

PEN PAPER DREAMS

THE MAGAZINE



Featuring conversations with Kiran Manral, Priya Hajela, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Madhulika Liddle, Kavita Kanani & Jumana Lokhandwala

April 2026 | Issue #2

FROM THE EDITOR

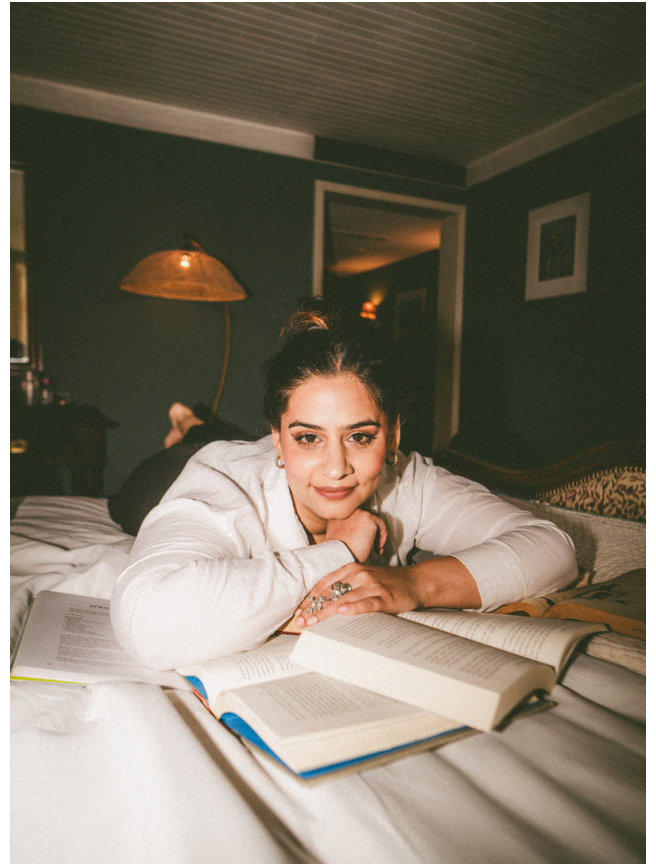
Dear Reader,

Welcome to the second edition of Pen Paper Dreams' digital magazine.

If our first issue was about protecting creativity in childhood, this issue asks what it means to return to it in adulthood.

Across these pages, we explore writing not simply as craft, but as a way of paying attention - to memory, to the body, to silence, to longing, and to the quieter parts of ourselves that often get drowned out by speed and routine.

This edition brings together conversations with authors and poets whose work explores identity, interiority, migration, history, and emotional truth; a roundtable on slowing down and reconnecting with the body; a deep dive into India's growing snail mail culture as a return to analogue intimacy; and a reflection on the women's writing circle we



recently began in Mumbai - an experiment in showing up for our words, even imperfectly.

At Pen Paper Dreams, we continue to build spaces where writing can exist outside performance: as reflection, exploration, and presence.

Thank you for reading. I hope something in these pages helps you pause long enough to hear your own voice a little more clearly.

Amanda Sodhi
Founder, Pen Paper Dreams

A black and white photograph serves as the background. On the left, a bouquet of small, delicate flowers is visible. On the right, the silhouette of a woman is shown, her form partially obscured by shadows. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

THE
TRUEST
STORIES
BEGIN WHEN
WOMEN
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ONE THING.

In Conversation with KIRAN MANRAL

An award-winning author, TEDx speaker, and columnist, Kiran Manral explores the inner lives of women with striking honesty in books like The Reluctant Detective, Saving Maya, and The Kitty Party Murder. Moving across genres, her work resists easy labels while returning to themes of identity, complexity, and quiet defiance. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on her evolution as a writer and the courage it takes to tell uncomfortable, deeply human stories.

You've written 18 books. What feels like the biggest shift in your writing journey?

I would say my biggest shift has been that I wrote my very first book on a whim, now I write intentionally. It has been a shift from being totally cavalier about the writing process, to now being able to say, with just the slightest imposter syndrome, that I am a writer. Early on, I was writing to get my mother off my back to have a book published and perhaps to prove to myself that I could be a published author if I chose to. Now I write to prove that I am worth being published and read to myself. It is not a need to impress anyone, but to impress the toughest person to impress, myself. If I read bits of any of my recently published books now, pause and think to myself, wow, I wrote that, then I feel vindicated. All the long hours at the desk from morning to night feel worth it.

I am also more courageous now, I write about uncomfortable things. Women who don't fit into neat boxes. Women who do uncharacteristic and unlikeable things. Older women as protagonists, women who are bipolar, women who leave their children and go away, women who have sex for the sake of pleasure. I no longer tie things up in





neat endings, I am comfortable with unresolved endings, keeping things contradictory and flawed. It comes from realising that life doesn't always offer any closure, only continuance.

My shift has also been from observation to interiority. I observe keenly, but I am drawn over and over again to the interiority of the lives of women. The silences, the negotiations, the unspoken bargains they strike with themselves.

Do you see a clear thread that connects all your books, even as they span multiple genres?

The primary thread is the interior life of women. Through my fiction, non-fiction, whether the humour or the darker books, I find myself circling the same questions and trying to answer them differently. What does it mean to be a woman in this world we inhabit, our smaller circles of apartment buildings, our families, our cities, our country, the world? What do we carry that is unseen, unacknowledged? What do we give up without question, without resistance, without framing it as a loss to ourselves? How do we find our moments of defiance, no matter how small? I think this layers all of what I write.

Do you approach each new book differently, or have you now found a system that works for you? What's harder for you, starting a new book or finishing one?

I don't think I have a system except for being at the desk from morning to night. I've realised that every book will find its own method. Some books will require meticulous planning. Other books unfold themselves only as I write. But the only system that works is discipline, let no one tell you otherwise. To keep writing even when you are unsure, when you've just received yet another rejection in your inbox, when writing feels like it is words on the page, and nothing that stirs up your own heart. I have learnt to not wait for any certainty when it comes to writing.

The starting is easy, the sustaining is what is difficult. Reaching the end is difficult. Finding an ending that works for me is the most difficult, I have organised over endings for months because I hate endings that are cut and dried and resolved. There is a stamina in staying the course with the work, as a writer, and seeing the book to the end. Of course, there is always a moment of doubt while starting. Does this idea have enough life in it? Am I the right person to tell this story? Once you have crossed that threshold, the struggle is to stay the course.

How do you avoid repeating yourself, especially when you've written across genres and themes?

