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman. So, we weren't really afraid to approach children as capable readers. I think adding a bit of a lightness of touch...So, in *The Girl of Ink & Stars*, there is a character called Miss La who is essentially just a comedy foil – she is a chicken. She is very grumpy, and she sort of flaps in and out of these dangerous scenes, just giving a child a light to hold onto and to guide them through the darker points. I do try to encourage a little bit of humour, a little bit of tenderness within those moments of high drama and darkness.

RF: And so, hope is really an important part of these stories, to feel that there is a way ahead, a way out of what's happening, however dark the situation.

KMH: Most definitely, and I think that is something that we really need to gift our children. Especially in times of cyber-bullying and those things are increasing, they are so in touch with each other all the time and all their aspects of themselves. They are so vulnerable, they are so open, and I think just teaching them to keep something of themselves, for themselves, is so important and sort of solidifying that.

RF: You were talking a little bit about how children have to overcome adversity too and how you should not shy back from the bigger issues that affect us. And although your books are very much about the friendships and relationships, and these things that knot us into the world, the actual world itself is quite hard and complicated. You have tyrannical dictators; you have strangers coming in manipulating and taking away children. Do you feel that these kind of cross-cultural societal issues... was that something that was intentional? Is it political, even, to use that – in the sense that tyranny is always political?

KMH: It is an interesting question and something that, as I am progressing in my career, I am becoming a lot more conscious of. But it is there in my earliest work, so it is obviously something that I have been subconsciously putting in for a long time. But going forward, my work, I think, will become more political not polemical, but I think it is irresponsible to believe that we exist in a vacuum. We do exist in a world where racism is a real problem, where class is still impacting hugely, poverty and divides. And it just makes me angry to think that children feel alone in this and feel like things can't get better. And I think that we have a responsibility as authors for children to show the world as it is, but show that it can be better. So, when someone is reading, for example, *The Island at the End of Everything* and they are thinking about segregation, and they are thinking about children being taken away from their families and then we are looking at what is going on in America, with the children in detention centres...I want them to draw those lines and I want them to not feel powerless to do nothing about that. I want them to feel that they could make a good difference in the world.

RF: Just to talk a little bit about the cultural aspects of your books. The first three of your middle-grade books I've read, I felt that you'd made quite a decision to put them in different cultural settings, to try and absorb the mores of two different island settings. One which was very particularly 'real world', set in the real-life leper colony of Culion, off the Philippines, and in *The Way Past Winter* to a completely different kind of Nordic, Scandinavian-type setting. Was that a particular decision to use those three very different settings and cultures?

KMH: It was a decision in so far as I've always been interested in stories that are not centring the experiences that I have, for instance grown up with, or not centring... It is very important to me in my novels to decentre

whiteness. That is a real thing. So, with *The Girl of Ink & Stars* that is dedicated to my cousin Sabeen who is a very dark-skinned, very beautiful Indian girl. And she grew up feeling like there were no characters that look like her. And it is true, it is very hard to find a book where they are the central character and they are shown to have darker skin and still be incredibly beautiful, still being incredibly vivacious and all these sorts of things. So *The Girl of Ink & Stars* was a very conscious decision to centre a brown girl. That was so interesting when I was editing that book because none of my editors picked up on the fact that these characters weren't white. And because it was obvious in my head, because the one white character in it, I make a big deal about how pale she is – it's the governor's wife – and how pale she is, how different her skin is, I just assumed that they would know... That this is a place off the coast of Africa, you know, it is not going to be full of these white-skinned, pale people, but that was not something obvious to them. So, I went back, and I really worked into the fabric of my story these descriptions and very much had Sabeen in my head when I was writing *Isabella*. So, I had these things about gender and race very much present in my mind. But [it was] quite late on in the editing process when I realised that we hear a character, and we think 'white'. So, that was an early learning curve for me.

RF: It is interesting because when I read your book, I felt very clearly that this character, this heroine, was bravely brown, and you actually make it quite clear that her dad was dark. I think you even use a phrase like 'darker than pie' when you are describing someone. And by contrast, I have heard that inattentive readers of, for example, *The Hunger Games* were unaware that some of the characters were black and quite shocked when the movie came out. And they thought it was 'political correctness gone mad', that lovely quote, when in fact they were just true to the author's vision. And people, I guess, read what they want to read.

KMH: Yes, and I got into a bit of a debate about this, on Twitter actually, with someone who said, 'why can't we just not see colour?' So boring that we are still having this discussion, because when you 'do not see' colour, you see white. It is the standard, and we need to decentre that, we need to destabilise that, and that is something very important in my books. When I am describing characters now, I want my readers to be clear that these are people of colour.

