

What do I value in the natural world?

Jasbinder Bilan

Nature and the wild are like a deep vein running through all humans whether we are aware of it or not. Whenever I am out in nature, I always get a sense of connecting with a past that stretches way beyond written history.

As I gaze at the stars I wonder about the people before me who looked at the same stars – about who they were and what their lives were like. It is this opening of the imagination to nature that often begins my search for a new story.

Growing up in the city, one of my earliest memories is of when I found an un-feathered fledging chick and scooped it into my mother's metal soup spoon, hoping to save its life. As children we align ourselves with nature wherever we live.

I have an image of myself as a baby, born in a stable close to the foothills of the Himalaya – a sort of wild child. Even when I moved to Nottingham nature was an unconscious part of me and I was always happiest playing in the grassy parks or staying with my uncle in the country.

Nature is at the core of my stories as a children's writer. It's a theme which is both empowering and comforting and speaks to all readers whether they're adults or children. The extra twist I like to give nature is to push it to extremes and sprinkle it with magic.

In *Aarti and the Blue Gods* (2021) it seems I have set up a harsh environment for my protagonist, Aarti. The only other human on the island is her aunt whose tempers are as stormy as the sea. But the island nurtures and protects her, like a parent would, and I give her a magical fox to guard her.

I want to show children who live in difficult circumstances that they are not forgotten. If they look around, there is so much beauty – a setting sun, a flight of swallows, the single red poppy that pushes through a crack in the city pavement.

Noticing these things gives hope to children and I think it also gives them self-confidence and self-belief. It can help them look forward to a different, more positive future.

In *Asha and the Spirit Bird* (2019), Asha takes a mango stone and some earth from her farm and carries it all the way to the city to search for her missing father. It becomes a sort of symbol of hope. Even at her lowest point when she's taken as a child slave and the mango shoot withers and almost dies; it reminds her of who she is, reminds her not to give up.

Not all children have equal access to green spaces, but through reading they can experience how it feels to live on a wild Scottish island or to adventure through the world's highest mountains. It helps them to realise

that nature is everywhere. They, too, can take a seed and pot it in an empty tin can, care for it and watch it grow.

And if nature can succeed against all odds, then so can they.

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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