I think some repetition is inevitable, perhaps necessary. I don't consciously try to avoid repetition or include it, it creeps in, in different forms. We return to the same questions all the time, don't we, and struggle to find the answers to those questions, which is what I think all writing is about. We keep asking the same questions in different forms all through our lives. Time changes the lens through which we ask those questions. Age too, life circumstances, the experiences we go through. But then even if the theme is similar, the genre differences make the treatment different. Writing something from the humorous lens demands a very different treatment from writing it in the noir genre. The act of working with the craft of a specific genre creates a certain distance from repetition.

What recurring truths about Indian women do you find yourself returning to in your work?

I've realised that women are far more complex than the narratives around them. The narratives that are safe and palatable in public discourse. Women are layered, emotional, intuitive, yes, but they can also be ambitious, cut-throat, highly sexual, non maternal, even evil. Women are not allowed to be 'bad' in the public discourse. Boxing them into convenient labels of good, kind, accommodating, maternal, constrains women to make them convenient.

I keep returning to the idea of invisible labour - emotional, relational, domestic. Every woman carries that load unquestioningly most times and for years, until perhaps menopause hits and our hormones deplete, allowing us a clarity that removes the need to perform to a script that does not favour our own wellbeing. Women are always taught to make themselves smaller, quieter, more accommodating. When the resistance happens, there is no stopping it. And there's loneliness - within marriages, within families, within seemingly full lives. It is something I find myself writing about over and over again.

You've worked in advertising and journalism as well. How have these experiences shaped your writing process?

In advertising I learnt the importance of writing to an audience. Writing something to sell. How to make it land, to use words to persuade. Rhythm, punch, to hold attention. In journalism I learnt to work under deadlines, in chaos, to stick to facts, to build a narrative, to pry out what is the most important in a story. Both taught me discipline. deadlines, consistency, the ability to produce even when inspiration is absent. I think the most important thing I learnt is to respect the reader and to be grateful for their time and attention. They don't owe you that, you have to provide them value for their time.

Many people in India feel intimidated by writing because of how it's taught in school. How would you encourage them to reconnect with writing in a more personal, freeing way?

I think if people read more, they would want to write. The thing is not to write thousands of words in one day but to write 500 words, which is one page in a day over a few months. Forget all writing advice that does not resonate with you. There is no correct or incorrect way to write, the only way to write is to write. It isn't an exam, it is a way of letting your thoughts flow onto the page or the screen and transcribing the world to yourself. Start small, write a paragraph, a page. Take notes wherever you are. Feel the moments deeply. Experience life and then put it down in words. Look at nature. Don't worry about grammar or structure initially - if you read enough they will come to you.

To help writers on their journey, I founded The Story Company India, where we have wonderful workshops to help writers across stages, from raw beginners, to writers looking to sharpen their craft.





As AI enters the creative space, what do you think the future holds for writers and storytelling?

Storytelling will change. Human storytelling will always be more complex, more emotional and deep felt. I am not a purist, I think AI will intrude into all forms of creativity, and all we can do is confront it, look it in the face and stand our ground. Eventually the dross will sift out, and human storytelling will learn to collaborate with AI. While AI can generate text, mimic style, even produce coherent narratives, it doesn't bring a lived life with all its richness into its storytelling, it does not live a life. It cannot carry memory, or experience the depths of loss, longing, desire, regret, all of which inform human writing, in very individual ways. I feel authenticity and the lived experience with unique styles of writing will prevail eventually.

What is a writing prompt you recommend for people exploring creative writing for the first time?

Sit in a public place, observe those around you. Start filling in the back story that seems interesting to you, create a narrative around that person. I believe you can only build a story when your protagonist is clear as a real person in your mind. This is a good first step to learn to build a character, a protagonist.

SOME
THINGS
DESERVE
TIME.



You've Got (Snail) Mail!

WE SUBSCRIBED TO 14

Everyone is tired of the digital overload, so the return to analogue rituals feels less like nostalgia and more like a necessity. It perhaps explains why snail mail clubs – thoughtfully curated envelopes filled with letters, art, stickers, and keepsakes, any tiny slices of someone's inner world – have quietly found a niche audience in India, too.

At Pen Paper Dreams, we briefly ran our own snail mail club for three months before realising just how much labour, intention, and cost goes into sustaining one (we eventually paused it). Between ideation, packaging, sourcing, and shipping, the economics of slow mail are far from simple. So when we noticed a fresh wave of new snail mail clubs emerging, we were curious – what exactly makes one worth subscribing to?

We began with a list of 25 India-based snail mail clubs and eventually narrowed it down to 14 we successfully received. (One went missing, one didn't ship to India, some were inactive or unresponsive, and a few simply didn't align with what we personally look for in snail mail.) Out of these, 13 were paid for by us, while one – Stardust Explores – was gifted.

Prices ranged from Rs. 99 to Rs. 641 per envelope; we wanted to understand what subscribers are really paying for: stationery, art, community, or connection.

What arrived was more revealing than expected. Some envelopes felt deeply personal, like hearing from an old friend. Others were visually stunning but emotionally distant. Some proved stuffing an envelope with extras isn't the same thing as creating an experience. That's perhaps the most important thing we learnt – snail mail works best when it aligns with the experience the recipient is seeking.

For some, letters might be at the heart of it – the emotional texture, a real voice. For others, it might be intentional design – all pieces speaking

the same visual language so an envelope feels curated rather than randomly assembled.

We also realised that more items doesn't always mean better value. Some subscriptions sent many inserts, but quantity competed with usability. A well-made magnet, a trinket box, or an interactive activity can stay with you longer.

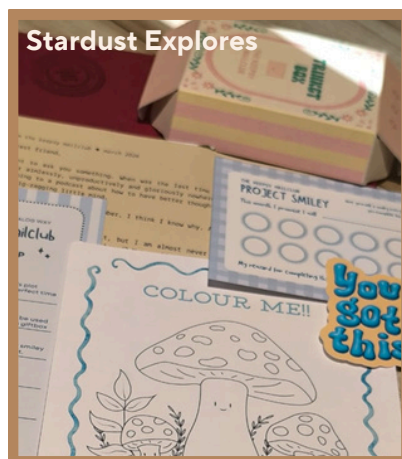
And finally, small things mattered far more than expected – signatures, edition names, context in letter continuity for first-time readers, even simply mentioning the creator's handle. In a format built on intimacy, these tiny omissions shape whether something feels personal or transactional.

After 14 subscriptions, one thing became clear – good snail mail isn't about how much arrives in the envelope. It's about intention. The best mail clubs understand that subscribers are not just buying paper – they're buying pause, personality, and presence.



