

# THE BOOK REVIEW

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FOCUS ON BOOKS FOR CHILDREN



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## Children's Books: Special Issue

'A book is like a garden carried in the pocket.' –Chinese proverb



A book at once offers endless possibilities of growth and tranquillity much like a garden, with flowers of knowledge and wisdom that never stop blooming; it is an avenue one may visit anytime from anywhere. For children to have access to a variety of books is to allow them a peep into the larger world beyond their primary environment, introduce them to heroes/heroines they can look up to, inspire creativity, instil empathy, boost their cognitive capabilities to focus, analyse and memorize, and enable them to discover and explore their likings in an immersive experience beyond their screen time.

As per a global study of trends in children's and young adults' book market in March 2024, the industry is growing steadily—from USD 11.76 billion in 2023, it is expected to cross USD 12 billion in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Authors, translators, illustrators, editors and publishers are collectively working hard to help young readers adjust better to the ever-changing world. An effort in the same vein, the team at *The Book Review* is happy to present its annual Children's Special Issue to its readers both young and older. It is a carefully curated collection of recently published books in English, Hindi and Bangla for children across different age groups—Beginners (ages 3 to 7), Middle Readers (ages 8 to 12), Early Teens (ages 13 to 15) and Young Adults (ages 16 to 18).

The leading section on Reading and Education opens with Satish C Aikant's review of Harish Trivedi and Lalit Kumar's book on Amaranatha Jha, former Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University (1938-1947), 'dealing with his views on a range of issues such as English literature, Indian Writing in English, Indian Languages, Kipling, Tagore, the state of higher education in India and the role of university teachers.' Anjana Neira Dev's review of *Children's Books: An Indian Story* edited by Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao offers a keen observation: 'While Indian children have always had stories told to them, it is only recently that the question of these children as active agents of the narrative rather than just its passive receptors has been raised.' The book also addresses issues faced by the industry—of quality, authenticity, differential literacy and linguistic diversity, to name a few. Toolika Wadhwa reviews SP Mishra's book which is 'a ready reference for parents' that 'covers ten key themes that are couched in psychology, economics, financial management and sociology', and Prabir Purkayastha's book which brings 'attention to the important yet often ignored aspect of interface of science with society and with commerce'.

The section for Beginners includes books from Hachette, India which explore themes of acceptance and friendship, a picture dictionary with 'focus on inclusivity and cultural sensitivity', and other titles spanning familial experiences of a young child: ageing grandparents, elders breaking gender stereotypes, and one's relationship with pets. Children are introduced to nature in titles by various authors. The fear of losing a loved one or being lost is addressed as also how to acknowledge and defeat the fear of mathematics through activity-based learning. Sanjib Mukhopadhyay reviews five books in Bangla from the house of Eklavya across various themes.

For our Middle Readers, we bring a mix of stories old and new. Semeen Ali reviews multiple titles from Pratham Books which highlight 'the importance of children's voices in driving societal change', and 'language and its connection to identity'; Jane Sahi reviews Arunava Sinha's translation of *Kabuliwallah* by Rabindranath Tagore which 'seems particularly relevant at the present time when children are often growing up in an atmosphere of fear of the stranger and suspicion of the outsider.' Discrimination and self-doubt are dealt with as are experiences of travel. Books by Sudha Murty follow to remind readers 'that often the most ordinary things in life are the most valuable'. There are also myths and folk stories/riddles, sharing important life lessons with the young.

Similar themes in greater depth are presented for our Early Teens. Aisha Kawalkar reviews *Bio-Inspired!* by Muriel Zürcher which is about how 'nature's ingenuity has influenced innovation', for example, 'the aerodynamic design of aeroplanes mimicking the gliding of birds to reduce fuel consumption'. Titles like *The Plum Tree* by Hans Sande explore the nuances of growing up. How language acquired its present form is discussed; Vikram Seth's translation of *The Hanuman Chalisa* is an attempt to make culture more accessible to children. Hindi titles include a famous traditional Japanese folktale rewritten by Sara Cone Bryant, offering lessons in critical decision-making. Nidhi Qazi's review provides a philosophical view of nature—how 'the mundane can become mindful' if sights and sounds in nature are paid attention to.

The collection for Young Adults focuses on diverse subjects like Indian history—accounts of India's unification and 'of individuals whose contribution to the Independence struggle went unrecognized', themes rarely discussed in textbooks; history of battalions, of the movement of forces, of wartime strategies and the reasoning behind tactics employed in times of conflict. Non-fiction titles include works on nature and for self-help: an anthology on the natural world spanning three centuries; a much-needed title on the sync between mental and physical health, especially for young adults. Shubhra Seth reviews a collection of fairy tales narrated by disabled women piecing together their lived experiences. Fiction titles in English and Hindi include tales of identity quest and ambition, communalism and issues of urban life. The section closes with Asfia Jamal and Kaniska's review of a title which 'reflects on the existential question of the future of humanity'.