RF: I think there is a great sense of... it actually doesn't feel like otherness when you write about it.

KMH: No.

RF: Because they feel very much, they are the centre of their world. You know, in that floating island off the edge of Africa, in that island off the Philippines, in that village where they are having to go on that vast journey, they are very much the heroines and the heroes of the world. They do not feel like they are being othered in their own community at all.

KMH: No, they are that community. They are... and it is so strange, isn't it, that this tiny proportion of the world has so much of a monopoly on culture as we know it? That we just assume everyone else is other, and that is so important. I've never seen it like that because I have always had my Indian family there and I've always understood that the world is so much bigger than the western world. And people are so much more than just the people who I'd see growing up in Surrey. So, I have had that awareness, but I am aware that many children don't in this country, so that is something important to me. It's like, look at the world, look at all its incredible diversity

and that should be celebrated. It is not about othering; it is just about lifting us all up to the same level.

RF: Absolutely. I mean, do you feel that your heritage has informed the types of books that you write, because of that? Or is that something you would have felt strongly about whatever ethnicity you were?

KMH: I like to think it is. I like to think that my parents would have always brought me up to have that... you can't say, can you? You so are your upbringing, and of course you can change as you grow. Some people grow up very closed-minded and they do change, and I do believe that people can be redeemed. You mentioned, sort of, redemption and that is something very important to me in my books. But who knows? You know, I grew up in a very white area and, you know, I am white-presenting. So, who knows what the truth of it is? I would like to think that I would always have grown up to know that this was an important thing to do.

RF: Yeah, and I think it is wonderful that [in] children's books particularly, people are recognising, first of all, that there was a lack of representation because until you acknowledge that, you can't change it. And now, through efforts of writers such as yourselves who are putting that centre stage because I think that every child deserves to find themselves in fiction. And when you talked about your cousin Sabeen, that is so sad - that she was seeking yourself and you can't find yourself. When I see books in the bookshop which actually show children who might look like my children, I love that because you do not have to look for it in fantasy, it is there. You are reflected and you belong, you can see yourself, and say yes, I was here.

KMH: Absolutely, and that is a lovely way of putting it.

RF: I would just like to ask you about your incredible back catalogue and the books that you are writing now. You are an astonishingly prolific writer. So, we've got *The Girl of Ink & Stars*, which has exploded on the scene a few years ago with all these awards. I can't even memorise them because there were so many. And then you have your next two middle-grade books, which move in different cultural settings. And now you are writing, not satisfied just with moving to young adult, you are also writing adult fiction which will be out in the same year. So, how do you juggle all these balls? And what inspires you to keep moving, I guess?

KMH: Fear... [Laughter]... No...

RF: That is the answer for all writers and we're all too afraid to say it. [Laughter]

KMH: I think there is an aspect of fear. There is an aspect of wanting to keep moving like a shark. Writing is my passion, that is a cliché. But it is air to me; it's oxygen, and it's how I process the world. So, there is a part of it just sheer wanting to be alive, and writing is how I feel alive. And then there is the career side of it where I want to be growing, I want to be pushing myself, I want to be a better writer than I was in the last book. And when it came to writing for children, for teenagers, for adults, it wasn't sort of a cynical move, as in 'how can I grow my career?', it was very much, I want to tell a story appropriate for whoever that story might be appropriate for. So, I am always led by the story. So, for instance, with *The Mercies* which is my first novel for adults – or 'grown ups' as I constantly call them, because I write for children – that very much came from the story. It was about women left alone, bereaved, traumatised, after their men have been killed by a storm, and then this new man coming in and sort of ripping apart their society and rebuilding it under this umbrella of suspicion and terror.

And it is not children's fiction, I just knew from the moment I heard this – because it is based on real events around Norwegian witch trials in the 1600 – I knew as soon as I heard that story and there wasn't a novel about it, I knew I wanted to write that novel and I knew it could not be for children. I wanted it to be about sexuality and gender, you know these concepts that were not necessarily appropriate to write for children. And then with *The Deathless Girls*, which was my first novel for young adults, that was a commission from Orion, and they wanted to take writers who hadn't worked in young adult areas before, and they wanted them to take a male authored classic and come at it slant, and tell it from a marginalised character's point of view. So, for me that was Dracula and his dark sisters, his 'brides of Dracula'. I have told them, I have reimagined them as members of a traveller community, and they're taken [as] slaves by Vlad the Impaler who was the real-life inspiration for Dracula. Again, not really a middle-grade appropriate... Again, it is a very much a coming of sexuality, coming of age story, and it has these quite dark violent thrusts through it. So, I couldn't quite stitch in as much hope as I would in a middle-grade novel about that, because we already knew the end of the story.