Price vs Inclusions (Sorted Lowest to Highest)

Snail Mail Club	Price	Inclusions	Best For
@hungrypandas mailclub	₹99	Signed letter, maze activity card, art print, stickers, art explanation insert	Budget subscribers who enjoy themed stationery
@findingyourrain bow. studio	₹139	Signed letter, stickers, bookmark, postcard, colouring sheet, crossword puzzle	Readers who enjoy interactive snail mail
@stardust_explores	₹200	Letter, colouring sheet, punch card, sticker, DIY trinket box, content insert	Subscribers who enjoy experimentation
@amarai_tales	₹249	Letter, colouring sheets, art print, bookmark, phone charm, welcome card	Casual stationery lovers
@forestberr.y	₹256.45	Signed letter, zine, art print, sticker, activity card	Readers seeking balance across all categories
@star.and.paper	₹356.59	Signed letter, postcard, calendar card, sticker	Minimalists
@elysian.vibes	₹359	Signed letter, art print, bookmark	Readers seeking emotional resonance
@mixed.monet	₹367.83	Signed letter, two art prints, sticker, zine, art explanation insert	Experimental art lovers
@oldschoolmoth	₹408.70	Letter, premium postcard, kantha embroidery bookmark, art explanation insert	Readers who value emotional intimacy over aesthetics
@stoberimoo	₹420	Letter, art print, handmade bookmark, stickers	Lovers of cosy, character-driven snail mail
@coo.collective	₹499	Signed letter, stickers, note cards, calendar card, postcard, personalised welcome note	Design-first subscribers
@ubad_khaabad	₹530	Signed letter, two art prints, stickers	Readers prioritising personality over polish
@thecozyquirky	₹570	Letter, activity inserts, stickers, postcard	Subscribers who enjoy abundance and interactivity
@the.ginnipatch	₹641	Thick design sheets, bookmarks, paper fan, art explanation insert	Paper collectors





Ranking by Letter

Snail Mail Club	Score
@forestberr.y	5/5
@oldschoolmoth	5/5
@stoberimoo	4/5
@elysian.vibes	4/5
@findingyourrainbow. studio	4/5
@mixed.monet	4/5
@coo.collective	3/5
@stardust_explores	2.5/5
@thecozyquirky	2.5/5
@tamarai_tales	2.5/5
@ubad_khaabad	2.5/5
@hungrypandasmailclub	2.5/5
@star.and.paper	2/5
@the. ginnipatch	0/5

Ranking by Goodies

Snail Mail Club	Score
@coo.collective	5/5
@forestberr.y	4.5/5
@stoberimoo	4.5/5
@stardust_explores	4/5
@thecozyquirky	4/5
@tamarai_tales	3.5/5
@findingyourrainbow. studio	3/5
@elysian.vibes	3/5
@hungrypandasmailclub	3/5
@mixed.monet	2.5/5
@oldschoolmoth	2.5/5
@ubad_khaabad	2.5/5
@star.and.paper	2/5
@the. ginnipatch	1/5

Note: aesthetics and emotional resonance are very subjective. Every creator in this space is putting in time, care, and effort to sustain something analogue in a digital-first world - this piece is simply our honest, personal experience of the mail we received. Each brand's pricing and snail mail contents may evolve - check their IG handle

HOME
IS WHAT
WE
REBUILD
FROM
MEMORY.



In Conversation with PRIYA HAJELA

Having authored multiple short stories, Priya Hajela's debut novel - Ladies' Tailor - offers a nuanced exploration of displacement, identity and resilience. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on migration, storytelling, and the quiet act of rebuilding one's life.

You've lived across cities and countries - Ludhiana, Delhi, Pune, and the US. How has your understanding of "home" evolved over time? Has it ever felt fragmented or fluid?

It's interesting that you ask this. Not only have I lived in the cities you've mentioned, I also left Ludhiana for boarding school when I was 8 years old, first to Simla and later at Sanawar. My parents separated and my mother moved to Chandigarh with her mother. My father moved to Delhi. We left for the US when I finished school, where also we wandered till I met my husband and got married. My concept of home was disjointed and broken till I created a home of my own. We moved around even after our marriage, but this time, it was planned, organized...fluid. We have created and dismantled several homes in the past 33 years of married life - but each one has been precious, rooted, and focused on continuity vs. the shuttling around and walking away that happened in my childhood.

How important is writing in the life of an immigrant - not just as creative expression, but as a way of documenting memory and making sense of displacement?

I don't think all immigrants write, in fact most probably don't. But life as an immigrant forces you to see things that people who have lived in one place never do. It enables you to see cities that are welcoming vs. cities that are closed. It shows you the people who differentiate between born and bred vs. settled. It provides perspective and vision that non-wanderers



never have. It is this way of looking at places and people that gives immigrants who want to write a superpower. Being an immigrant doesn't necessarily mean I feel displaced. It means that wherever I go, I look for wanderers like me and in them I find kindred spirits.

Writing about trauma can be complex. How did you approach portraying its emotional truth without oversimplifying it? What kind of research or personal inquiry went into building a narrative that feels historically grounded and emotionally intimate?

You write what you know is simplistic especially when it comes to larger historical content but it isn't when it comes to emotions. It is hard to write about emotions you haven't experienced unless you go very deep into your character, which is possible but only when the moment strikes. I can't sit at my desk and simply write what Simrat felt when she left her home in Sukho. I have to either draw that emotion from



memory or become her. Because I left first one place, then the next and on to a third in the span of one summer break, I taught myself detachment. I didn't want to leave my father's home and go to my mother's but I had to and so I did. I didn't want to leave my mother's home to go to my grandmother's but I had to and so I did. I stored away my favourite places, my time with my Nani's dog, her mango trees, and so on and packed up and left.

You've written short stories before - how different was it to step into the scale of a novel? Did developing sustained characters and arcs change your writing process? Does outlining help you, or do you prefer discovering the story as you write?

I have written short stories against my will. They are not satisfying to write, not fulfilling for the soul, and not pleasing to my muse. I like writing characters that evolve, transform, do bad things, repent, do good things, are arrogant, then humble - a little hard to do in the span of a short story. I wrote the ones I did because I needed to get a little work out while I continued to ponder my novels. I outline a storyline before I start writing. What works best for me is the NaNoWriMo strategy. I write 50,000 words in a month after I've done a little reading, but not too much. I get the story out using this process. That first draft evolves over years into the final. I take many detours into lots of research and reading.

Many people hesitate to write because they associate it with judgment or academic pressure. Could you share a simple writing prompt or exercise that might help them begin exploring their own stories, especially those rooted in memory or identity?

The first thing I wrote was my perspective of mother's life. My mother was bi-polar. I didn't understand her illness. Writing about it helped me understand what she had gone through. I would recommend writing about what you

don't understand, what is complex in your life, what makes you wonder, "why me?" I find this kind of writing to be therapeutic and cathartic. You may not come away with anything concrete but you will have parsed through your thoughts, broken them down into smaller components and will be able to begin understanding their structure - without judgement or any pressure. Once you do this, you can take those smaller components and rebuild them into a story that's not about you but about someone or something else entirely.

