

PEN PAPER DREAMS

THE MAGAZINE



Pen **PAPER**
Dreams

*Featuring conversations with Sanjana Chatlani,
Dilshad Khurana, Shivani Vakil, Shreedevi Sunil,
Orijit Sen, Bonita Vaz and more.*

July 2026 | Issue #3

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the third issue of Pen Paper Dreams' quarterly digital magazine.

Putting together this issue reminded me that stories rarely arrive the way we expect them to. There were interviews that quietly fell through, conversations that never happened, and moments when I wondered if these pages would ever feel complete. Looking back now, I can't imagine this issue with anyone else. Every conversation you are about to read found its way here at exactly the right time.

This issue also arrives during a month that always feels like a fresh beginning. July brings the monsoon, my birthday, and, this year, a return to things that matter deeply to me. After a brief pause, I restarted my children's creative writing workshops, where stories are written for joy rather than grades. I also found myself exploring improv in Mumbai – a reminder that storytelling is just as much about listening and trusting the moment as it is about carefully choosing words.

I also owe you an update. In our previous issue, I had promised a video reflecting on the letters we received through our Snail Mail Club. Health had other plans, and by the time I was ready to return to it, the moment had passed – the clubs had grown, changed and evolved.



Across these pages, we explore the many hands that shape a story long before it reaches us – from the rituals that sustain readers and writers to the voices that bring books to life, the maps that become memory, the covers that give stories their first visual identity, the storytellers who keep wonder alive, and the booksellers who place the right book into the right hands.

Thank you for reading. I hope these conversations leave you with a deeper appreciation for the many people who help stories find their way into our lives.

Amanda Sodhi
Founder, Pen Paper Dreams

WE
BECOME
WHAT
WE
RETURN
TO.



The Ritual of BEGINNING

*We asked four members of our community to share the reading and writing rituals they follow.
Here are the practices that continue to nurture their relationship with words.*

Priyanka Singh - One reading ritual I often follow is taking a picture of a paragraph or page that really resonates with me. Sometimes I share these passages with close friends whom I know will connect with the words or find meaning in them. More often, I save them to revisit whenever I need a little perspective or wisdom.

Growing up, I used to copy my favourite quotes from books into a diary. Over the years, that habit evolved and my diary became the Notes app on my phone and typing eventually gave way to simply photographing the page itself.

On weekends, I love taking a book to a quiet cafe and spending a few hours reading. Lately, I've also been trying to build a morning reading habit, starting my day with a cup of green tea and a few pages while walking on my terrace. It has become a peaceful way to begin the day.



Puja Ganguly - When I wake up in the morning, I do not check my phone or go to the kitchen or talk to anyone. Instead, I go straight to my garden and stay there for at least 20 minutes. It helps me to disconnect and reconnect with the world around me at the same time.

It is very important to maintain a balance between the world that resides outside and the one we have inside us. How can we understand the people around us if we do not understand ourselves first?

The journey starts from within.

The Ritual of BEGINNING

Mitali Deshpande – A writing ritual I've followed for years is journaling every night before I go to bed. I started this habit in Grade 4, and I've stayed consistent with it ever since.

Before I sleep, I take a few minutes to write about my day, how I felt, what happened, and the little moments I want to remember. It's become my way of slowing down after a busy day and making sense of my thoughts. I never pressure myself to write perfectly; I just write honestly.

Over the years, these journals have become an archive of different phases of my life. Reading them now reminds me of how much I've changed and grown.

What started as a simple habit has become something deeply personal and therapeutic.

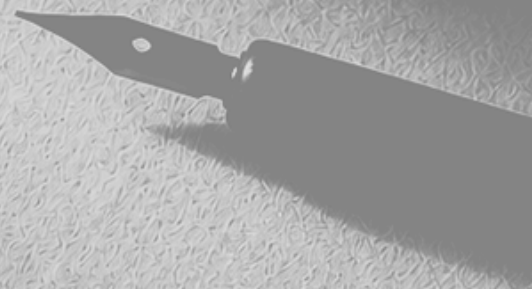


Shreya Nandy – We writers often feel like mama hens, protective of everything we write. Every word, phrase, and analogy feels like one of our own. Sometimes, we lose our stories to that attachment. And if we're not careful, we end up adding to the noise instead of creating a voice. Guilty as charged!

Lately, I've started a writing ritual to tackle this. While writing my first draft, I don't stop myself or self-edit – I let it all out. Once I'm done, I return with a clearer sense of the story and make that the priority. The descriptions I love most must reveal character, sharpen an idea, or move the story forward. If they don't, I pare them down.

I'm a heart-over-head person, so this ritual lets both have their say – the first draft belongs to the heart; the second belongs to the story. Writing should work for the story, not the other way around.

EVERY
WORD
ARRIVES
WEARING
A SHAPE.



In Conversation with SANJANA CHATLANI

Sanjana Chatlani is the founder and creative director of The Bombay Lettering Company, an award-winning studio specialising in bespoke calligraphy, stationery and lettering. She has created bespoke lettering for luxury brands and celebrations, including serving as the on-site calligrapher for the wedding of Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas. An educator who has taught thousands of students around the world, she joins us to reflect on the emotional language of letterforms, the discipline of craft, and why the human hand continues to matter in an increasingly digital world.

As a calligrapher, do you think the way a word is written can change the way it is felt?

Absolutely. The words tell us what something means, but the way they're written shapes how we experience them. A wedding invitation set in a standard font and the very same invitation addressed by hand create completely different emotions before you've even read the first line.

I've always felt that calligraphy isn't about making words beautiful for the sake of it. It's about giving them a personality. A name can feel elegant, joyful, understated or celebratory depending on the rhythm, spacing and movement of the letters. It's subtle, but people feel it instinctively. They may not know why one version resonates more than another, but they almost always do.

When you are lettering someone else's words - a name, a vow, a line of poetry - what are you looking for before you decide how those words should take visual form?

The first thing I try to understand isn't the words themselves, it's the people behind them. Who are they? What are they trying to make someone feel? Is this a black-tie wedding in a palace, or an intimate dinner under olive trees? The lettering has to belong in that world.





From there, I think about hierarchy, rhythm and restraint. Not every word deserves the same amount of attention. Just like in conversation, some words whisper and some words deserve to sing. Good calligraphy isn't about adding flourishes everywhere; it's about knowing when to hold back.

Calligraphy asks for slowness, repetition and physical control in a culture increasingly built around speed. Has practising it changed your own relationship with attention or patience?

