



# Sita Brahmachari interview

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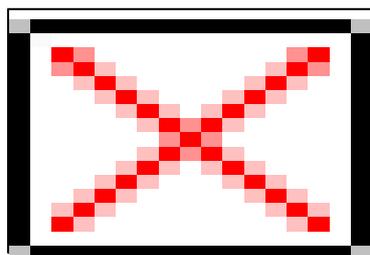
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Sita Brahmachari interviewed.

Sita Brahmachari interview

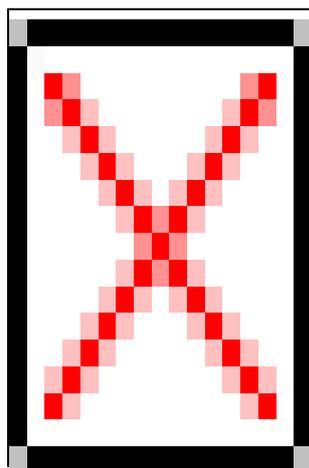
Sita Brahmachari's new novel *Jasmine Skies* explores family history and identity. Anne Joseph interviewed Sita for **Books for Keeps**.

'I was quite an in-your-imagination sort of child but I do remember seeing ghosts,' recalls author Sita Brahmachari. 'As an adult, I remember them as an absolute fact of my childhood.'



It is memory that forms the inspiration behind Brahmachari's second young adult novel, *Jasmine Skies*, in which 14-year-old Mira travels to Kolkata, India for the first time and encounters a world that is far removed from her life in London. The significance of the journey is both a physical and an emotional one; Mira's curiosity propels her to explore her own Indian history and identity and in doing so, she tries to gain a greater understanding of who she is.

Like Mira, Brahmachari was fascinated by her own dual nationality. Brahmachari's father was an Indian doctor from Kolkata and her mother an English nurse from the Lake District. Sitting in her north London kitchen, the sound of the heavy April rain falling outside, she explains that, '*Jasmine Skies* is about contemplation of my father's memories of his own childhood; what he shared with us, my own memories of going to India for the first time and mediating my identity in that.'



She acknowledges that there are some deep elements of autobiography in both her novels but

that her characters, 'are transformed, even those that have a root in reality'. Most of them are a fusion of imagination and people that she has met but she admits that Bimal, Mira's grandfather in *Jasmine Skies*, is firmly based on her father.

Her memory is remarkable. Details are potent. So too are the emotions that accompany recalled events. She says that there is a moment in *Jasmine Skies* where Mira is sitting with her auntie by the river. Mira describes the shadows of the people in the water melting into nothing. Then she realises that she is just a tiny speck in the universe. That realisation happened to Brahmachari as a child but she laughs as she says it is definitely not a moment that her two teenage children have experienced! She says that she 'really remembers being 12 and 14 in an intense way' and this is one of the reasons why she enjoys writing for children because it is an age of such 'intense reality'.

Heritage and culture, family, loss and identity are all recurrent themes in both of Brahmachari's novels. Her award winning debut, *Artichoke Hearts*, won 2011 Waterstones children's book prize and was selected for the Booked Up scheme. It was also longlisted for the 2012 CILIP Carnegie Medal. Not bad for the 'quiet story' Brahmachari thought she had written, as quoted in *The Guardian's* review. It is about how Mira, aged 12, comes to terms with teenage life, first love and her grandmother's death from cancer. Former children's laureate Anthony Browne described it as 'a beautifully written book about family, friendship, grief and hope.'

Brahmachari explains that she tends to start writing her books with symbols. In *Artichoke Hearts* she began with the artichoke charm; a symbol that was transformed into a gift from her husband. He had the charm made according to Brahmachari's description in the book. In *Jasmine Skies* she thought of the kingfisher as being a symbol of her father. She says she remembers sitting by a river with her father, when she was 14, this time in the Lake District. On observing a kingfisher coming to land, her father had told her that the bird was 'a messenger from home'. That scene is adapted in *Jasmine Skies*.

Although her books are strong in their exploration of Anglo - Asian identity, it is apparent that Mira's Jewish identity (her grandmother and father are Jewish) is not examined at all. Again this relates back to Brahmachari's 'root in reality'; her husband is culturally Jewish but not religiously so. She says she imagined that for Mira the 'other' is more present, more obvious. But adds that should she write another Mira story - which she would be interested in doing but not now - that aspect of her identity might be examined.

In writing *Jasmine Skies*, Brahmachari had decided that 'the journey must be fore grounded if it's to be beyond a book about India, if it's to be a book that looks at Diaspora identity and what that actually means'. She says that one of the questions she asks children who have read it is 'whether they can identify going to their own countries that they have contact with and they all say yes'. She says that children from different backgrounds can appreciate the idea of the journey, to a homeland, 'in some ways as the foreigner but with a link into that place. Which is Mira.'

Are Brahmachari's books a means for her to make sense of her own dual heritage, considering her decision to create Mira's background so similar to her own? 'Not in the sense of therapy,' she says, 'but as an adult writer I think when you write about childhood there has to be an element of you. As a child there were things that you were trying to work out. As an adult you have an understanding that stories about such things can enable other children who are grappling with these same ideas.'

Librarians have told her that readers - in particular Asian girls - love the fact that the name Sita Brahmachari is on the cover of the books. Although her books are read widely she says that 'Asian girls pick it up as if it belongs to them.' Additionally, they 'love the character of Priya, [Mira's Indian DJ-ing cousin]. She's not boring. A lot of Indian characters in books are traditional. They feel quite empowered by her.' Brahmachari explains that, 'I had self consciously wanted to create an Indian character who was in many ways more modern than Mira. That's often the experience of the migrant. Specifically, in all-Asian families they are more strict, more traditional here than their Indian cousins.'

But why are there few Anglo-Asian children's writers? Brahmachari isn't sure. She wonders 'whether there's a sense of privacy to a lot of Indian culture. I don't know if that's founded in reality but in terms of communities sticking

together, look at the scandal *Brick Lane* caused.? She believes that there is a new generation of Indian writers - of her age (mid-forties) - who are emerging and cites Sufiya Ahmed (*Henna Girl*) as one. Perhaps, she queries, there isn't yet a realisation that there is a market for such novels.

Brahmachari's background is in theatre and she is currently co-creating *The Arrival*, a theatre-circus production that is inspired by Shaun Tan's graphic novel. She is also working on her next book. Set in the Lake District its protagonist is also a girl, of mixed race but of African heritage; she thinks that all of her stories will have that dual culture aspect to them. ?As a child I remember having books that didn't belong to me,? she says. Fortunately, thanks to Brahmachari, there is a new generation of readers for whom that is no longer the case.

*Jasmine Skies* (978 1 4472 0518 0) and *Artichoke Hearts* (978 0 3305 1791 1) are published by Macmillan at £5.99 each pbk

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