***Ladies' Tailor* moves through multiple geographies - from pre-Partition Punjab to refugee camps to Delhi. How did you think about the idea of "home" while writing the book? Also, does the novel draw from your paternal grandparents' migration journey?**

I write about twelve different homes in the book. From Sukho to Patel Nagar to Nizamuddin, to Lahore and more. I didn't realize I had done that. I described each home in great detail. I realized while evaluating displacement and homes in the book that I was obsessed with the idea of home and it was coming through in my writing. The fact that it aligned beautifully with my subject - Partition - was convenient, almost.

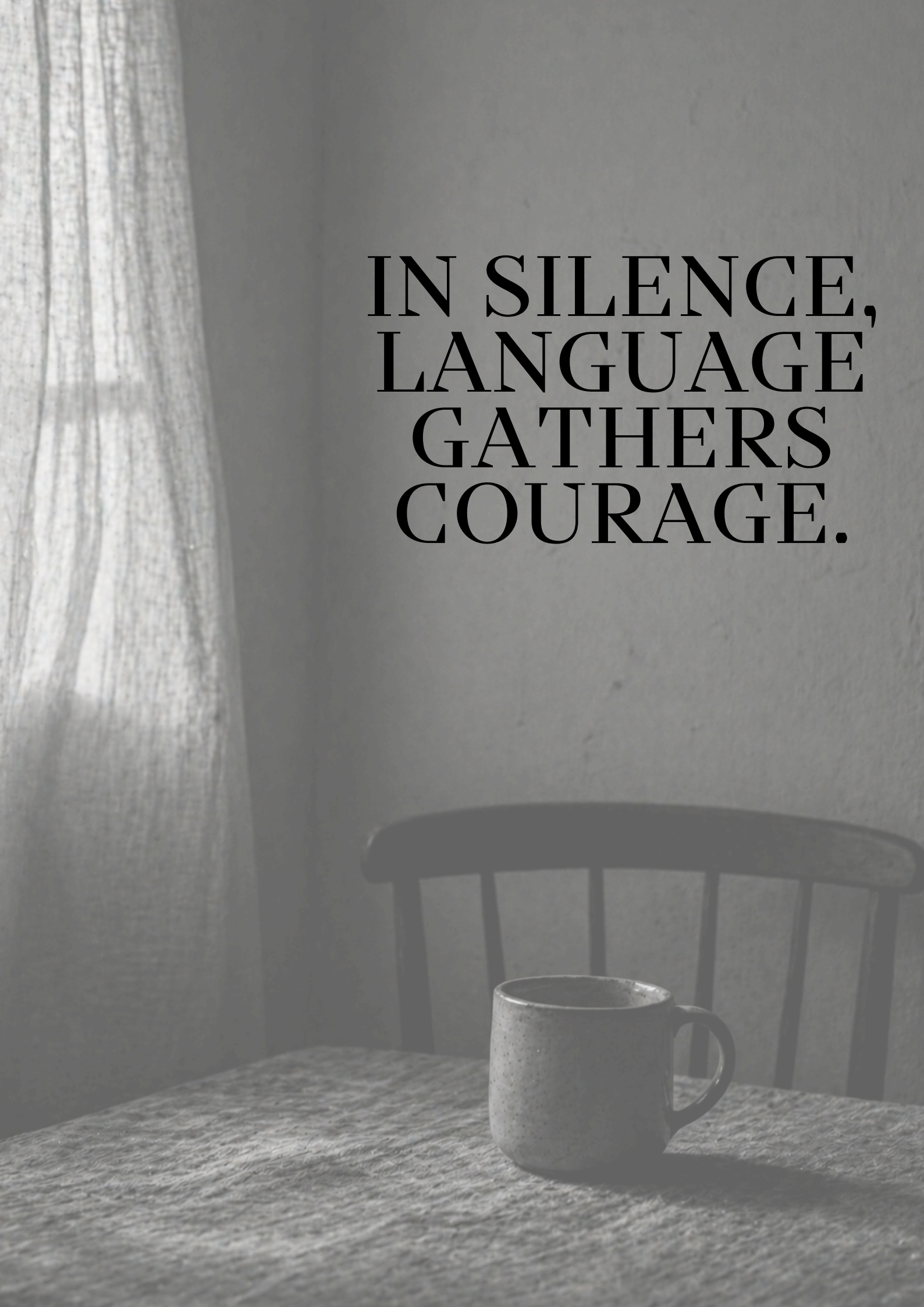
My paternal grandparents did leave Pakistan and come to India. But my book is not based on their story at all. They didn't talk about what happened. My father opened up a bit after he read my book. Their time in their former home was discussed a little but not too much but the journey, not at all. So, *Ladies' Tailor* is all fictional.

Your novel captures both loss and rebuilding. Does this theme of rupture and renewal / repair come up in what you're writing next?

After the idea of home, my next major obsession is stories of repair and renewal, surviving and then thriving. Hard work, perseverance, commitment, these pay off. Taking risks, moving your life forward, never resting on your laurels, these are principles I live by. My next book is a prequel to *Ladies' Tailor*. It is based on the premise that adventurism runs in families.



IN SILENCE,
LANGUAGE
GATHERS
COURAGE.



In Conversation with

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

One of India's most distinctive contemporary poetic voices, Arundhathi Subramaniam is known for works like *When God Is a Traveller* and *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, which explore spirituality, language, and the inner life with rare sensitivity. Her writing dwells in the space between sound and silence, offering a reflective engagement with both poetry and lived experience. Her work has been translated into several languages. In this conversation with *Pen Paper Dreams*, she speaks about attention, creative stillness, and the evolving voice of poetry today.

Your work often feels deeply attentive - to language, to silence, to the inner life. What does writing allow you to notice that everyday living might not?

The British poet Ruth Padel's mother, a scientist and sceptic, after being persuaded to attend a poetry reading, reportedly said, "I see the point of poets now. They notice things."

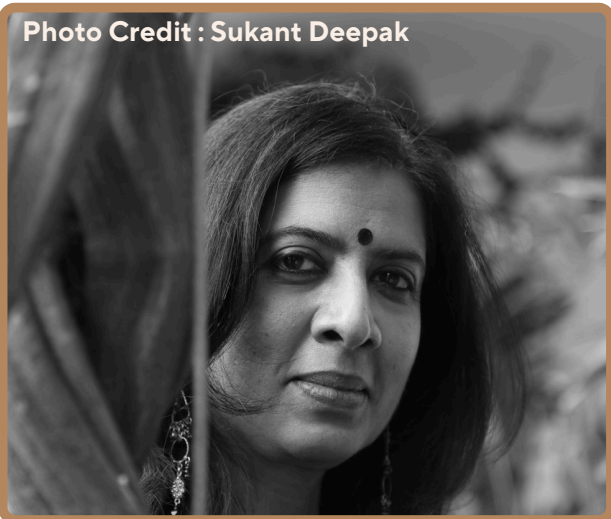
That sums it up, doesn't it? Poets do notice things. Of course, if you are excited by poetry, you're likely to be a reasonably attentive person, anyway. But you can also hone that skill. Writing is like exercising a muscle. The more you sharpen that skill, the more attentive you become. And the more attentive you are, the more skilled you become. When you watch the best dancers in performance, you see that: their movement is the listening.

