

Winners of the Big Little Book Award 2020, illustrator Rajiv Eipe and author Subhadra Sen Gupta discuss the art of telling stories without words and writing for children

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The power of images



Broad strokes Rajiv Eipe's (inset) illustration in the book *A Book For Puchku* by Deepanjana Pal. • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Rajiv Eipe's first illustrations were for Geeta Dharmarajan's *Dinosaur-Long-As-127-Kids* (Katha, 2010) telling the story of a one-of-its-kind Dino that loved taking children for rides. Since then, the illustrator has been bringing different characters to life. This year's winner of Big Little Book Award 2020 in the illustrators category, Rajiv dedicates his award "to all the wonderful illustrators doing amazing and inspiring work in children's books in India".

He adds over phone from Parag, "It is inspiring to see organisations recognising and shining a light on people working in the children's literature space. There is so much work happening right now that it is good to see it being encouraged." Besides illustrating, Rajiv also runs Plankton Collective, a small animation studio in Bengaluru, with two friends from his design school.

Edited excerpts from an interview:

Tell us about your passion for art.

● I started drawing at an early age. I didn't know that one could make a career out of drawing pictures for books at that stage. One could either be a fancy artist displaying paintings in galleries, or paint signboards and hoardings. I must have discovered book illustration around the time when I

was in Art College (J J School of Art, Mumbai).

Tell us the process/research that you follow before illustrating a children's book?

● It begins with rough drawings and style options after having read the manuscript to get a sense of who the characters are, what the final page of the book might look like, whether the illustration style matches the tone of a story. After discussions with the art director and editor, a clear direction emerges. That helps to make rough thumbnail layouts of the entire book, and to have a glimpse of the story's flow. Then, I create final illustrations. The average timeline for a picture book is usually three months.

What are the challenges when creating illustrations for a children's book and a comic book/graphic novel?

● The challenge is to make a career in illustration financially viable. In terms of the actual work, the main challenge is to make sure the illustrations serve the story. You need to be able to maintain some level of consistency throughout the illustrations of a longish book, and make sure the illustration adds something to the story, and is not just a repetition of the text.

What are the skills that budding illustrators have to develop to sustain in the field?

● Besides good drawing and composition skills, it helps to have some amount of patience and empathy. Also, a love for books and storytelling, an eye for detail, and a willingness to accept criticism and accommodate different ideas and viewpoints.

Considering the importance of visual storytelling in children's books, do you feel illustrators are not given due credit?

● I haven't personally experienced this. I have found, in the children's publishing industry, that illustrators are valued and respected as much as authors. But in general, people working in children's literature aren't given enough credit and importance for the incredible work they do.



Complex concepts in simple stories



Words matter
The Teenage Diary of Jahanara by (inset) Subhadra Sen Gupta
• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

gauge what they liked and what they did not because kids are, thankfully, not polite and tell me. No kid will ever say my book was 'nice'. Also, if they like my books, I become a friend and they write freely.

Who are the writers that you admire?

● The one I am thinking of right now is John Le Carre. I am addicted to detective fiction and at one time dreamed of being the Agatha Christie of India. I read a lot of history, especially Ramachandra Guha, Upinder Singh and my favourite: Abraham Eraly.

Most of your books revolve around history. What would be your tip for budding writers on writing history that people want to read?

● First, e-mail me. I'll guide you so you don't see a fat history book and have a panic attack. There are ways to research and ways to use the information cleverly. I am offering my experience of 30 years of panic attacks.

Did you write through the pandemic?

● In the beginning, I froze. Somehow the silence and isolation got to me. I realised how much I needed my family and friends, and just getting out of the house to freshen my mind. Yet, one book is nearly done, again around the life of people in the past like *Let's Go Time Travelling*. This time by request from the children. One kid wrote to me ordering I 'make' a book about people in the past. So I obey.

took children's writing seriously. There were no awards, and even commissions from publishers were difficult. I have gone through all that. So now, the more awards we have, the better. I am happy to be a part of the work that Parag and Tata Trusts are doing.

Your latest book *The Constitution of India for Children* (illustrated by Tapas Guha) deconstructs the constitution in a simple language. Tell us, what about your writing process is both challenging and exciting?

● You have to be conscious all the time that you are talking to a child and keep in mind their level of understanding. For example, complicated concepts like democracy or secularism needed to be explained. But I do not preach to them. Even a 10-year-old notices and understands much more than we think. There is a clarity and logic in children that helps me present complex subjects and know they will understand. I have discussed everything from the caste system to religious tolerance and have been amazed at how they respond.

Most of your books have your email id at the end for your young readers to give feedback. Has this interaction given you new insights?

● A few years ago, I began to save the mails in a separate folder and it has nearly 300 mails, some from adults, and from all across the world. I just helped an American high school student with her project. The feedback helps me

In the year of the pandemic, there has been good news for writer Subhadra Sen Gupta and illustrator Rajiv Eipe, who were honoured with the Big Little Book Award 2020 for their significant contribution to Indian children's literature. An initiative of Parag (Tata Trusts), The Big Little Award aims to create a platform for parents, young readers, schools and publishers to connect and spread the joy of reading good children's books.

Every year, one Indian language author is chosen for the award; in its fifth edition this year, English is the selected language. Subhadra was among two people selected from 318 nominations by the jury.

Subhadra's forte is historical writing, which reflects in her books. In her three-decade journey as a writer, she has written over 60 books, a majority of them for children. Balancing her career in advertising (for two decades), she has been able to carve a niche with her inimitable writing style. Explaining complex concepts in a simple but engaging way is a hallmark of her books in different genres — fiction, non-fiction, travel, scripts, and comics.

Edited excerpts from an email interview:

For someone who has been writing for children for so many years, it must have been an amazing feeling to win the award.

● Oh yes. It was a beam of sunlight after a very cold, grey year. I was surprised at how happy I felt. It's a great feeling of validation of all your work. Most importantly, it is about children. For 30 years, I've been talking to children and it has been worth it. For years, not many people

