

## **Why do you write?**

Umi Sinha

A therapist once asked me who my role models had been when I was growing up; she had assessed my parents as having been too preoccupied and neglectful to have fulfilled that role. I didn't have to think for long. 'Books,' I said. I expected her to be surprised but she didn't seem to be.

When I think of my childhood, what I remember most is long seamless days of boredom, depression and loneliness, similar to what many people who live alone must be experiencing now, in this time of the Covid-19 lockdown. My father – the Captain of a naval engineering base in the Western Ghats – was always busy. My mother worked in Bombay and only came home at weekends, usually bringing a crowd of her advertising or theatrical friends with her. What I remember most about the house was silence and the pervasive smell of mould. The Western Ghats receive some of the highest rainfall in India: clouds hang low, the air is damp and when the monsoon starts the landscape, belts, shoes and handbags turn green overnight.

Back in those days, and it may still be the case, girls were not allowed to go outside and play. My brother was free to range the rugged and beautiful countryside, track leopards and wild boar and, when the monsoon filled the cracked dry lakebed, fish in the lake with his friend, Dan. My younger sister and I were confined to the house with our ayah (nanny). I wouldn't start school till I was seven, so there was nothing to do all day except read.

My mother had a vast and eclectic collection of books, and we got books for every birthday and Christmas: collections of fairy tales and children's classics. By seven, I had worked my way through all of our children's books and was choosing books at random from her bookcase. Walter Scott and

the Brontës are ones I particularly remember. I skipped pages of Scottish dialect, descriptions of Yorkshire landscapes, and boring conversations I didn't understand, focusing on the stories and the drama. A lot went over my head, but I loved being immersed in these other worlds that took me away from the everyday world in which I was constrained and powerless and could see no possibility of change. I woke, ate and slept with those stories, lost in daydream, to the irritation of my ayah, my parents and, later, my teachers. *Jane Eyre* gave me hope that I could escape being trapped in a world where girls had to be good and obedient and had no freedom. *Ivanhoe* made me aware of prejudice and injustice. Fairy tales taught me that even the deepest journey into the dark and frightening underworld produces treasure at the end.

Because my parents moved all the time, my education was fragmented and so most of what I have learnt has come from my own reading. Reading provided my entertainment, my comfort, my education and, yes, my role models. Books saved my life and made me who I am. I write because I want to give that experience to others, but mostly because writing is my portal into a world like those I encountered in childhood, a world that I can control and make sense of.

## **Umi Sinha**

Umi Sinha is the author of the novel *Belonging*. Born in India, she spent her first ten years at the naval engineering base in the Western Ghats where her father was stationed. She moved to Britain with her mother and siblings at the age of fifteen. Her British-born mother was a writer and an artist. Her father was one of the first Indians to be accepted as an officer into the

Royal Indian Navy and served on the Arctic Convoys in the Second World War.

Umi Sinha's short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies. She has worked as a Lecturer in Creative Writing on the MA at Brighton University and currently teaches on the Creative Writing Programme at New Writing South. She also runs her own courses and workshops at her Writing Clinic.

In 2006, Sinha and a group of other storytellers founded The Guesthouse Storytellers, an oral storytelling club based in Newhaven, East Sussex.

**[www.writingclinic.co.uk](http://www.writingclinic.co.uk)**

**[www.umisinha.com](http://www.umisinha.com)**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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