

THE INTERVIEW

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I have absolute faith that today’s children will not let India’s national animal and the world’s most majestic big cat become extinct. *YOU* can save the tiger. And I just know you will!

Writing for children is a greater challenge, even well-known children’s authors like Paro Anand say so. Did you feel that? Especially when you debuted as a writer with children’s fiction?

I think retaining a child’s interest is harder so you really have to work at keeping them engaged. An adult may put up with a few pages that don’t hold their interest but a child will drop the book the minute it seems prescriptive or dull or just well, not as fun as the Xbox or the Wii or the million other distractions available! Also, an adult who reads does so out of choice but some children are still deciding whether reading is worth their time or not (even if mama, papa or their teacher say it is!) Which is why I’m over the moon when kids who are reluctant readers tell me that they breezed through *Ambushed* and go on to ask when I’ll be writing more stories.

The subtext of *Ambushed* has a sort of dysfunctionality in the protagonist Tara’s parents: a father who wants to return to his roots mid-career and a mother to whom life without city lights is anathema. Do you think writing about gritty subjects for 9- 10-year-olds easily gets past editors, parents, or even schools for the book to reach children? And then, children are also the toughest critics?

I get the feeling that increasingly, us grown ups (the self-appointed gatekeepers!) are realizing that we need to have a conversation with children and young adults about even the gritty subjects, because the world isn’t perfect. Childhood is supposed to be this magical place of discovery but as we well know, sometimes the discoveries can be, well, not so happy. Books can be the lever to prise open the world with and try and make sense of stuff. And they are a terrific icebreaker for those difficult conversations, that we sometimes need to have.

Kids are the toughest critics but what is wonderful is that they are also the most honest. I value a child’s criticism immensely. I wish we listened more to kids’ opinions about the kind of books they would like to read. Their take on the world and flights of imagination never fail to impress me.



Cricket is big game too: Moghiya children of ex-poachers now attend the school set up by the NGO Tiger Watch in Sawai Madhopur.

What do you think of mainstreaming YA fiction? Does it need “prominent platforms” to discuss the serious business of children’s literature?

It is paradoxical that children’s literature is so overlooked, given the crucial role it can play in shaping the world we want to live in. The mainstreaming really needs to happen. We need a movement! To give kids’ lit the shelf space it deserves in bookstores, in libraries, in book festivals, in people’s minds, in children’s lives. And hopefully that exposure will make it much more financially viable for publishers, bookstores, festivals and authors to keep trying to engage more children with the wonderful world of the written word. Incidentally, in recent years, it is children’s literature that is keeping publishers in business. It really needs to be given its rightful place in the sun.

And how much of a role did your own Taras (your daughters) play in the crafting of *Ambushed*?

An absolutely invaluable role! It wouldn’t have happened without them, partly because it was written for them, but mostly because it was written with them, and they came up with all the best ideas! My daughters were aged 11 and 9 at the time I finished writing the first cut and they were the first to read it. Their feedback was that it was ‘alright but could do with more hiccups and mystery’ and then proceeded to give me some excellent suggestions for plot possibilities! And told me to try a bit harder in my next draft! Which I tried to do!

Project Tiger: Your to-do

- **Spread the word** about tiger conservation amongst your friends and family. By saving tigers, we are really saving the forests and the water cycle and ourselves; it’s all inter-connected!
- **Raise funds**—arrange a bake sale/a ‘tiger’ run/a sponsored read/let your imagination go ‘wild’ and support projects and NGOs like Tiger Watch who have dedicated their time here to help save our planet.
- **Start a signature** campaign—to stop the illegal trade of tiger skins and body parts especially in countries such as China and Malaysia who breed tigers on farms to kill them (this is how these countries sidestep the wildlife laws that ban tiger trade as these tigers are then not considered ‘wild’ tigers but their own property!)

There were my consultants on Tara’s gadget geekiness and her strategies to survive exasperating adults (that seemed strangely familiar!).

And, given how tech-challenged I am, they became my in-house studio crew - creating a book trailer for *Ambushed* for me to take on my school tours and to the Jaipur Lit Fest, etc and also a Fur-ocious Tiger Quiz PowerPoint, both of which really seemed to connect with all the many wonderful kids I’ve met on this exciting adventure!