When you find that alignment - between labour and listening, effort and eavesdropping - you're 'in the zone', as they say. You are also in a more spacious place inside yourself, and that's always a good place to be!



Photo Credit: Meetesh Taneja

Photo Credit : Sukant Deepak



You've spoken about the idea of "meditative waiting" in writing. In a world that rewards speed and output, how do you protect that space of waiting?

I suppose I try to wait for a strong inner imperative. When asked what I'm working on – a polite question people feel obliged to ask writers -- I don't hesitate to say 'nothing'. When asked when my next book is due, I often say, 'I don't know.' And that's the truth! When a book is done, I'm truly unsure if I will ever feel the need to write another.

Even hatching an idea for a book takes time. Only sometimes does it happen full-blown and with complete clarity. Then you realize a kind of subterranean preparation was already underway. It happened with the recent anthology, *Wild Women*. I boarded a flight to India with the germ of an idea, and by the time I landed, I knew the book had to happen. It would take time and effort, I was aware. But on some level, the book had already been birthed! My work for the next five years was just to give it form and shape.

Anyway, the good thing about poetry is that no one's really clamouring for you to write your next book! There's probably a certain gratitude if you actually choose to remain silent. So, there's plenty of indirect encouragement for waiting!

And still, waiting isn't passivity. It's like sitting by the waterfront without feeling obliged to go fishing. Not looking for the next poem, the next word, the next idea, the next catch – that's the kind of sacred witnessing I believe we need more of.

You've described poetry as a distillation of sound and pause. How did your own

journey with language – and perhaps silence – shape this understanding?

I fell into silence in 1997. It's as simple – and as strange – as that! And when I began surfacing from that wordless place – with relief, I might add – and when daytime consciousness and language began to return, I began to understand poems more deeply.

I saw that the poetic element of rhythm – which I love – is as much about pause as it is about sound. So, why was I so preoccupied with sound? Why was I so caught up with the word? I started paying more attention to silence, because I now knew – experientially – that that is the place from which all sound and image emanate.

This changed the way in which I made poems. Not right away; it took many years to integrate this understanding. But in the long run, it made me less anxious, more trusting of the process, more alert to inner cues rather than the clamour of cultural opinion.

Your writing engages with spirituality in a way that feels exploratory rather than prescriptive. How do you navigate that space without becoming didactic?

Because I see myself as a traveller, not an evangelist. Didacticism never worked with me, anyway. I have always needed to feel a teacher is coming from a place of experience, not borrowed opinion; a place of integration, not glibness.

In any case, on a spiritual path, the uncertainties don't go away. They only deepen. You are just learning to live with them. It takes skill to swim, as well as a certain attunement to the tides. So, both life-sense and alignment, practice and trust, are imperative.

I've found a non-verbal spiritual tool – a kriya yoga practice – has helped me find a balance between skill and trust. That has to be worked at every single day. Poetry helps, too. Because it doesn't demand foolproof conclusions. It's okay to look foolish and blundering in a poem -- as long as you're doing it with some artistry and authenticity!

How do you know when something wants to become a poem rather than an essay or a longer piece of prose? Is it the sense of urgency?

I don't write fiction, so my prose is not born of a story-telling impulse. It's more about the impulse to make frames: to create a window through which a subject can be viewed or contemplated.

I would create a prose window only if I feel that the subject needs to be unpacked in a particular way. Otherwise, I'd stay with poetry.

I love the lyric poem because it is the purest form I know. It's as close as language can come to the furnace of living experience. Prose, on the other hand, is, for me, a springboard — an invitation to leap into the joyful non-linearity of a poem. This is what my introductory essays in anthologies like *Eating God* and *Wild Women* hope to do. They invite you to dive into a language that works with a very different logic. The essays describe an experience; the poems distill it.

But let me be fair. Prose has its own rewards. I enjoy playing with the lucid and the lyrical, with statement and image, the explanatory and the atmospheric. The two obviously aren't watertight categories. In my book, *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, for instance, the essays lead up to the poems, and the poems clear the way for the essays.

Poetry can feel intimidating to many readers. What do you think poetry offers that other forms of writing cannot?

A respite from too much meaning. In a world choked by language, we need a break from information – and prejudice masquerading as information – more than ever.

I often tell people who are perplexed by modern poetry: hang in there. Keep returning. Don't try too hard. If you give it time, the magic will happen.

Poetry is not emphatically not chopped-up prose. It is a joyous kinetic ride of sound and sense and silence – all at once. One cannot be extricated from the other. If you pull one out, the whole rollercoaster will collapse!

You take the ride for the sheer pleasure of it. It can be a slow ride, or a fast one; a short ride, or a long one. Insights dawn, and vanish. Meaning flashes by, and slips out of your grasp. It doesn't matter. You're there for the experience, not the takeaway. And when you emerge, you're not always sure of what just happened. But you feel more alive, more clarified, more you.

Today's world often demands speed and constant output. What does it mean to cultivate a slower, more reflective creative practice?

We are picking up a great deal of anxiety that isn't ours. When you start writing from a

quieter place within yourself, you also learn how many of your anxieties are borrowed. So, dig deeper. That would be my suggestion. Once you start clearing out some of the debris, you find more breathable ways to be yourself.

Are we losing touch with our inner voice, or are we simply not making enough space to hear it?

Why do you want to write poems? It helps to start with that question. For a pat on the back from a social media follower? For an invitation to a lit fest? For a chance to brandish a book with your name on it? You don't have to feel guilty for wanting those things. But I don't believe any of that makes you a poet.

The way I see it, a poet is one who isn't looking for badges. She loves language, but doesn't trust the easy line, the catchphrase, the culturally fashionable trend, the politically correct opinion, or the seductions of instant applause. She doesn't trust processed or packaged language. She wants to hang out in those archaeological digs where language – if at all it is found -- is alive and scorching, demanding and unpredictable.

I have a poem called 'Memo' that speaks of the importance of finding 'the right gaze':

Not the conference
of hungry eyes

but the fellowship
of those who stand aslant,

multilingual,
listening...

