

INTERVIEW

NAYANIKA MAHTANI

AUTHOR OF *THE GORY STORY OF GENGHIS KHAN*

What made you decide to write a book on Genghis Khan?

The idea was born of my attempt to introduce my daughters to Asian history – and to try and do it in a fun way. As I sifted through sources, I was captivated by this exiled, illiterate, nomadic boy, who defied all the odds to become the world's greatest conqueror. What drew me in further was that there seemed to be staggeringly conflicting reports on him. Was he the vilest of all villains that had ever lived or was he the most farsighted hero the world has seen? I decided it was time to take a trip to the 12th century to do some finding out.

What kind of research did you undertake before writing the story?

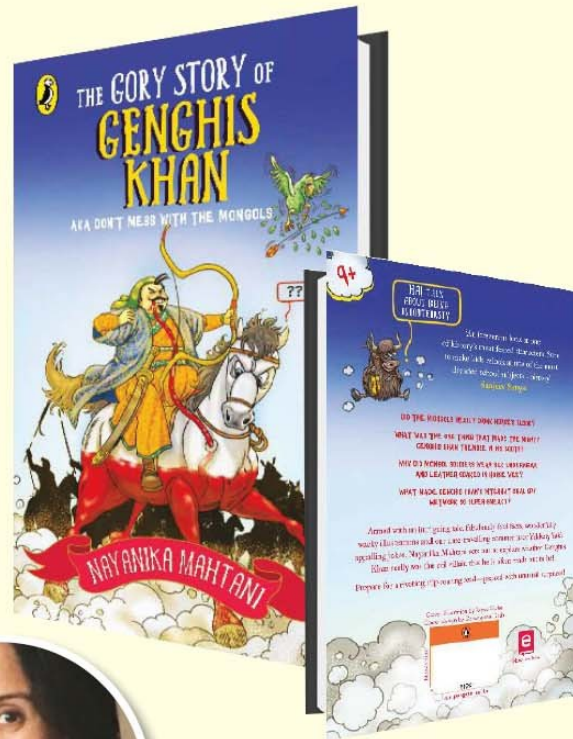
I would haunt the British Library – where the lovely staff would put up with my unending requests for books. My constant writing companion was Urgunge Onon's translation of *The Secret History of the Mongols* – a fabulously rich source of material written shortly after Genghis Khan's death. Other sources include Jack Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* and translated versions of the *Baburnama*, the *Mu'izz al-ansab* (a genealogy of the Chingizids and Timurids), *Il Milione* (The Travels of Marco Polo) and the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* – written by Rashid al-Din, a vizier in the Ilkhanate Mongol Empire in the 14th century.

What was the most fascinating piece of information you learned about Genghis Khan or the Mongols? Did it make it into the book?

To me, the most unusual circumstances of his birth and the prophecy surrounding it sounded straight out of mythology. But, apart from these little nuggets of trivia that the book is peppered with, the most fascinating thing for me was trying to recreate his childhood to uncover what Genghis Khan was like as a boy. It was fabulous to trace his journey through his chequered childhood – and watch the building blocks of his character emerge – which went on to shape not only his destiny, but also to deeply impact our modern world.

The narrative follows a fun format of narration. Tell us how you came upon this idea...

There was a lot of historical information that needed to be packed in, but I really wanted this to be a fun book that invited children in (including reluctant readers and those who 'dreaded history'), to hopefully discover that history is cool and fun and relevant! So I introduced the time-travelling commentator



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and guide Yakkety Yak who takes the kids on this adventure to Mongolia while telling the most appalling jokes. We also meet Yuherdit Hearfurst, the Mongolian reporter from the *Steppe on It show*, who brings us the news faster than anyone else. As also Ireed Thesigns, a Mongol folklore expert – who is really good at reading the signs that the heavens are sending Genghis Khan. Once we had our cast and crew in place, the narrative format just seemed to fit. In my head, I can see this story being played out as a stage production or a film – but my head's always seeing some show or the other. ☺

What projects are you currently working on?

I'm working on my next children's book, apart from a couple of scripts for film/digital media.

Any advice for young budding authors out there?

I learned quite late in life to embrace the possibility of failure – which I find is very liberating. So don't hold back – just go out there and tell your story! No one else can tell it quite like you can. 📖