

WRITERS MOSAIC

Natural worlds

Sita Brahmachari

Sounding out the flinty nature of words

I have to go back to a time before I could read to reflect on how the natural world has impacted on me and continues to live in me and through my words.

Some of my earliest memories are of being in the presence of the awesome force of the natural world as a child growing up in the Lake District. The slate grey brooding mountains, the fells, the streams, becks and waterfalls all worked their magic on the open portal of my young imagination. Long before I read Wordsworth's poem 'The Prelude', I imagined in the landscape a host of characters: fairy folk to gnarled ogres, water spirits, slate people and ancient fell-roaming ghosts taking the form of humans, birds, fell ponies, otters and deer.

These meetings I would distil into words and stories and sometimes I'd relate them to my family, if they were inclined to listen! I felt, and still feel, that the first character that was written in me was the landscape out of which I grew.

This free roaming in story worlds was in stark contrast to the experience of learning to read, a painfully containing process also experienced by my own children. They learned to read in much the way I did: walking with sharp stones in their shoes, stumbling over words that failed to capture their wild imaginations, growing tired and bored of spelling and 'sounding out' before the word river had the power to catch them in its current.

While my children negotiated the flinty nature of words, in Norway my nephews of the same age were learning to balance on a piece of wood over a stream, trek through meadows, build a fire and climb trees. When they finally met the word on the page, they seemed to make easy

transitions from their experience of the natural world.

Musing on this contrast took me back to my own feeling about words as a child. I could read...I could understand that placing several letters together could make a word...that I could print on a page and it would make the magical creature that flew through the sky at dawn and dusk, white wings, brown-tipped, bright staring eyes and twisting head, into a creature that others would recognise too as an 'o w l'...and that calling it an 'owl' would help me to transport some of what I had seen, felt and heard swooping through my mind, but those three letters seemed to distil something grand in nature into less than it could be in word. How could this magical creation of the natural world, crouching in a barn or flying ahead of me on a walk to a mountain tarn, be contained by the word 'owl'?

For a long time, I didn't want to name it. Luckily for me, I learned to spell by a phonetic method that soon went out of fashion because critics pointed out that children had to learn to spell twice! I have discovered that many writers of my generation learned to write using this method. True, I'd never win a Spelling Bee contest but the method encouraged me to pound out words at speed, lots of words, to collect and collate them, cross-match letters and sounds until I was able to reach for the soaring, crouching, head-twirling, fell-roaming owl through my own words. Before I learned that an owl 'hooted', and before I knew how to spell the word 'true', I wrote that the sound an owl makes is to 'truw truw'.

The freedom that transferring childhood roamings in nature to phonetic words in my own impossible-to-decipher hand-made books gave me, has stayed with me. It's why I keep going...the owl is never as beautiful in word as it is in nature...but once the hunt is on, it's too compelling not to try at least to capture its flight in this mark-making.

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**

© Sita Brahmachari