Completely. Running a business means I'm constantly switching between decisions, meetings, production schedules and problem-solving. Everything moves quickly. Calligraphy is one of the few places where speed simply doesn't help. The nib doesn't care how busy your day has been. If you're distracted, it shows. If you rush, it shows.

Ironically, after years of doing this professionally, calligraphy has become the place where my mind slows down. It's one of the few moments in my week where I'm focused on just one thing. I think that's why I still enjoy it after all these years.

Handwriting carries irregularities that digital type often removes. Do you think imperfection

is part of what makes the written hand feel human?

I think it's exactly what makes it human. When something is made by hand, it carries tiny variations that no machine would intentionally create. Those aren't flaws to me—they're evidence. Evidence that a person sat there, made decisions, adjusted pressure, lifted the pen and continued. We're surrounded by perfectly polished digital experiences today, and they're beautiful in their own way. But handmade work reminds us that there's another kind of beauty – one that comes from presence rather than perfection.

You work on personal objects and occasions, from names and notes to wedding stationery. Have you noticed that people relate differently to words when they know those words have been made by hand?

Absolutely! One of my favourite moments is watching someone pick up an invitation for the first time. Almost instinctively, people run their fingers over the paper before they even begin reading. They're responding to texture, weight and craftsmanship before they've taken in a single word.

That's what handmade work does. It slows people down. In a world where we consume most things with a swipe or a scroll, receiving something that someone has designed, printed and written by hand feels different. You're not just reading information – you're experiencing care.

Most of us now write primarily on screens. What do you think we lose when our words no longer carry any trace of the hand that made them?

Convenience has made communication incredibly efficient, but sometimes efficiency comes at the expense of presence. I don't think digital communication is replacing paper. I think it's redefining its purpose. We no longer print because we have to; we print because we want someone to pause.

That's why beautifully made invitations, handwritten notes and printed keepsakes continue to matter. They're tangible. They ask for your attention in a way a notification never can.

You also teach calligraphy to students around the world. What do beginners tend to misunderstand about beautiful writing - is it primarily a matter of talent, technique, rhythm, or learning to really look?

There's a common misconception that calligraphy is easy. People see beautiful work online and assume it's something you can pick up in an afternoon. But the reality is almost the opposite.

One of my favourite moments in every workshop comes about an hour in, when people realise just how much precision, attention to detail, hand-eye coordination and muscle memory go into every single stroke. It's a very humbling experience, and I think that's when they begin to appreciate the craft in a completely different way.

Like any skill, the better someone becomes, the more effortless they make it look. What people don't see are the years of practice behind that effortless line. Calligraphy isn't difficult because it's complicated - it's difficult because it asks for patience, consistency and a willingness to slow down and practise.



AI can now imitate lettering styles and generate polished visual work instantly. Has that changed what you value about the handmade mark?

If anything, it's made me value it even more. AI can imitate aesthetics remarkably well. It can generate beautiful compositions and convincing lettering styles in seconds. But it can't replicate intention. The value of handmade work has never been the final image alone. It's the hours of practice, the decisions made along the way and the knowledge that another human being created this piece specifically for you. As technology becomes faster, I think those human qualities become even more valuable.

Lastly, after spending years working so closely with letterforms, is there a letter, word or script you find especially beautiful - can you explain what you see in it that the rest of us might miss?

I don't know if I could ever choose just one. There are definitely letters I enjoy writing more than others. I love uppercase B, F, R, L and M - they're incredibly expressive and give you so much room to play with movement, balance and flourishing.

That's one of the things I love about calligraphy. Every letter presents a different design challenge. Some are bold and architectural, others are soft and flowing. Even after years of writing the same alphabet, I still find myself discovering new ways to interpret a single letter, and I think that's what keeps the craft endlessly fascinating.

THE PAGE
IS ONLY
ONE WAY
A STORY
SPEAKS.



ROUNDTABLE

GIVING STORIES THEIR VOICE

With decades of experience in theatre between them, Shivani Vakil and Dilshad Khurana have built careers around storytelling in its many forms. Today, alongside their work on stage, they are also recognised audiobook narrators, lending their voices to fiction, biographies and non-fiction alike. We brought them together for a conversation about the invisible craft of narration, the responsibility of becoming an author's voice, and why listening remains a uniquely intimate way of experiencing a story.

The two of you have worked together in theatre and both spend your time bringing stories to life through the spoken word. Do you see audiobook narration as an extension of theatre, or does it demand an entirely different way of thinking about performance?

Dilshad: Audiobook narration definitely requires aspects of performance art to make it engaging. One needs to bring the words to life through vocal expression alone and display a vocal range, whether you're reading for different characters or simply conveying information. Along with this, of course, the technical aspects of narrating an audiobook also have to be kept in mind, such as clarity, pronunciation, and even using the correct breath so your voice doesn't sound like it's losing wind!

Shivani: Oh, absolutely! It is storytelling – you are bringing the text alive, drawing the listener into the world, and creating the imagery, all with your voice, stripped of the theatrics of lights, music and sets. This is true for fiction. However, with a non-fiction book, the information and facts are key, and one needs to be careful that personal views or opinions don't come in the way of an authentic narration.

Dilshad Khurana



Shivani Vakil



Before a listener imagines a character, a place or even the rhythm of a sentence, they first hear your voice. How conscious are you of the influence a narrator has over a listener's imagination, and where do you draw the line between interpreting a book and simply serving it?

Dilshad: Great question! I think a little background work helps. Before we begin reading, it helps to get a note from the author about how they imagine the tonality of the book as a whole, as well as that of each individual character. Then we, as narrators, try our best to do justice to that. I'd say, for me, being on the same page as the author is important. Hopefully, the listener will then follow that perspective.

Shivani: As Dilshad says, communication and being in sync with what the author wants to convey is essential. Unlike a play, where characters are interpreted by actors, with an audiobook we are the voice of the writer.

Every manuscript seems to ask for a different voice. When you begin recording a book, what are you listening for before you've settled on the way it should sound?

Dilshad: I try to understand what the author wants. If it is a narrative book, should it sound affected or plain and neutral? If the book is a biography or a story about certain characters, I try to use my theatre skills to understand the character and their graph before beginning to record.

Shivani: How does the author see their work come to life? Would they prefer neutral or animated? The children's book I recorded was most fun because there was so much scope for a variety of voices.

Silence is rarely discussed in narration, yet pauses, breath and restraint often shape a performance as much as the words themselves. How do you decide when not to perform?

Dilshad: It's important to be familiar with your text before you start to record. Is the page talking about something sad, or is the author taking a breath for the idea to sink in? If there are pauses and restraint, we need to figure out what they're trying to tell us.