RF: So, it sounds as though you are subverting gender expectations and assumptions in classic tales. And for the adult book, it sounds as though it just got hold of you.

KMH: Absolutely, it was the most extraordinary experience of my writing life so far. So, I came across it because Louise Bourgeois, who is one of my favourite artists, had done as her last ever commission before she died, this amazing memorial to these 91 men and women who were killed in these witch trials in Norway. And it's in the north-easternmost point of Norway, this really remote area, so hard to get to. It's further east than Istanbul, and it's in the Arctic Circle. So, really out there. I thought, why has

she done that? What is the story? I went to Wikipedia, of course, and I learned that there was this storm that killed all these men on the island in a moment, and then three years later, these women were tried for witchcraft for conjuring this storm. And I thought, what happened in those three years in between? And I always want my history in novels because I always like a little bit of imagination in there, and I could not find one and thought this is just such a perfect structure for a novel and I wrote it in two months. And my poor agent was on maternity leave, but she was editing 5,000 words a day, sending them back, I'd write another 5,000 words, send it to her, and she would edit. It was really intense, and it just came out, it had to come out and it has been wonderful. And it was a mess, of course, first drafts always are, but it was an incredible experience and a very intense experience.

RF: So, that is an extraordinary story and so, basically, you were hijacked by a storm in those two months.

KMH: Absolutely.

RF: And that is all that you could do was to just keep writing.

KMH: Absolutely, it was wonderful.

RF: You have kind of decided to write more children's fiction. Do you think that the adult fiction was just something that took you over? You are not going to seek that experience again for a while or are you going to wait for it to come to you in that very organic, natural way?

KMH: I already have my next adult novel contracted, and I have it in my head. It is just sort of taking a little bit of a back seat while it grows, then I

am going to write my next children's book, actually starting tomorrow, which I am extremely excited about. I think I just want to tell stories, and if they're for adults – great, if they are for children – great. I will always write everything, is my hope, but of course I might go through phases where it is one or the other.

RF: You also collaborate creatively as well. I've read a wonderful piece of work by yourself and your partner, Tom de Freston – *Orpheus and Eurydice*. I remember you reading from it, years back. Do you want to talk a little bit about your creative collaborations and what inspires them and why you keep doing it?

KMH: Absolutely. Collaboration is such a wonderful thing because it destabilises your ego, and I think ego is the death of good writing. Because the moment you start to think that you are untouchable, you are uneditable and editing is the only way that your book can become better. So, *Orpheus and Eurydice* was a project that emerged from my husband making work around that myth and recentring it around Eurydice and the female experience. He got really interested in Francesca Woodman's art, for example. And when he showed me her photographs, Francesca Woodman's photographs, she became Eurydice for me. And at that time, I was going through my own struggles with mental health. I had depression and I felt sort of bowed by the world and by this weight that I felt on me. And so, by putting myself in Francesca Woodman and then putting Francesca Woodman inside Eurydice, I actually found a way to navigate through that, and I think for Tom too, together, we found a way to navigate through my illness through this project. This project turned into something about our relationship, about any relationship that may be impacted by depression or anxiety, or one person not wanting to be there anymore and how does that feel. And *Orpheus and Eurydice*, the myth, already contained

all of that, you know. She actually doesn't want to be pulled to the surface, she wants this peace, she wants to stay here. It was interesting finding that agency through collaboration, and we are going to be working on a children's book going forward. I can't talk too much about it yet, but one of the four books I have just signed with Hachette is going to be... he's going to be doing art for it, I am writing the narrative. So, we are hoping for *A Monster Calls*-level piece of work that will engage with grief and also teach us something about ourselves about husband and wife as well as collaborators.

RF: One of the things that I took from *Orpheus and Eurydice* is that you shouldn't expect someone to save you. And you shouldn't believe that someone wants to be saved.

KMH: Absolutely.

RF: It is about creating agency within relationships and empowering the individual, whether it is a female or a male. But actually having that power in your own destiny.

KMH: Absolutely, and I think one of the interesting things, I think my mom said to me once was, 'You are only ever responsible for half of a relationship, the other person has to come and meet you.' I think it is important to understand that you can't come all the way up to someone, they have to come to you, and you have to keep enough back for yourself, as well.

RF: What message do you want your readers to take from your work?

KMH: Hope. And I believe that that is something very solid, and something powerful and something that can be honed into a blade and made to fight for better things. I just want to tell my reader a really great story and for them to come out of that and feel like, however bad things get, there is always hope. But above all else, I want to excite and engage my readers and I want them to read my books and want to keep reading.

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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