

WRITERS MOSAIC

Belonging

Sita Brahmachari

The iridescent brightness of home

Perhaps it's no coincidence that the characters in the stories I write, and therefore the young readers I meet, are at an age where questions about 'belonging' are perhaps most keenly felt... or certainly were in me, growing up. As I look over the stories I've written, a questioning of the bonds of belonging to people or places occurs and re-occurs in many different guises. The aspect of belonging that most exercised me as a child, and still does, grew from being of mixed heritage. My father was from Kolkata in India. Coming to this country in the late 1950s to be a doctor in the newly formed NHS, he met my mother, a nurse from the Lake District, in Edinburgh. I and three siblings travelled as children, following my parents' work and family from the Midlands, to Hull, the Lake District and finally to Shropshire. Each of these lived landscapes had a strong pull on my imagination and, as children do, I found a way of belonging and making friends in each place. And in each place, I was also acutely aware of the duality of my heritage. When one of my aunts from Kolkata visited the barn where we lived in the Lake District and danced in her beautiful saris, or when we visited India, I was captivated by the convergence of worlds in my family and in me. In my early teens, I wrote diaries and travel journals and even letters to my cousin wondering what it was like when my Mum and Dad married, from the point of view of my family in India. Looking back on this correspondence and reaching out to cousins across the world I realise I was asking questions about identity, history, culture, religion and belonging that I have never really stopped asking. The memories that lodge can be random. One of my fondest ones from primary school in the Lake District was making lemon curd. There was

a whole side of me...wild flower collecting...loving the mountains and lakes...that belonged, despite being the only mixed heritage family in school. But there was another side, my father's heritage, that I knew was a great source of creativity and richness in me and that felt outside the experience of school. I didn't understand that listening to my Dad's stories or my aunt dancing in the living room or my travel journals from India would have a value in creative writing in school. Of course, when I was growing up, there were few stories to be read that included families anything like my own. I think subliminally I understood that storytellers were not people like me so I kept my writing secret...but I wrote all the time. Little snippets, like memories, of sitting by a beck in the Lake District with my Dad looking at a kingfisher landing on a piece of driftwood and saying its iridescent brightness reminded him of 'home' and me wondering, because I thought the landscape was 'home'. Realising this place wasn't fully home for my father made me wonder if it could ever be fully 'home' to me. These musings on 'belonging'. Stories of knitting together the diverse aspects of self, of attempting to write into the complexity of landscapes and people, are a constant and ever-present thread in the stories I write for young readers today. It feels like an important connection to make in enabling a sense of belonging in new generations, so that they understand that wide diaspora identities make for enriching stories and enriched landscapes in which a patchwork sense of 'home' can be discovered and also created.

Sita Brahmachari

Sita Brahmachari's creative projects with diverse communities are at the heart of her writing. She has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Arts Education (Central School of Speech and Drama). She has been Writer in Residence for The Book Trust and Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants. Amnesty International has endorsed her work as upholding the rights of children and families, and she is an Amnesty Ambassador.

Sita has worked in theatre, creating education and new writing projects for The Royal Court, Talawa Theatre Company, Tamasha and The Royal Shakespeare Company. She co-created a play inspired by Shaun Tan's novel *The Arrival* for Tamasha Theatre Company.

Her debut novel for young people, *Artichoke Hearts*, won the Waterstones Children's Book

Prize, 2011. Subsequent novels including *Jasmine Skies*, *Tender Earth*, *Red Leaves* and *Kite Spirit* (all published by Macmillan Children's Books) have been nominated for major awards. For Barrington Stoke, she has written *Worry Angels*, *Brace Mouth False Teeth*, *Car Wash Wish* and *Zebra Crossing Soul Song*. Her most recent novella *Corey's Rock* (Otter Barry Books) is illustrated by Jane Ray.

Sita has contributed short stories to a number of anthologies with a human rights focus and is under commission to Orion Books for two further novels, the first of which is to be published in July 2019. She is the recipient of the UK Honour (2018) for her novel *Tender Earth* from The International Board on Books for Young People. **www.sitabrahmachari.com**

This is a version of a talk given by Sita Brahmachari. The recording can be found on the Writers-Mosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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