Shivani: Pauses are even more essential in an audiobook because it gives the listener a chance to process. The author writes in these moments for a purpose and it's our job to stay true to that.

India is a country of many languages, accents and pronunciations. Have you encountered moments where authenticity, intelligibility and listener expectation pulled in different directions? How do you navigate these choices?

Dilshad: I think trying to inculcate specific accents and pronunciations can be a tricky line, one that you don't want to get wrong. Yes, for certain specific terms and proper names, it's very important to get the pronunciation culturally correct. And that's where the pre-work comes in. I usually go through the whole book and get my pronunciations clarified before hitting the studio. I know authors are also pretty particular about these things, and it's often what comes back to us for correction.



Shivani Vakil



Dilshad Khurana

Shivani: Homework before recording is key! If there are words in regional or foreign languages – as there almost always are – learning how to pronounce them is an important part of the job. Accents are a slippery slope, as if I don't get them right, there's the danger of sounding like a caricature, which we absolutely wouldn't want!

Theatre disappears the moment a performance ends, while a recording can be replayed indefinitely. Does that permanence change the risks you're willing to take?

Dilshad: Overall, I am much more careful when I'm recording a book – not only because of the permanence but also because the mic is unforgiving! A good sound recordist can tell when I'm tired, or have a cold, or need a break. So you have to be at your best not only vocally but also physically when you're recording.

Shivani: Yes, I am way more cautious – an incorrect pronunciation, a crack in the voice, a breath; these are recorded for posterity! As with all work you do, you want the best version to be out there.

Lastly, if someone who has never listened to an audiobook asked you why they should try one, what would you tell them?

Dilshad: I myself prefer to read rather than listen. But I think audiobooks give you a more 'rounded' experience because you can hear what the character sounds like and hence feels more life-like than reading words. Audiobooks are also so much more accessible – can be heard on long drives, while cooking, while working out – just what we need with the busy lives we live these days!

Shivani: Audiobooks are soothing companions! You can listen and absorb while walking, travelling, cooking – or even when sleep evades you! I personally use audiobooks when the subject matter is overwhelming – I find it easier to process.

A black and white photograph of three paper boats floating on a body of water. The boats are made of newspaper, with text visible on their sides. The water is dark and has some ripples. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

STORIES
ARE HOW
WONDER
SURVIVES.

In Conversation with SHREEDEVI SUNIL

Shreedevi Sunil is the founder and chief storyteller at Talking Turtles Storytellers, where she brings stories to life through performance, puppetry and interactive storytelling. She also works with schools and teachers to use storytelling as a tool for learning and engagement. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on reading an audience, adapting stories for performance, and why the same story can leave every listener with a different takeaway.

Children are one of the most honest audiences - if they're bored, you will definitely know. What have children taught you about what makes a story hold attention, especially because children do have very wavering attention spans of late?

"Of late" - yes, that's key. When I started out 15 or 16 years ago, you could tell a 40-minute story. Today, attention spans are shorter, but children also have access to so much good content that you're expected to constantly up your game, to make things more interesting for them, and find ways to deliver stories in a way that surprises them and holds their attention. It is important to read your audience.

Children are very honest. If they don't like something, you see it on their faces immediately. The minute you see it, it is your job as a storyteller to improvise on the spot. If they are getting fidgety, then I need to quickly rope them back into the story. But when they're completely invested, I know I can slow down, enjoy the process, and go into the story a little more because I have them with me.

I ensure I arrive before time to read the energy of the children who are coming in and prepare myself accordingly. You cannot go in prepared saying, "This is what I'm going to do today." You have to give yourself room to improvise. I always go in with multiple options - different openings, different endings, different stories. Today's



children are well-read, they know so much and have the power to choose. Sometimes I give them a curated set of stories and ask what they'd like to hear. Letting the audience lead the session can work remarkably well with children.

When you choose these different stories to perform, what tells you that this story is going to come alive aloud through performance versus simply working on pages? And, since you're combining multiple elements, your voice, puppetry, music, movement - how do you decide which specific elements that story needs without overwhelming the story itself?

I think it's a very simple rule - you have to enjoy the story when you're reading it, remember it, and connect with it. Not every story you read during preparation stays with you. The handful you actually remember are the stories that have really connected with you.

If I like a story, I start rereading it and see if I can identify areas where I can replace narration with



dialogue or if voices stand out. My friends are subjected to many retellings of the same story (laughs), and my kids are my guinea pigs. As I'm retelling it, I begin to discover a refrain I want to repeat or a place where I can plug a song.

Take The Lion and the Mouse. The original story is only about eight lines. But the more I read it, the more space I saw for improvisation. I wanted to establish the mouse's character before he finds the lion trapped in the net. What stood out to me was that the mouse is brave, clever and a very strong character, even though he's told otherwise because of his size. I wanted to show conflict here by having other animals bully him. I also included a song the mouse's grandmother taught him about being brave and clever, and about the idea that you can be physically small but still act tall.

Making a story into a puppet show involves scripting the same story in a different style to suit the puppet act. I perform on my own so I need to think about how many characters can appear together, how they enter and exit, and how they interact. While the story remains the same, there is a difference in the story you write to tell, to read, and to perform as a puppet show.

What changes in the way you tell a story when you're working with different age groups?

Your innate style of telling a story stays the same. What changes is how you deliver it. You can tell The Lion and the Mouse to a two-year-old, an eight-year-old, a fifteen-year-old or even a seventy-year-old. What changes is the vocabulary and the references.

For example, "six seven" has become such a huge trend. I was telling a story to second and third graders that involved counting. The moment we reached six and seven, all 300 children shouted, "Six seven!" At that point, you can either stop the story and reprimand them, or you can play along for a few seconds and move on. So, we played with it for exactly five seconds and moved on. But, the next time I told the story, I simply skipped those

numbers and acted like I'd forgotten them. It's important to understand current trends that work for our audience, pick stories with good content, and use relatable lingo, especially with older age groups, like teenagers. If I'm telling The Monkey and the Crocodile, I'll focus on friendship and the little things that annoy us about our closest friends – that's something they immediately connect with. I recently slipped in a passing reference to Taylor Swift during a puppet show – it cracked them up because they did not expect the puppet to be talking about it. Even when you're talking about the war or genocide, talking about it in their language makes it sound less preachy.

Often, adults will assume because the audience is children to over-simplify the story. But, in your experience, do children understand ambiguity, complexity or even darkness better than adults tend to give them credit for?

