

Belonging and a Sense of Place

Jasbinder Bilan

As human beings I think we are all searching for a sense of belonging and place. Even as small children, we seek out the comfort of a friend whose company we enjoy and who will mirror back to us what it means to connect and feel at home.

In my writing for children, I am drawn to characters who are themselves searching for their place in the world and discovering who they are.

I think, within families, this sense of uncovering who we really are is a strong urge and lifting the lid on family secrets can be both exciting and illuminating. For better or worse, this helps us to understand ourselves more fully.

In my book *Tamarind and the Star of Ishta* (2020), when Tamarind finally returns to her ancestral Himalayan home, she can begin to piece together her mother's story and come to terms with her mother's death when Tamarind was still a baby.

I was born close to the foothills of the Himalaya on our family farm, and when I was 18 months old my family emigrated to Nottingham where we all built a new life.

Even though I was too young to remember the time before England, whenever we gathered as a family for elaborate dinners expertly cooked by my mum, the stories we remembered and shared were always about India. It was during these times that I discovered what a magical place it was, filled with a wild beauty.

As a little girl my imagination was sparked by stories fondly told about our monkey, Oma, who was part of our family. She used to whisk my brother off to the tall neem tree in the farmyard and, so the story goes, she stubbornly stayed there gently rocking him as if he were her own baby.

More than anything what these stories did was to anchor me in two very different physical places. Even when I was an adult, whenever my beloved grandmother saw me, she never ceased to recount the story of the day I disappeared outside during a monsoon storm having found my way to the well where I stood dangerously close to the edge, bawling my eyes out. She, of course, scooped me up avoiding any further disaster. In her retellings, I re-lived this moment over and over, each time feeling the warm rain beating down on me as the memory grew strong visceral roots.

Growing up in Nottingham, my mother tongue was Punjabi and I distinctly recall acquiring my English in fits and starts. I would search my brain for the correct word for cartoons in preparation for when I would arrive at school and join in conversations about my favourites.

In my writing, I always begin with setting. It comes to me in a sudden visual image and, when I search that landscape, I invariably find characters with stories to tell and journeys to take which send them on quests for truth. Armed with this knowledge they return changed but always happy to be home, exactly where they belong. In this sense, storytelling for me is always about the journey home.

Jasbinder Bilan

Jasbinder Bilan is an award-winning children's author of numerous magical realist middle-grade novels. Her debut *Asha and the Spirit Bird* (Chickenhouse, 2019) won the Times Chickenhouse prize 2017, was short-listed for the Waterstones children's book prize 2019 and went on to win the Costa children's book award 2019. Her writing is inspired by her family roots in India and explores themes of friendship, family and hope. *Tamarind and the Star of Ishta* (Chickenhouse, 2020) won the Indie book awards 2021 and the Calderdale school library awards 2021. Her latest novel *Aarti and the Blue Gods* (Chickenhouse, 2021) explores connections between Eastern and Western mythologies.

Jasbinder contributed to the *Book of Hopes* (Bloomsbury, 2020) a collection of stories, poems and illustrations edited by children's author Katherine Rundell to bring joy and hope to children during the pandemic. She has been commissioned to write numerous articles for the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. She has spoken at many literature festivals including Edinburgh, Hay, Cheltenham and Charleston. In October 2022 she will publish her first non-fiction book for children *India Incredible India* (Walker, 2022). She has been commissioned to write the text for the new Museum of London exhibition exploring London's pre-history.

Jasbinder is Patron for Young People at Somerset Arts. Her life-long work with young people is hugely important to her both as a teacher of English as well as an author.

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

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