Our most sincere thanks to all our reviewers without whom this Special Issue could not have been put together. We are grateful to Tultul Biswas, Shailaja Srinivasan and Kanak Shashi of Eklavya Foundation, and Ragini Lalit of Muskan for their immense help in identifying books and reviewers for the Special Issue as also for permitting us to use two illustrations from *Chakmak's* bank of children's drawings, one for the cover by Rudra Gosawi of Class VII, and on p. 12 by Suragi, age 7.

It is our endeavour to provide young readers with the freedom to explore narratives of all kind, especially those which transcend expectations of physical perfection and a perfect life. It is time children's literature is perceived as a genre in itself where children are allowed to confront difficult truths to find hope in endings and learn how to make a difference through action.

**Palak Hajela** works as Editorial Assistant with *The Book Review* since 2019.

1. <https://www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com/report/children-and-young-adult-books-global-market-report>

## Anjana Neira Dev

**CHILDREN'S BOOKS: AN INDIAN STORY**

Edited by Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao  
Eklavya Foundation, 2024, pp. 424, ₹ 424.00

This fascinating story about Children's Books in India is narrated using extensive research and enough anecdotal evidence to make its perusal informative and enriching for anyone interested in this burgeoning field of literary production and study. This is probably the first time that publishers, authors, illustrators, editors, translators, librarians and educators have collaborated to share their research and wide-ranging experiences to chart the terrain and offer desirable future directions. The book clarifies its scope and delimitations at the outset by stating its linguistic and chronological as well as regional contours, and therefore anticipates any critiques in relation to inclusions and exclusions. The citations and bibliography that conclude each chapter adhere to academic best practices, serve to pique the reader's interest and encourage further exploration of the themes and concerns that may be of interest or study. The ground covered is extensive in range and this is finely balanced with the depth of analysis that is rarely found when such genre-specific histories are written.

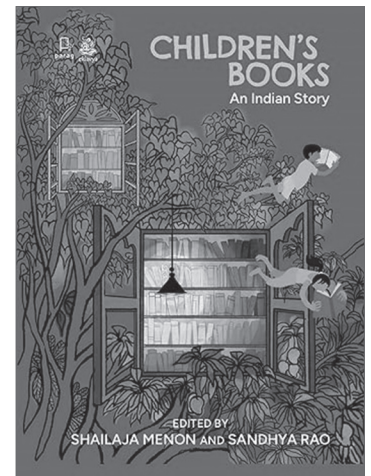
The agenda and inspiration shared by all the contributors and articulated indubitably by the editors in their Introduction to the collection of essays, is to familiarize as many Indian children as possible with the joys of reading by creating books that resonate with them and reflect their world and help them find their meaningful place in it. The socio-economic fountainhead of this initiative is the boom in publishing of children's books, especially in the last three decades in India, following economic liberalization and accompanied by scholarly research and interest as well as civil society initiatives and interventions. Besides the quantitative leap in the number of children's books being published there is also a tectonic shift in the modes of production, the role of illustrations and graphics, and the stretching of boundaries beyond the fabular and mythological to include topics that would earlier have been taboo as mandated by the adult gatekeepers of this arena. While Indian children have always had stories told to them, it is only recently that the question of these children as active agents of the narrative rather than just its passive receptors has been raised and this is where this wonderful book plays a starring role. One of the most interesting concerns raised by this volume of essays is the fact of children's literature being an artefact that is a synergy of multiple variables, and to understand what it is and where

it is headed needs a thoughtful investigation as well as a sincere desire to create an ambient climate for children to read. Even though 'trade books', those written for entertainment and enjoyment, account for only about four per cent of all the children's books published in the country, they are enough to start this conversation

and take it forward. Some of the major challenges faced by those who are engaged in the creation of literature for children in India are: quality, authenticity, validity, voice and perspective; as well as the need to balance the message and the medium of transmission, not to talk of differential literacy and linguistic diversity. These are some of the challenges that are confronted in the four sections into which the book is divided.

The first section is appositely titled 'Understanding the Terrain: Children's Literature in India', and includes two essays and a thoughtful and thought-provoking 'companion piece' by a publisher on the history of children's literature in India from its regionally diverse oral and performative origins to the present. The textual evidence is amply complemented by illustrations and examples so that the adult reader is also invited to share in the myriad wonders of storytelling that form an integral part of cultural heritage and repository of the subcontinent. The story then segues into the contemporary avatars of the field with its hybridity of media forms and innovations in production and transmission. This opening section of the volume raises as many questions as it answers and the voices we hear are multivocal, a useful metonymic parallel for the kind of books that the contributors are pitching for. The two main questions that this section drew my attention to are related to the adult gatekeepers of the world of children's literature and the need for if not indigenizing the themes and content but at least making them true reflections of the lives of their young readers.