Yes, far better. For example, there's a wonderful story about parenting that I tell to both children and adults. It's about a woman who longs to become a mother. When the gods finally grant her wish, she promises she'll be really good and gentle. Fast forward to a point where the kids cause some kind of chaos. She scolds them once, then twice, and the third time she gets really angry and whacks her child – completely contrary to the promises she made earlier. When she wakes up in the morning, the children are gone and she feels terrible. She asks for forgiveness and to get her children back.

At this point, I always stop and ask the children, "Do you think we should forgive her?" And, they say, "Yeah, it's okay. It's Mumma. She can get angry sometimes. These things happen. She's had a bad day." But, parents are far harder on themselves and don't have it in them to forgive the parent. As adults, we're much more judgemental of our own age group. I always tell parents the kids are always so nice about it.

What do you think, though, causes the same story to bring about such different reactions just based on the audience?

It's where you are in life when you come in to listen to a story – that shapes how you experience it. Your takeaway from a story is different from mine because we each bring our own experiences to it.





When we were younger, all stories would end with a moral. I don't think that's necessary anymore. While I may want to highlight a particular emotion or character trait, I don't believe there's ever just one moral in a story. There are multiple takeaways, and those come from the audience itself.

A couple of months ago, I told an Indian folktale called Unwanted Guests to a group of undergrad students. They related to it because they were at that age where they wanted to hang out with friends and do their own thing instead of entertaining extended family or guests at home.

Culturally, we have stories that overdo the guesting – the whole concept of Atiti Devo Bhava, that every guest is to be treated like a god in your home. It's a fantastic thing to engage with guests and to have people over, but there also needs to be something called "boundaries." So, yes, these kids laughed because they recognised themselves in it.

You've used storytelling in education and also trained teachers. What do you think it is about a story that makes things possible in learning that just a straightforward explanation or just giving a kid a bunch of instructions may not be able to do to the same extent?

It's fun. The minute you decide to tell a story, both the audience and the storyteller are in a space where they expect to have a good time. It takes the pressure off the educator and the students.

The second part, of course, is preparing the story to teach by choosing the right vocabulary and thinking about how to drive home the point you're teaching in an engaging manner. For example, if I were telling The Thirsty Crow simply as a storyteller, my focus would be on how the crow persevered and figured out a way to get water. But if I were using the same story in a classroom, I'd ask myself what I wanted to teach through it. For younger children, it could be the concept of sink and float. For older students, it could introduce the Archimedes principle.

Storytelling has tools like repetition and replacing certain words with action and gestures instead. You can actively involve students in a story and that's a great way for them to learn the concept you want to teach them.

Lastly, is there a particular memory you have of the first time you were amazed by a story or of being on the receiving end of storytelling?

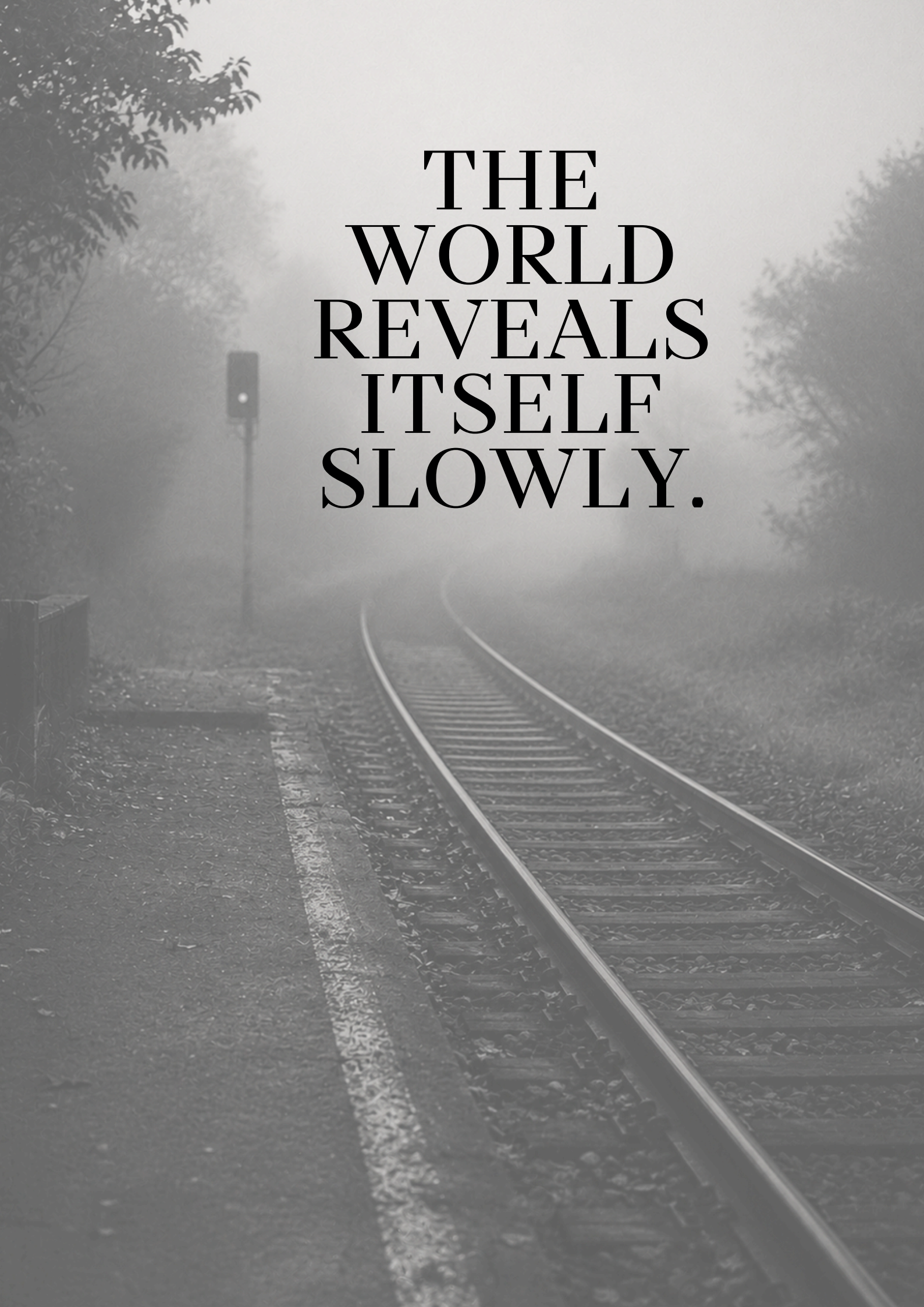
My earliest memories are of my aunt telling me stories. She read a lot of books, would tell me the stories in English, and then I would translate it into Tamil for my younger cousin sister who was ten years younger than me. My aunt wanted her to learn Tamil – she would tell me the story, I would retell it to my cousin in Tamil. This was the deal.