Once you subscribe to the conference of hungry eyes, it's difficult to hear your inner voice. The climate of scarcity and mean-spiritedness, the oscillation between chronic self-doubt and grandiosity, resentment and egotism, is insidious. My way is to try to return to 'the fellowship of



Photo Credit: Meetesh Taneja



Photo Credit : Sukant Deepak

those who stand aslant'. At times, it can seem like a fellowship of dead poets! But communities are found in strange places, and living poets do turn up, thankfully, at periodic intervals.

With the rise of Instagram poetry and performance spaces like poetry slams, how do you see poetry evolving today? Do these forms expand the space for poetry, or change it in fundamental ways?

It's an exciting time for poetry. As domains expand, our definitions of poetry will, as well. As someone who enjoys reading poems aloud, I'm delighted at the resurgence of orality.

But while we may enjoy the high-voltage performance poem, we will never stop needing the less flashy, more nourishing, more considered utterance. There will always be a need for poems that are cooked over a slow fire. Or so I believe on days when I feel optimistic!

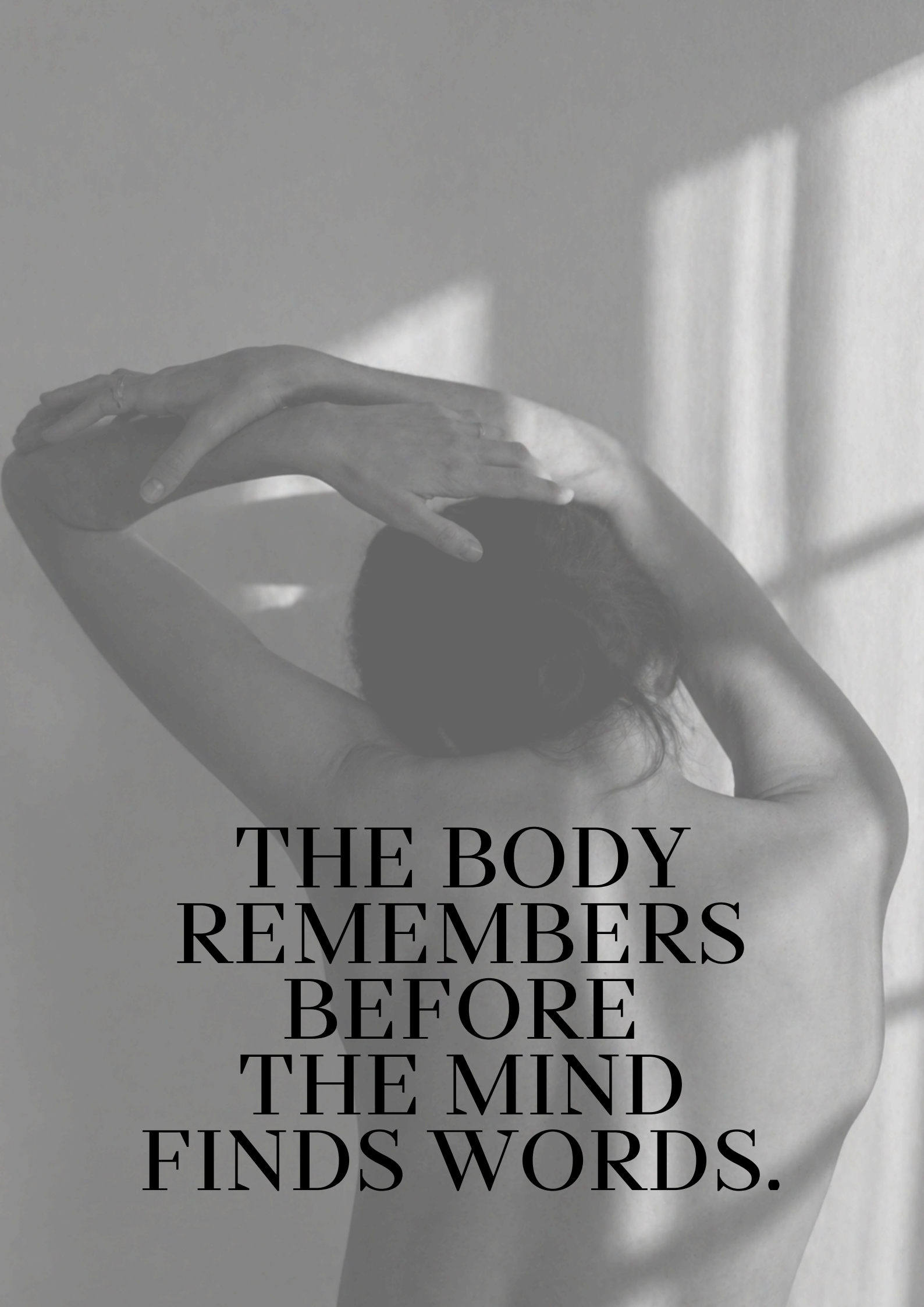
What is a small writing practice or prompt you'd suggest for someone beginning to explore their inner voice?

How about the old Zen koan: what is the sound of one hand clapping? Familiar, but still a good

reliable place to begin an inner journey. Try to find language that is precise and subtle enough to distill that sound. And if you don't find it, subside into silence. That's just as good a place to be -- and you'll learn a lot about throat-clearing and laryngitis, in the process!

I'm not trivializing the journey. I know the challenges. Finding a voice that feels like your own can take time. Prepare for imitation. Prepare for doubt. Prepare for boredom. Prepare for distraction. Prepare for dryness. It helps to remember, even as you learn from others, that you're not aspiring to become anyone else: you're aspiring to become more you.

And when it happens - a shiver of a line, born of blazing necessity and graceful inevitability - it won't sound like the poet you hero-worship or your creative writing instructor or your guru. It will be you. And that's how you begin to create your own lineage. That's what Borges meant when he said, "Every author creates his own precursors."



THE BODY
REMEMBERS
BEFORE
THE MIND
FINDS WORDS.