The second section of this collection is called 'The Moving Landscape: Looking at Books', and the four essays and two companion pieces included in it do exactly what the dominant verb in the section title demands: observe closely how books for children look and what they look at. The first essay has illustration trends and challenges as its focus and reminds us how vital picture books and pictures in books are, to introduce children to curiosity, critical thought and an understanding of the world they inhabit. The pictures with which the essay is generously endowed speak eloquently of the power of



pictures in books for children. There is a change in gears in the third essay as we enter the minefield of didacticism and morality, and debate the enduring appeal and saleability of stories with an overt ethical message and lesson. This essay also expands the scope of the ongoing discussion to include the use and sometimes misuse of humour in children's stories as well as the yet relatively limited fields of poetry and drama written specifically for the young Indian reader. The writerly reflection in this section reminds us how important it is to find the vocabulary to mirror the immediate environment of the readers for whom the books are primarily intended and how fraught the process is with problems of diversity and inclusion. The third essay explores the ideology of existing generic and thematic boundaries through a discussion of creative non-fiction and graphic narratives and the limitless possibilities for creativity if our plots, characters and action are to go beyond familiar horizons of normativity. The concluding chapter in this section ventures into an exploration of the nascent genre of young adult fiction that is a recent entrant into the conversation and one that has generated a lot of interesting debates in the field.

The third section of this collection is titled 'Uneven Ground: Issues in Children's Literature' and the four essays and a reflective companion piece bring to the fore those areas of silence and darkness that have beleaguered children's literature in India, and their foregrounding becomes essential to give shape to the aspiration with which this book has been painstakingly compiled. The first chapter is dialogic and using inputs from a range of writers, centers the discussion on the fraught areas of diversity and representation with a laudable impulse to tip the balance of bias towards more inclusive storytelling in terms of language, gender and sexuality, neurodiversity, caste and intersectionality, to name a few of the more prominent challenges that face all writers, but especially those writing for children and young adults. The next essay reminds us how we take the simplest actions for granted if we are abled and how challenging even the simple act of turning the page of a book can be for a differently abled reader. The writer of this chapter has researched extensively on the physical and intellectual barriers faced by some readers and how these are beginning to be addressed by publishers who are experimenting and innovating to make books inclusive and accessible to all readers. The reflective piece in this section is from one of the key players in the field of children's books, the editor, who dons multiple hats—friend, critic, mediator, confidant, etc., and is often the final piece in the creative puzzle, before the book goes into print. The next essay is a thoughtful and practical exploration of translations of children's books and deals extensively with challenges and triumphs in equal measure. The final essay of this third section lists some of

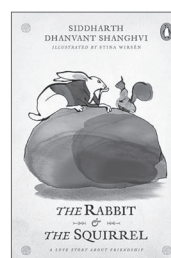
the milestones and dominant challenges in the field and these include issues of languages, caste and class, diversity and plurality, as well as concerns about textual aesthetics and designs.

The fourth and final section of the book attempts to set up a dialogue between the two characters in the children's book story, school books and trade books, by seeing if the latter can comfortably and self-assuredly accompany the former to teach and educate the children who are after all the target audience for both. The first essay has as its central concern the importance of literature in the life of an individual, especially a young reader whose sense and sensibility are work in progress and whose thinking and being in the world are significantly influenced through literary engagement. Through a series of classroom and other activities the writers walk us through the creation of a suitable environment for forging a bond between children and literature. The second essay is an in-depth analysis of the way children respond to literature, construct and deconstruct, agree with and interrogate adult analyses and in the process form independent and self-reliant personalities of their own. The penultimate companion piece in this collection is by a reader who metacognitively analyses her evolution as a reader and the way this has facilitated her passing the baton to other readers. The final two contributions in this ambitious collection are from the perspective of those who manage that space outside of a bookstore that gives us access to books—the library. While the essay is a biography of the free library movement and the need for this to become a norm rather than a singular example, the final companion piece is an eloquent appeal by a librarian to let children read with freedom and joy.

The editors modestly claim at the outset that this book was put together to foster a spirit of understanding and initiate a grand conversation about children's books in India and they have undoubtedly succeeded. As I read each essay and companion piece, I met many old favorites that I cut my reading milk teeth on, and have also been introduced to many new friends whom I would love to get to know. This book bears eloquent testimony to the sheer range of books being thoughtfully created for children in India and the story is as encouraging as it is inspirational.

## Book News

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*The Rabbit and the Squirrel: A Love Story about Friendship* by Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi, illustrated by Stina Wirsén, is a charmed fable for young adults, in which one life, against all odds, is fated for the other.

Penguin, 2024, pp. 48, ₹ 299.00