Later, when my partner and I were researching storytellers around 2010, we found most of them were American, with only a sprinkling from other parts of the world and perhaps one or two from India. The storyteller who truly struck a chord with me was Diane Ferlatte. I was inspired. I listened to her endlessly, trying to understand her expressions, intonation and voice modulation. It was incredible. I had never heard anyone tell stories like that. They were humorous and stayed with you.

Thanks to the universe, we're friends today. I'm 44, she's in her late 80s, and every time she works on a new story, she tells it to me. She's been telling stories for more than fifty years, and it's an amazing learning experience for me.

You can practice, you can read, but the best feedback you get is by opening the doors. That's when you get the real feedback of how your story is landing. Sometimes it lands, sometimes the story doesn't work – but you have to experience that to truly understand how your story is working.



A black and white photograph of a railway track curving into the distance, shrouded in a thick fog. The track is flanked by trees and foliage, and a signal post is visible on the left. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

THE
WORLD
REVEALS
ITSELF
SLOWLY.

In Conversation with ORIJIT SEN

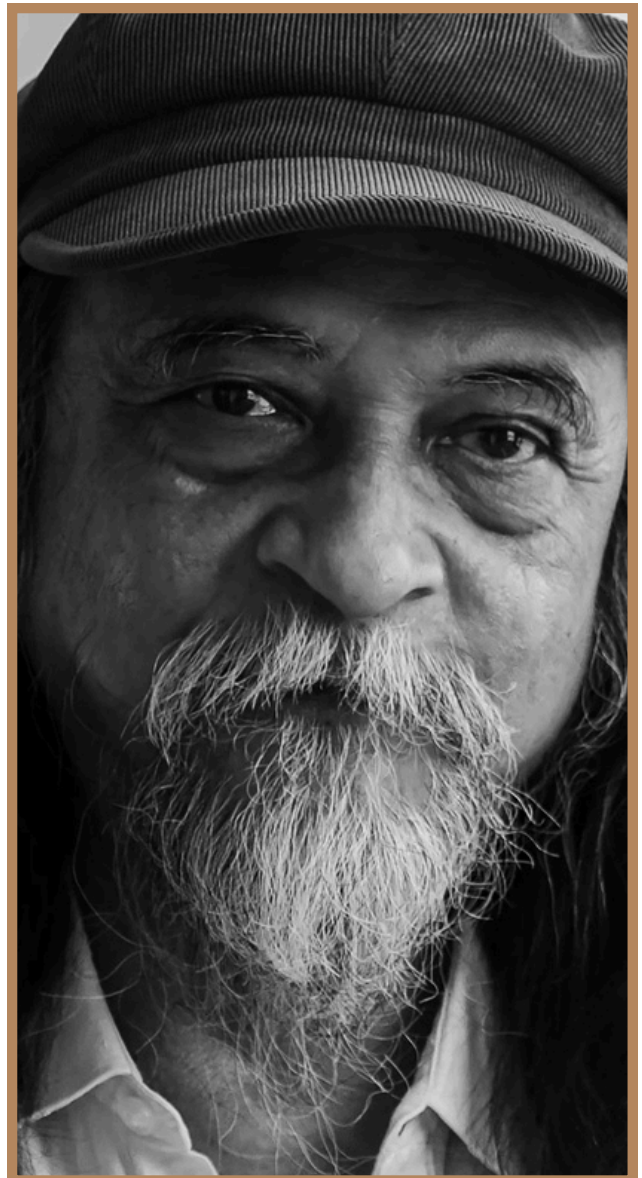
Orijit Sen is a graphic artist, designer and one of the pioneers of graphic storytelling in India. Best known for his landmark graphic novel River of Stories as well as his murals, public art and comics, his work draws equally from close observation, research and lived experience. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, he reflects on maps, memory, visual storytelling, and why drawing remains one of his ways of understanding the world.

You spend a lot of time talking to people, sketching, researching before you begin drawing. When do you know you've spent enough time observing and are ready to start telling the story?

It's not a linear process. Some of my projects extend over time, while some are just quick things. For graphic satire on social media, an idea or thought might spark another idea and I am able to express it quickly. But, on projects that go on for months, sometimes years, the process might begin with a germ of an idea or in some cases it is actually commissioned – for example, someone says we're setting up a museum; and, in that case, I start reading up, looking at things, and usually travel.

For example, the big mural I did in Anandpur Sahib involved travelling frequently between Delhi and Punjab. I brought in younger artists who were my assistants and we'd meet people, receive referrals to visit places, talk to even more people, and we'd continue sketching. I insisted everyone on my team – even if they were taking photographs – should still sketch.

I follow an interwoven process of observing, talking, meeting, reviewing things, reading up about things, sketching and then developing those sketches further. Sketching organically flows out of research – I do that with maps, too.





Speaking of maps - they appear regularly in your work. Do you see maps as records of places or as ways of telling stories?

In retrospect, I see the link more clearly. My father was a cartographer. He joined the Survey of India in the 1940s as a trainee cartographer first and then a junior surveyor. Shortly after Independence, he got an appointment to literally map the borders of the country - entire India was preoccupied with that question of where exactly the borders were being defined. He would get posted along various border areas, like the eastern frontier mapping the borders along Arunachal, Burma and China.

When I began accompanying him in the 1970s, he was posted on the western border between India and Pakistan. He went to places where nobody did - there were no roads or connections. Everything happened based on the maps he and his colleagues were making. His job was to decide - this line has been drawn on an existing British map between the borders, but does the border go on this side of the rock or the other side of the rock?

I'd travel with him when he wasn't going too far and was fascinated by how he mapped the landscape, did measurements and calculations in the field. Sometimes we would traverse little streams, see a fox there, or vultures eating a dead crow. When I started drawing maps, I would literally have a story for them. In my head, I had physically traversed that stream and had memories of it. But on a map, they become very abstract - lines of dots and dashes and hatched areas.

I think the connection between places, narratives, stories and maps kind of sort of happened at that time even though I didn't consciously think of it as subject matter for art or drawing - it was just fascinating for me. I think that perhaps came back to me over time as an artist - the idea that maps can tell stories.

My father's maps were abstract graphic drawings with no stories - a God's-eye view of the planet, of the land. But for me, it was a human-scale view of

the land. I wanted to populate his maps with the stories I knew belonged to those maps. I realised this in retrospect - it wasn't a conscious thought that I wanted to tell the stories of those places.

