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Interview With the Writer Ranjit Lal



5 March 2023

2:30 pm

Oberoji Apartments, Duplex8, 2 Sham Nath Marg, Delhi

Jyotsna
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Vallabh Govt. College, Mandi (H.P.)

Jyotsna: *In the bygone eras, there were limited choices for the readers (children). I grew up reading Champak, Chacha Chaudhary and Nagraj. But these days, markets are flooded with many books catering to the needs of readers of different age groups. What would you say about the current scenario, and how can you make the correct choice of books to read?*

Ranjit Lal: Well! The current scenario is certainly better than what it used to be because there are a lot of Indian authors beginning to write for children. We still have a long way to go before we catch up with the west ones. You go to any children's book stall; you go to Bahrisons; almost ninety per cent of books are from foreign authors, and there are very few from Indian authors. I practically know all the children's authors in the country. But still, it is getting better; the subjects they are now writing about are more contemporary. There are

some; I call them gatekeepers. They always say that you can write but don't go beyond this limit, which is stupid to say these days because you can read everything on social media—internet *par sab kuchh hain*— there is the internet, and if you read the newspaper and how are you going to stop a child from reading the newspaper? When you write the same thing in your story, they don't like it. You have to sort of push the envelope every time you write a book. You are pushing the envelope further and further. One should write about a complex subject in a way that a child can make sense of it rather than being a sensational sort of thing. I think it is much better.

J: *Who inspired you to write specifically for children?*

RL: Well! Frankly, I never wanted to be a writer. It was my plan B. I wanted to be an automobile designer and engineer, as you can see over here. (*The room has quite a beautiful collection of miniature models of almost all the cars worldwide. It is exciting to see everything kept aesthetically, and the room is truly a wonderland: a magical world of imagination*) I had health issues, major health issues, and all told me, 'you can't do engineering; you forget it'. And I was always interested in writing, and I said OK! I might do as well, so I started with freelance journalism. Then someone said, 'why don't you write a book?' I said what book? Then, I became interested in birds and wildlife. Then I sat down and started writing; my first book was *Crow Chronicles*, and it took about two or three years for the first one-third of that book. Then I got fed up; then I said, either I sit down or finish it or drop it. There is no point carrying on and on. In six months, I finished the rest of the book. I was lucky that the Penguin took it up. After that, it was *Life and Times of Altu & Faltu*, based on monkeys, which we have plenty of over here. I had a good time with that book. Then, I found I enjoyed writing for children more than for adults. Even *Crow Chronicles* was meant for adults. My friend came to me and said, 'my eleven-year-old son loves your book', I said fine then, but yes, I love writing for children more than adults.

J: *What kinds of books have you read in your childhood? Please mention some.*

RL: All kinds, I think, well! Of course, we were brought up reading Enid Blyton, the Biggles book series, Willy Wonka, and the *William Series* by Richmal Crompton, all those stories. I owe it to my sister; she was the bookworm in our family. When we came from school or on holidays, I picked Archies and other comics, but she told me to put those aside and read Charles Dickens and Alexandre Dumas, all those fat books. She told me, ‘if you don’t understand, come to me. If you don’t understand a word, look it up in the dictionary; this is what it is meant for. Make a list and progress’. First, there was a little bit of resistance, but then I enjoyed it. My sister is a teacher in California; she has been a teacher all her life. She has got all the books and a lot of books over here she has brought. So, I owe a lot to her.

J: *Your work has dealt with many dreadful issues. How do you manage to write about these social issues with ease? In works like *Faces in the Water*, *Smitten*, and *Secret of Falcon Heights*, you have creatively explained the grim themes. How?*

RL: That’s the challenge! Managed to put humour in the stories through the characters. *Smitten* was the most difficult; there was not much to laugh about. Chubs provided humour in *The Secret of Falcon Heights*, and all the kids had a ball in *Faces in the Water* despite the grimness of the theme. Humour offers a lens through which one can examine serious issues, offering insights and facilitating discussions that might otherwise be too uncomfortable. Aranya in *Smitten* needed help; such abuse takes place in our society. She wanted someone who could help without any ulterior motives. I spoke to my friends, who shared that this had happened to us. Our Mama, Chacha, and so on have done this. It’s difficult. I don’t know why we all live in denial. It is crucial to tackle the problem head-on.