SLOWING DOWN

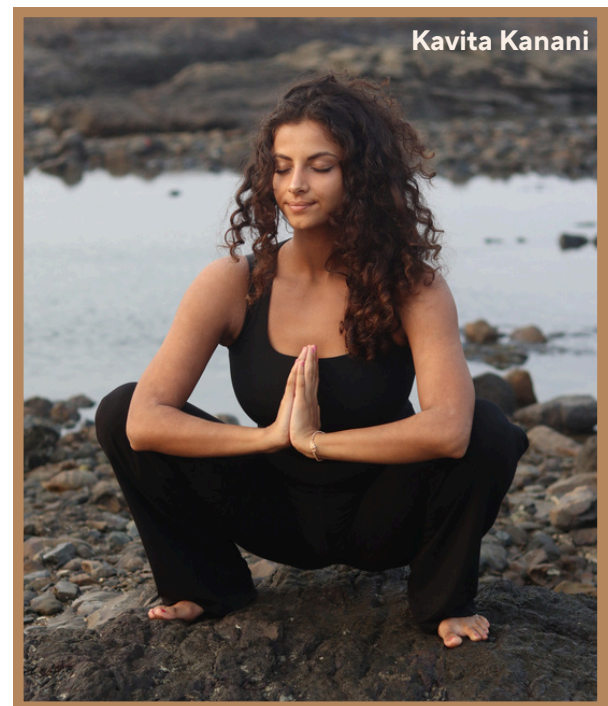
BODY, MIND & CLARITY

In a world that rewards speed, constant stimulation, and productivity, the idea of slowing down can feel counterintuitive – almost indulgent. But what if the body already knows what the mind is struggling to process? In this roundtable, trauma-informed yoga teacher Kavita Kanani and life strategist, sound healer, conscious parenting practitioner and Partner at Aikyam Wellness, Jumana Lokhandwala, share insights on how working with the body – through breath, movement, and stillness – can create clarity, regulate the nervous system, and gently guide us back to ourselves.

In your experience, what happens to the mind when we consciously slow down the body?

Kavita Kanani : The two are one – it isn't a separate experience, though initially it may feel to be. In the practice of yin yoga for example, the body is asked to stay still in an asana, but the mind can still be racing on light speed. Eventually, once we've confronted our traumas safely, processed what gives us stress – and essentially feel safe again, we can be as slow as our body is – and that's where the merge happens. The body and mind are not separate, just energy.

Jumana Lokhandwala : When the body slows down, the nervous system receives a clear signal that you are safe. The sympathetic (fight-or-flight) response softens, and the parasympathetic (rest, digest, restore) state takes over. I often see people stuck in a dysregulated state where the mind feels cluttered, which eventually manifests in the body as dis-ease. Slowing down creates space and the mind begins to settle.



Kavita Kanani

Jumana Lokhandwala



Why does working with the body – through breath, movement, or stillness – often bring more clarity than trying to “think our way” out of overwhelm?

Kavita Kanani : As much as I argue that the body and mind are not separate, if we are too much in our thoughts, we need to make that separation so that we can soothe our nervous system and get that clarity. The nervous system is a part of the physical body, and it's responsible for telling our brains that we are safe. So when we do specific practices like pranayama, tapping, or a repeated yoga sequence that the body is familiar with, there does become ease in the mind because we pause on over-intellectualising everything. That's not to say talking therapy isn't just as important – I think they complement each other in fact – which is why we see the term holistic wellness being used a lot.

Jumana Lokhandwala : Overwhelm lives in the body before it becomes a story in the mind. Racing heart, tight chest, shallow breath. When we try to think our way out, we are using the very system that is dysregulating you. The body offers a different entry point. Breath slows the heart rate, movement releases tension, and stillness allows the system to recalibrate. We are not bypassing the mind; we are stabilising the foundation it rests on. Clarity then arises naturally.

Many of us are used to constant stimulation and speed. What are some signs that the body is asking us to slow down?

Kavita Kanani : If you can't sleep through the night. If you constantly feel anxious, your stomach feels weird, your hair is falling out, your skin is breaking out. You feel too busy - on the edge of a burnout and you feel like you have no time to have a break. That's when you need it the most. Stop running away. It will catch up to you.

Jumana Lokhandwala : Shallow or held breath, frequent sighing, and accumulated tension in areas like the jaw, shoulders, or lower back. Sleep may feel restless and there may be a constant sense of fatigue. You may also notice increased irritability or a tendency to rely on stimulants or distractions like caffeine or scrolling. These are not failures; they are signals. The body speaks before it demands.

What is one simple practice (breath, movement, or pause) that someone can use during a busy day to reset their mind?

Kavita Kanani : When we stimulate the vagus nerve, we get out of that stressful flight or fight state and into the rest, digest and process. There's one small thing we can do to stimulate this: Tilt your right ear towards your right shoulder. Look up to the left direction, and fixate your gaze on that point for a minimum of 30 seconds. Do the same on the left ear/shoulder. In-between, allow a sigh/yawn/exhale/burp to come out naturally. This shows that you feel safe again. I have a video on it on my instagram if you'd like a demonstration.



Jumana Lokhandwala : The 4-7-8 Exhale Reset: Pause wherever you are. Inhale through your nose for 4 counts, hold gently for 7, and exhale slowly through your mouth for 8. Repeat 3 times. The longer exhale activates the vagus nerve and signals the body to relax. It takes less than a minute and can be done anywhere.

If someone has just 5 minutes a day, what would you recommend they do to reconnect with their body and clear their mind?

Kavita Kanani : Make it a ritual. Find a place that can be your sanctuary. Start by lighting a candle or some incense that calms you and clears the room's energy. Take 3-5 deep breaths into your belly and out through the mouth. Write down how you're feeling, and take a moment to thank your blessings. Give yourself a hug and feel grateful you have this body to experience life with and that you've been blessed with another day, even if it's been a harder one. You still showed up.

Jumana Lokhandwala : You can use breath, sound, or gentle movement. Sit still and bring awareness to your breath, allowing the body to soften with each exhale. Even a few minutes of conscious breathing can reset the system and create clarity. You can also support this with slow movements like rolling your shoulders, stretching, or listening to your favourite song to shift your state. Five minutes won't solve everything, but it interrupts the momentum of overwhelm and reminds your system that stillness is always available.

WRITING
ASKS
FOR THE
COURAGE
TO STAY.



Holding Space for Words

A SMALL EXPERIMENT IN SHOWING UP

In March, Pen Paper Dreams began something small but quietly meaningful – a women’s writing circle in Mumbai. The idea was simple – to create a non-performative, low-pressure space where women could sit together and write every Wednesday at a cafe. One hour of uninterrupted, focused time to put away phones, introspect, and write. No teaching, no critique, no expectations beyond showing up. Much like meditation or yoga, it was designed as an individual practice held in a shared environment – an antidote to the isolation that writing often brings.

The first edition began with ten women, each carrying her own stories, hesitations, and intentions, who assured me they were genuine about committing via the Google Forms screening process – a community cannot be built from scratch without people showing up consistently.

However, as the weeks unfolded, the group became smaller and smaller. By the end of the month, a core of four members remained – consistent, committed, and quietly building a rhythm together. Despite the drop-offs, something about the space resonated and members from the first cohort expressed a desire to continue into a second edition.

April brought that second edition, spread across five Wednesdays. Yet, as is often the case with creative commitments, intention did not always translate into attendance. Of those who had been most enthusiastic, only two returned – and even they could only join sporadically. New participants came in, some curious, some tentative. One member generously brought along friends, a reminder word-of-mouth still carries a trust algorithms cannot replicate.