Your pages reward slow reading. There are new details to discover each time one looks at a page. Do you deliberately create work that resists being consumed quickly?

I have always been fascinated by this idea of creating complete worlds. When I was a kid, growing up in the 1970s, we used to collect comics. There was no TV, and of course, there was no Internet, so comics were the only kind of medium of visual storytelling that was available and were precious. Our parents and teachers looked down upon them as a distraction and thought we shouldn't spend too much time reading them - I wish they knew what was coming on the Internet in the times ahead!

We got a little bit of pocket money and bought whatever we could afford. It naturally evolved into a barter system. One friend bought Phantom comics, I bought something else, and we continued to exchange comics amongst the entire group. We had a fairly well-established value system - for example, two Phantoms were equal to one Tintin.

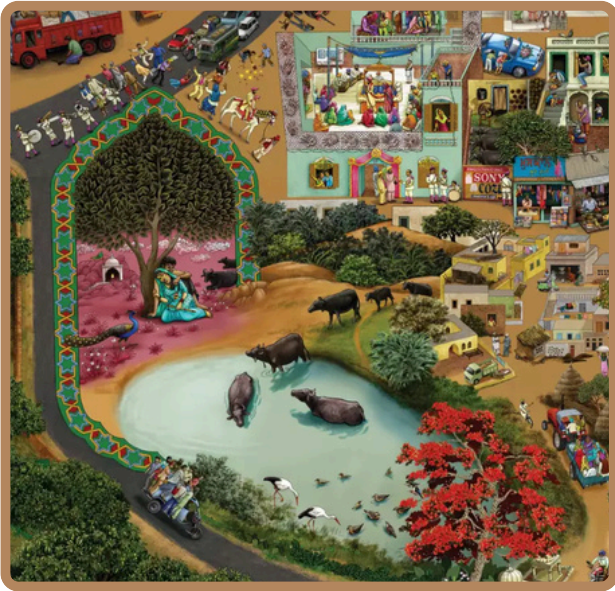
I used to get totally lost in those comics. I felt I was physically crossing some portal and entering a magical world through the protagonist. It wasn't like I was just looking at what was drawn in the panel. I felt like I had gone into the panel and could see the entire world that encapsulated it. I could look beyond what the frames were showing me. My view of that world was 360 degrees.

I think that's always been what I try to do with my drawings. I can't help it. There may be one level of meaning, which is the most frontal, obvious meaning of something I'm drawing. But then there are things happening in the background, things happening in a corner and things happening somewhere else. It's an attempt to draw the world that extends beyond the borders of the frame.

Comics are one of those mediums where the audience has no compulsion to do things the way you want them to. They might even start reading backwards. So you have to persuade your reader through building a rhythm to the narrative. If I want the reader to slow down because something complex is happening, I might fill a large frame - a full-page frame - with lots of detail. The reader can't just flip the page - they have to slow down because I've drawn them into that complexity of things going on.

How do you decide what form a story should take - whether it be comics or public art?

I don't think the format of the medium is something that emerges only from the idea. For example, the idea for the mural in Mapusa came from seeing the wall that had been built about 20 years ago. It was a retaining wall to hold up a hill on the other side. When I passed by the wall, I thought it would



be amazing to make a mural on it – the idea came from the structure itself.

I didn't know if I would ever be able to execute this idea because it would require permission from public authorities and a lot of funding. But, little by little, the pieces fell into place and each piece that fell into place led me to think of something more. I got a grant from an arts organization in 2023. Since the wall actually belongs to a church, I made a pitch to them – by then, I was also a much better-known artist.

On the other hand, the other big mural I did in Punjab, at the museum, came about because of the circumstances and conditions of the project, the space itself. I was initially part of a design team, and the brief was to create a dynamic artwork – the original concept was cinematic projections on a huge inner wall.

I had a meeting with an amazing art historian, Dr. B. N. Goswami, who was one of the world's leading authorities on Indian miniature painting, especially Pahari miniatures. He recently passed away. While interacting with him, I had an epiphany that we could use many of the narrative methods and techniques of the miniaturists, but do it in a completely contemporary way.

When making comics, I'm used to looking at stories from different angles and moving the viewpoint around. Miniature paintings, however, always show human beings front-on or, at most, side profile – not from high or low angles. They did, however, very interesting things with perspective of the landscapes, of the backgrounds. I love the way they used scale – largeness usually signifies importance. Even if one figure is closer to the viewer than another – the one in the back is more important and is larger than the one in the front.

I began to see how we could use the devices and language of miniature painters that Dr. Goswami was showing us and combine them with my own sense of shifting viewpoints while telling narrative

stories. But, I had to unlearn the default notion of perspective and how you frame something, because here there was no frame. People were moving through the space – so, their point of view was constantly shifting. I started to evolve a way of creating one huge image. You see a single image, but it contains multiple points of view, multiple scenes, and multiple things leading from one to the next. As viewers move along the ramp, their gaze shifts, and so does their point of view.

You've actually worked on a few collaborative projects – what has collaboration taught you that working alone might not have?

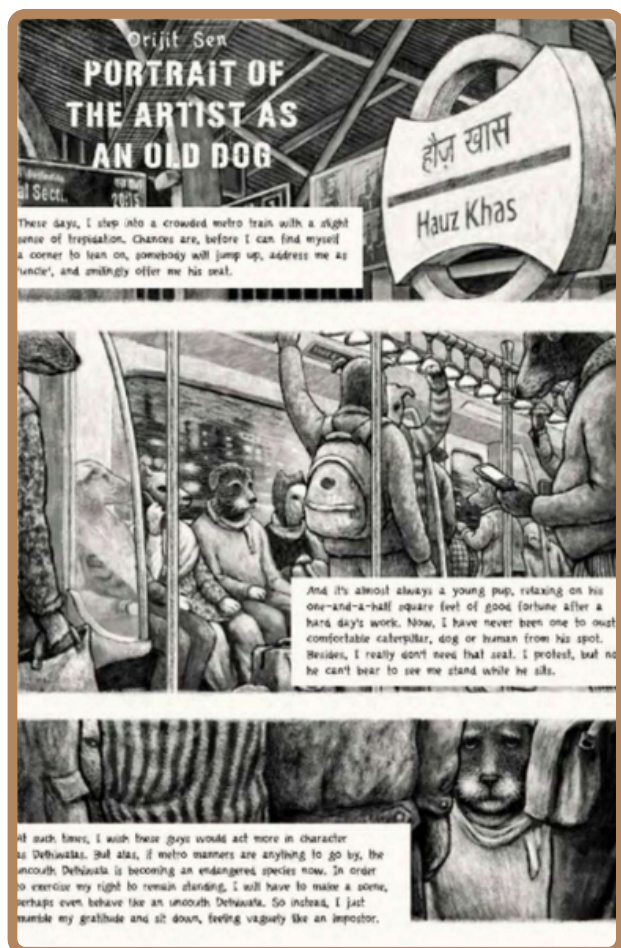
Making comics is an intensely solo business – I do not collaborate with a writer like many artists do. The specific style or technique I use to tell a story is not something anybody else can do, so I cannot really have an assistant. But murals and other kinds of projects involve a lot of intense collaboration, and I really like both – I see the difference in the two different ways of working.