J: *Which Indian writer is your favourite and why?*

RL: There is no single writer, but my favourites are R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, and Ruskin Bond. They would be the top three.

J: *Why are children's books didactic, where evil is punished and good is rewarded? Why can't there be open-ended novels and let the young minds decide?*

RL: The young should be made to decide for themselves, which is what I try to make them do in my stories. No child likes a moral emblazoned all over the story.

J: *What would you suggest to aspiring writers or young aspiring writers?*

RL: They should read at least a hundred times as much as they write and write daily. Writing is like any sport or learning a musical instrument; you must keep practising. It is not magic and needs practice.

J: *Are the incidents, characters portrayed, and their subsequent sufferings imaginary, or does real life inspire them?*

RL: Real life inspires most stories, and the old favourite question is 'What if?' While reading the newspaper, I read about a case of female infanticide. The family was not illiterate but well-to-do. I wrote all this in *Faces in the Water*. The Diwanchand family is also a prosperous family, but they still believe in keeping the tradition of 'only boys' alive. There are so many things coming up in newspapers. Most of the time, it is inspired by real life. Otherwise, there would be no stories.

J: *Do you think it is the vulnerability on the part of children that makes them subject to suffering and subsequent trauma they undergo?*

RL: Yes, children are very vulnerable, and sometimes unscrupulous adults take advantage of them. Unfortunately, some unscrupulous adults exploit the vulnerability for various reasons,

including power, control or personal gratification. Like in *Smitten*, Aranya's step-father is taking her advantage. It is vital for everyone to be vigilant in protecting children and providing them with a safe environment.

J: *The locales in your novels are set away from the humdrum of city life, whether Mahaparbatpur or Pahadpur. Are these locales fictional, or are they universalized like those in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi Days?*

RL: These locales are fictional. I love mountains, and it's always good to travel to higher altitudes to solve a problem away from the humdrum of city life.

J: *Sir, this is a personal question, and you are free not to answer it if you feel like not answering it. In most novels about children, you have portrayed parents who are careless, indifferent, and too absorbed in their lives that they don't spare for their children. The readers don't have any glimpse of your childhood days. Have you, too, been the victim of the same negligence or seen someone suffering due to all this?*

RL: Certainly not; I have not been a neglected child, but I was overprotected. I told you I have some health issues, and because of that... it is better you go through *What Lies Between the True Hearts*. You will find many answers there.

J: *Please share your thoughts on all the subtitles I have written in my research.*

Faces in the Water: A Terrible secret of Magical well

Adventure of Bozo and Chick: Terror at Bedlam House

The Secret of Falcon Heights: The Mystery Unfurled

Our Nana was a Nutcase: An Emotive Saga

The Battle for No.19: Assassination of mankind

Smitten: An Incestuous Tale

RL: The subtitles are all right, except maybe change the subtitle of *The Secret of Falcon Heights* from an incestuous tale to ‘Horror in the High Mountains.’

J: *Reflect on the ending of Faces in the Water; the child murderers should have been punished. Why didn't you punish them?*

RL: The child murderers are punished in *Faces in the Water*. The parents will regret what they did for the rest of their lives every time they look at their new twin baby girls; Mohini has shown them what they've missed by doing what they had done. Besides, punishing them conventionally would have meant punishing Gurmeet completely unjustifiably.

J: *Nowadays, especially post-pandemic, it has been observed that teens become overloaded with stress, which leads to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, physical illness or poor coping skills. As a parent, what kind of relaxation response should we resort to so the children can decrease stress with specific behavioural changes and techniques?*

RL: I have not been a parent, so I really would not know, except maybe to tell kids that it's not the end of the world if something does not work out. Something else invariably will. As for relaxation, get interested in and involved in something like music, photography, sports, trekking, etc.

J: *What are your future plans? What theme would you like to write about?*

RL: Nothing planned for the moment.

J: *Thank you, Sir, for sparing your valuable time to let me share your literary endeavour with you. It is an honour and life-changing experience for me to meet the writer whose stature and literary forte are unmatched, making him a signature name in the world of contemporary children's literature.*

RL: Thank you and wish you all success in your life.