What became clear over these two months is that while many people feel the need to write, sustaining that practice – especially in a structured, recurring format – is far more more complex. Writing asks for time, attention and a

willingness to sit with oneself, all of which can be difficult to prioritise in the midst of daily life. Even in a shared space, the act itself remains deeply personal.

At the same time, the circle affirmed why such spaces matter. For those who did show up – consistently or even occasionally – there was a palpable shift. Writing alongside others, without the pressure to perform or produce something “good,” created a different kind of energy. It made the act feel less lonely, less easily dismissed. The feedback from everyone, irrespective of those who dropped off midway or those who were regulars, was the process of having a dedicated time and safe space to write in a group setting felt good – they felt lighter and followed through on processing their thoughts.

The experiment also surfaced important questions about sustainability. A free, open format lowered the barrier to entry, but it also made commitment more fluid. Organising each session – investing in Instagram ads, coordinating attendance, holding space, and bringing people together – required more effort than anticipated. No one responded to a “pay-what-you-want” idea to help fund the ads, so that became another hurdle. Similarly, when the idea of a deposit amount refundable fully only if a minimum number of sessions are attended was introduced, most members fell silent. While some participants imagined workshop-style guidance, the original intention remained – a space not to teach writing, but to simply come as you are and write how you feel.

For now, the circle has been paused. It may return in a different form if the right viable structure emerges. Nonetheless, these two months were not lost to inconsistency – they were shaped by it. They offered glimpses of what becomes possible when even a handful of women choose to gather, sit down, and take their own words seriously. Perhaps that in itself is enough to begin with.



WOMEN'S WRITING CIRCLE, 2026

In Conversation with MADHULIKA LIDDLE

Award-winning author Madhulika Liddle – best known for her Muzaffar Jang series as well as her acclaimed contemporary novel, For the Love of Apricots – blends meticulous research with immersive storytelling. Her nonfiction work often focuses on classic cinema. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on writing across genres, the role of place and sensory detail, and the balance between history and imagination.

What comes first for you when writing historical fiction – the story, the characters, or the period itself? How do you navigate the line between historical accuracy and creative freedom?

There's no set strategy; it all depends. Sometimes, the story comes first; at others, the period or the characters. Mostly, though, it's a combination of story and period. When I'm writing, I try to make sure that the historical accuracy is maintained as far as possible – I do loads of research! If I need to distort the facts, I usually mention it in an author's note. There are umpteen fascinating details and anecdotes that I've had to leave out because they didn't really fit the story. For instance, in the book I'm writing right now – Book#3 of the Delhi Quartet – I wanted to introduce Juliana Dias da Costa, a Portuguese woman who served the family of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah I and ended up wielding a good deal of influence. But my story was already going well over the word count, so I had to – regrettably – leave Juliana out.

Food and sensory detail play such an evocative role in your writing. What draws you to using taste, smell, and texture as storytelling tools?

I think food is a very vital part of our existence; it makes its way everywhere. In religion, in politics, in popular cinema / literature – food influences and is influenced by all of these and more. I think food also tends to interest a lot of people; people feel deeply about what they eat. It makes for a compelling





subject, an element which can be used in myriad ways to either embellish a story or even be the foundation of one.

In *For the Love of Apricots*, food - pickle, jam, local produce - almost becomes a character in itself. What did that allow you to explore that a more conventional narrative might not?

Food is something people feel about, bond over. To have two people draw together because of a shared love for food – and, furthermore, because of a professional connection to food – seemed like an offbeat way to approach a romance. It allowed me to use food in ways that are often – in other romances, for instance – just part of the setting. My characters didn't need to go on dates to cafes; their food and drink was right there, all the time.

Mukteshwar and the Kumaon hills feel deeply atmospheric in the book. How important is place in shaping your characters and their emotional journeys?

Very important! I feel deeply about some places – Delhi, the Western Himalayas, and Kashmir: all places I love deeply. That love for the space, I think, inspires me when I set a story in any of these spaces, or a few others. I tend not to set stories in spaces I don't know. I think for me to write effectively, at least a basic knowledge of the place is essential. That helps me to knit the place into the stories of the characters, and – as my emotions are woven into the places I've mentioned – to similarly depict the emotions of my characters vis-a-vis the space they inhabit.

Nandini is a forty-year-old divorcee - independent, strong, but also vulnerable. What interested you in telling a love story

at this stage of a woman's life?

The story of Nandini wasn't planned the way it turned out. I initially thought of this as a short story about a middle-aged single woman living life on her own terms: unmarried, independent, happy with her work and her hobbies. There was absolutely no thought of making it a romance, but Vikas Joshi elbowed his way into the story, and then there was no looking back.

The romance feels gentle, unexpected, and shaped by community rather than urgency. Do you think readers today are seeking a different, more grounded idea of love?

For the Love of Apricots got a lot of praise from middle-aged readers, as I'd hoped it would! But I was pleasantly surprised younger people also found it a refreshing change. The old-fashioned "falling in love through conversations" rather than steamy encounters and pulse-pounding, heart-racing giddiness, seems to appeal to more people than just me.

You've written both historical detective fiction and contemporary romance. How do you shift between such different worlds?

It comes naturally to me, mostly because I read so many books across all sorts of genres, including crime/detective, historical, humour and romance, that I am very comfortable with different genres. I know, more or less, how they work. I don't consciously need to make an effort to write a particular genre – it happens on its own.

You've had a varied career - hospitality, advertising, travel writing. How have these experiences shaped the textures and details in your fiction?

Having a varied career means that I've acquired a good deal of knowledge in fairly unrelated fields. And, I'm deeply interested in history, food, old cinema, and nature. This helps broaden my horizons considerably, which helps me write more interesting fiction, too. The grounding in travel writing helps me write more evocatively about places; the stint in hospitality gave me an appreciation of food that I bring to books like *For the Love of Apricots*.

What is a writing prompt you'd suggest for someone new to exploring creative writing?

Take one of your favourite stories and rewrite it, keeping the first and last lines of the story intact. Along the way, though, turn it on its head. For example, if it's a romance, make the lovers end up as enemies at the end. If it's a detective story, change the criminal into the detective and vice-versa, or have the criminal discover a crime the detective has committed. Have fun!

A black and white photograph of a woman walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. She is wearing a long, flowing dress and her hair is blowing in the wind. The ocean is visible in the background under a bright, hazy sky. The text is overlaid on the lower left side of the image.

**SOME
STORIES
CONTINUE
IN THE
PLACES
WE
CARRY.**



Thank you for spending time with the second edition of our magazine.

Whether it was through a conversation with an author, a reflection on writing, an exploration of analogue rituals, or a reminder to return to the body, we hope something in these pages stayed with you.

Pen Paper Dreams builds writing spaces for children and adults alike..

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