Working solo on comics and graphic novels is a self-reflective process. You keep thinking through things, trying things, figuring out what the right direction is – there's nobody to tell you what to do. In collaborative spaces, however, you get to work with other artists, historians, researchers – people from other disciplines. Since the time I interacted with Professor Goswami, I have done a lot more work playing with perspective and narrative, such as in *Heart of Light*. So much happens when I observe and learn things from other people – architects, engineers, industrial designers – and how they solve things.

In Goa, we have motorbike pilots – this idea came before Uber and Ola also adopted the concept in other cities. I'm drawing a motorbike pilot – it is a lifesize 3D mural. The pilot is partially 3D. The front part of the motorbike is an actual motorbike assembled with bits and pieces from recycling dump places where you can buy parts of discarded machines – we got a wheel from one bike, a headlight from somewhere else, and handlebars from another place. My friend who is an industrial designer has been assembling this front part of the bike and I'm drawing the pilot in partial 3D, which will probably be made in ceramic. The accents at the back are fully 2D – they will be drawn flat into it. It will seem like it is emerging from the wall – going from 2D to 3D. While I'm working with my friend on this project, I'm fascinated by the way he thinks and the way he is figuring things out.

You've said you've never consciously tried to develop a recognisable style, yet people claim to instantly recognise your work. Personally, if someone showed me your work side-by-side without telling me it was created by one person, I would honestly never assume it was made by one person!

I'm glad to hear you think that because I don't want to be somebody who gets known by one style. But, yes, people still say that – "Oh, when I see that, I



know that is typically your thing." I want things to be different. I want to be inspired by the story, by the circumstance, by the situation – those things shape the way I respond to something.

For example, I was making the Portrait of the Artist as an Old Dog, it was for an anthology that was going to be published in black and white so I had to do it in black and white and explore the possibilities within that constraint, such as how I can create the kind of moodiness I wanted to. While black and white was a constraint, it was also an opportunity to do something different and new from what I would have ended up doing by default. It is one of the few things that is totally an internal narrative about myself, my anxieties, my troubles about growing up, and being seen as being old.

Lastly, you've described drawing as a way of thinking. Has there ever been a place or a person you truly understood after you had drawn them?

Drawing is a way of understanding the world around me. When I was younger, we used to spend a lot of time on the beach like any tourist would. We lived in a small village by the beach for about three months before we moved to a house, which we still live in now. That time was a very intense time for me, visually, the water and the ocean, because I was literally swimming every day.

Much later on, while I was staying in Delhi in the

winter, I was trying to finish some artwork in which I needed to draw a giant wave. Far away from the waves and ocean, I was trying to recollect what the wave was like, remembering how it was sitting in the ocean – a memory from quite long ago.

After a while, I started to see the colors – the different blues that you see when you're swimming in the sea, the color of the waves, the in-between colors, from deep blue to turquoise to green. As I was drawing, those colors were coming back to me. I knew how much contrast to create here, how this green goes from the blue, how there was a purple stone somewhere. Through drawing, I was trying to bring that memory alive.

Amazingly, I started smelling the sea in my nose. It was quite a crazy experience – I was sitting in Delhi, and I could smell the sea! I think that's what drawing is – a way of drawing from this well of memory of our experiences.

I have this technological metaphor – our brains have this huge digital recording device, but we don't have easy access to the servers or hard disk where all these memories are loaded and stored. Drawing is one of the ways we can access those memories from any time in our lives.

Drawing is important to me to make sense of not just the world but myself, my experiences, who I am and what are the experiences that have shaped me. I can be in touch with that through drawing – it's both outer-looking and inner-gazing.



CRAFT LEAVES
THE QUIETEST
FINGERPRINTS.



In Conversation with

BONITA VAZ SHIMRAY

Bonita Vaz Shimray is an art director, book designer and educator whose work has shaped the visual identity of many projects. With over two decades of experience, she approaches every cover as part of a conversation between author, editor, designer and reader. In this conversation with Pen Paper Dreams, she reflects on trust, collaboration, typography, and the quiet craft of giving a story its first visual form.

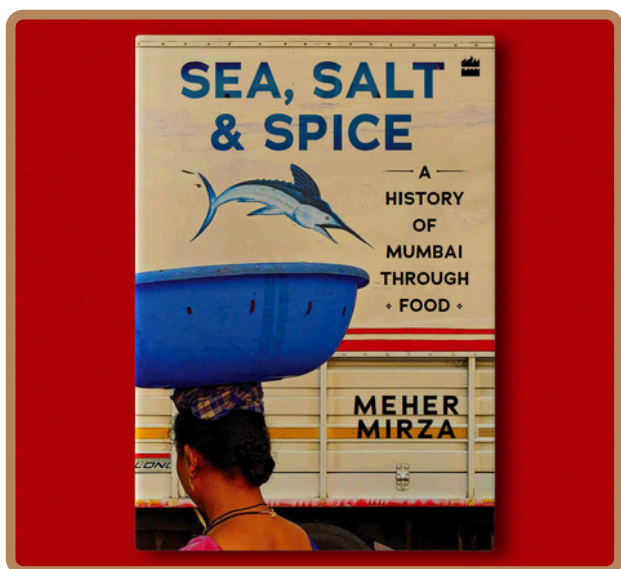
A writer can spend years deciding exactly how a story should be told, and then another person is asked to give that story its first visual identity. Do you see a book cover as an interpretation of the text - if yes, how much freedom should a designer have to interpret it differently from the author?

Every book has its own journey. The creative process is never identical because there are so many variables in publishing. As you rightly pointed out, a manuscript can take shape over several years before it reaches a publishing team that nurtures it to the finish line. At other times, a book idea is commissioned with a clear publishing vision from the outset.

A good publishing team works closely with the author to help a book reach its full potential, and in that sense the earliest visual cues often emerge from the publishing vision itself. The cover is one of many ingredients that contribute to the success of a well-loved book.

