



Big little  
Book  
award

# Nina Sabnani

Illustrator

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Winner 2018



"My dream is to create an anthology of stories based on how the different crafts in our country came to be."

**What role can awards play in the children's literature sector?**

They would certainly encourage the illustrator and attract others to do more for this vast audience. It may also indicate, which this award [The Big Little Book Award] certainly does, that illustration is important and may be taken seriously. At least as seriously as writing, since it is yet another form of communication, using different sensibilities.

**How did you become a children's illustrator?**

I was motivated by the encouragement and trust invested in me by Tulika Publishers. It was almost by accident, since I was primarily an animation film maker and it was one of my

earlier films on the Discovery of Zero that led me to this exciting field. Radhika Menon of Tulika Publishers pursued me relentlessly till I gave in. After I did one book I was tempted to do more, since books reach a much larger and varied audience and when they are translated in multiple languages their reach is amplified even more. Also it allowed me to explore the relationship between words and images, now an area of my research.

### **What was the first story/illustration you did for children?**

The first book I did was All About Nothing for Tulika Publishers. I had made an animated film with the same title on how the idea of zero and place value came about. The publishers approached me to make that into a book. It was a new challenge for me since film is continuous and the image covers the whole screen. Here, I had to be so selective and I am quite sure this has influenced my film making too.

### **Who are some of your favourite illustrators and why?**

My favourites are many but let me first name my teacher K G Subramanyan whose work in illustration has always inspired and intrigued me. In fact I also made an animated film based on his witty Summer Story about a smart crow. For him there was no hierarchy between art and illustration and he played with the memory and prior knowledge of his readers, trusting them to interpret his images in their own way. He never talked down to his readers. Amongst the younger generation in India I admire the work of Priya Kurien, Prashant Miranda, Anitha Balachandran, Kavita Kale and several others who are enthusiastically redefining the terrain and are comfortable using old and new technologies.

### **How can new talent be encouraged in this field?**

Currently those who are in the field of illustration are there for the love of it. I am glad that they are being credited on the covers of books now. In the past their names were not even mentioned. It is not a highly paid job as such. Barring some who can survive on it many have other primary jobs that allow them to practice illustration. So encouragement may come in the form of recognition, awareness of the medium, funds to work in areas of concern with other participants. If illustration can be seen as an equal partner in communication then it will attract illustrators who are not just good with their skills but also interpret words and ideas and see the communication problem from a wider perspective.

### **Is there any type of project you haven't done yet, but dream of doing?**

My dream is to create an anthology of stories based on how the different crafts in our country came to be. I have been collecting stories on origin myths of various arts (A Bhil Story is about how Bhils came to paint) and I am working on some other stories of a similar

nature. But what would be absolutely wonderful to do would be to partner with writers, traditional artists, publishers to bring many of the oral traditions from across India to the fore. Our craft traditions are our intangible inheritance which we must safeguard in multiple ways. There have been wonderful efforts by publishers to familiarize children with the different art forms in India. My first story was on how did someone get the idea of zero and now I would like to explore how did the many art practices/craft traditions in India come about? The anthology would also include information on how children may make something on their own. Besides becoming familiar with the crafts it would make children curious to ask more questions of why things are the way they are and how they may be interpreted in today's context.

**If you had a piece of advice for aspiring illustrators or authors, what would it be?**

I would say talk to the age group you are designing for, involve them in your storytelling, in your image making or at least hear their point of view. Children today are different from when the illustrators or authors were children. To base our stories simply on our own memories would not suffice. Developing a keen observation and using a participatory approach would be certainly more motivating and inspiring.