As a cover designer, I've come to respect that everyone has a role to play and value this collaborative process. I'm also aware that it can become counterproductive - too many cooks spoil the broth. That's where listening, trust and intuition become important. Ultimately, we're putting a book into the world in the hope that it finds its readers.





For me, the design process is built on trust – starting with the trust an author places in the right publishing home, and by extension, in the right design hands. I don't think creative freedom exists without trust.

The cover process I value most is one where the book's positioning, genre, competition and broad visual themes are outlined, alongside the author and editor's vision. That becomes the starting point for visualisation and helps steer a meaningful conversation with every iteration.

You've designed books across a very wide range of genres and subjects. What changes in the way you read when you're reading not simply as a reader, but looking for the visual idea hidden inside a manuscript?

I think it comes down to genre and the way the idea presents itself. With literary fiction and a complex narrative arc, it often means distilling concepts and themes until you arrive at something that works visually. Mostly, this is the outcome of years of being both an insider and a consumer of books – it comes from practice and experience.

When I'm reading a manuscript, I think about every aspect coming together. I think of tone and theme and how it would be possibly perceived. Sometimes in the various discussions around design – the positioning or even the title can change during the initial cover drafts, because that's often when an idea begins to take shape more concretely. These decisions are critical and can influence the course of a book's publishing journey.

The cover is the face of the book, and it should communicate the core reading experience with integrity. So the visual direction is important because it extends into marketing and publicity, and needs to work equally well in print, online and across social media. Ultimately, the right cover is the one that is able to make an emotional connection with its audience.

Much of a book's first encounter with readers now happens as a thumbnail on a phone screen rather than as an object in a bookstore. Has that changed the way you think about designing covers; or does a good cover still obey the same principles regardless of where it is first seen?

I think the fundamentals of design remain the same regardless of the medium. What has changed is the range of possibilities available to us. Print technology is ever-evolving and we have access to beautiful finishes, edge printing and other production techniques that make discovering a book in a bookstore a beautiful experience. At the same time, digital platforms allow us to animate elements from a cover, or create book trailers which has become a popular way of promoting books online.

While the design process always stays true to the story, we also think about visibility and how a cover will perform across different media. Those factors often help us refine and strengthen a design direction.

Looking across your work, some covers seem to let typography become the image itself, while others rely on illustration, photography or texture. What tells you, when reading a manuscript, that the cover should be built from words rather than pictures?

Sometimes, all you need is colour and typography to create a powerful cover – what I think of as emotive typography. Some titles are so evocative that you simply want to let them shine. You don't want to clutter them with visuals that compete with the impact of the words themselves.

Sometimes the author is the strongest visual asset. In memoirs, and often in expert-led non-fiction, the author's face becomes a recognisable brand that readers connect with. I've had the opportunity to collaborate with a range of photographers to develop a concept into a book cover.

That isn't to say photography doesn't work for fiction. A powerful photograph or in some cases a combination of photographs – can often evoke mood and atmosphere more effectively than illustration. And illustration itself offers countless possibilities through different styles and media. I always explore at least 2-3 distinct conceptual directions before making a selection, which also often goes through many iterations before we arrive at a final cover.

HarperPerennial is a dedicated imprint for translations from Indian languages into English and it has given me the opportunity to work on some of my favourite and most eclectic covers. Over the years, many of these books have been repackaged as a collector's series, featuring bespoke calligraphy by Studio Em and En in their original scripts. The series is an ode to Indic scripts and a fine example of typography as a visual motif.



Looking across your portfolio, it's striking how little your covers resemble one another. Do you consciously avoid developing a recognisable visual signature, or do you believe a designer's style should always remain secondary to the manuscript?

Again, it really depends on the book. I sometimes commission illustrators based on a concept that I feel is right for the story.

Often, we have access to great stock illustrations that work very well with a little modification and refinement. Image and illustration searches are a fun part of the creative process because they help you understand the importance of keywords and can open up new ways of seeing or interpreting an idea.

Different genres call for different visual approaches, and as a designer and art director, my role is to bring together the right people, skills and resources to create the strongest possible cover. While every designer naturally develops certain instincts over time, I don't think a personal style should ever overshadow the manuscript. The book should always lead.

Personally, I love designing illustrated and visual books as a whole. I enjoy working with grid systems and creating a visual flow that brings together information and imagery.

A recent example was Meher Mirza's *Sea Salt and Spice*, where the design process involved bringing together illustration, archival images, newspaper clippings and content to create a beautiful reading experience.

Lastly, has there been a manuscript that permanently changed the way you thought about your craft?

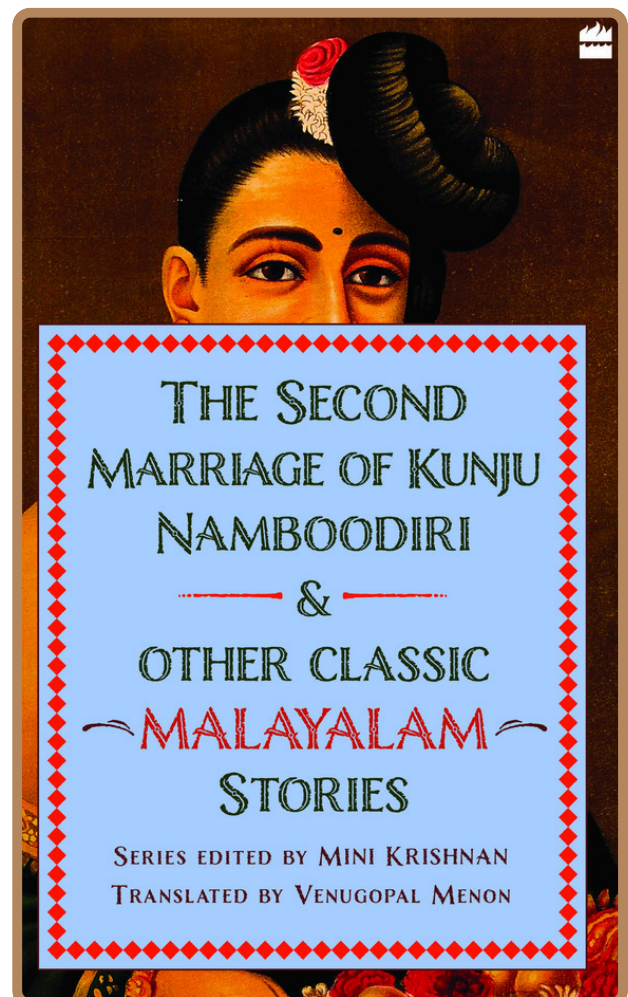
I think it would have to be Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Independence*. The characters in the

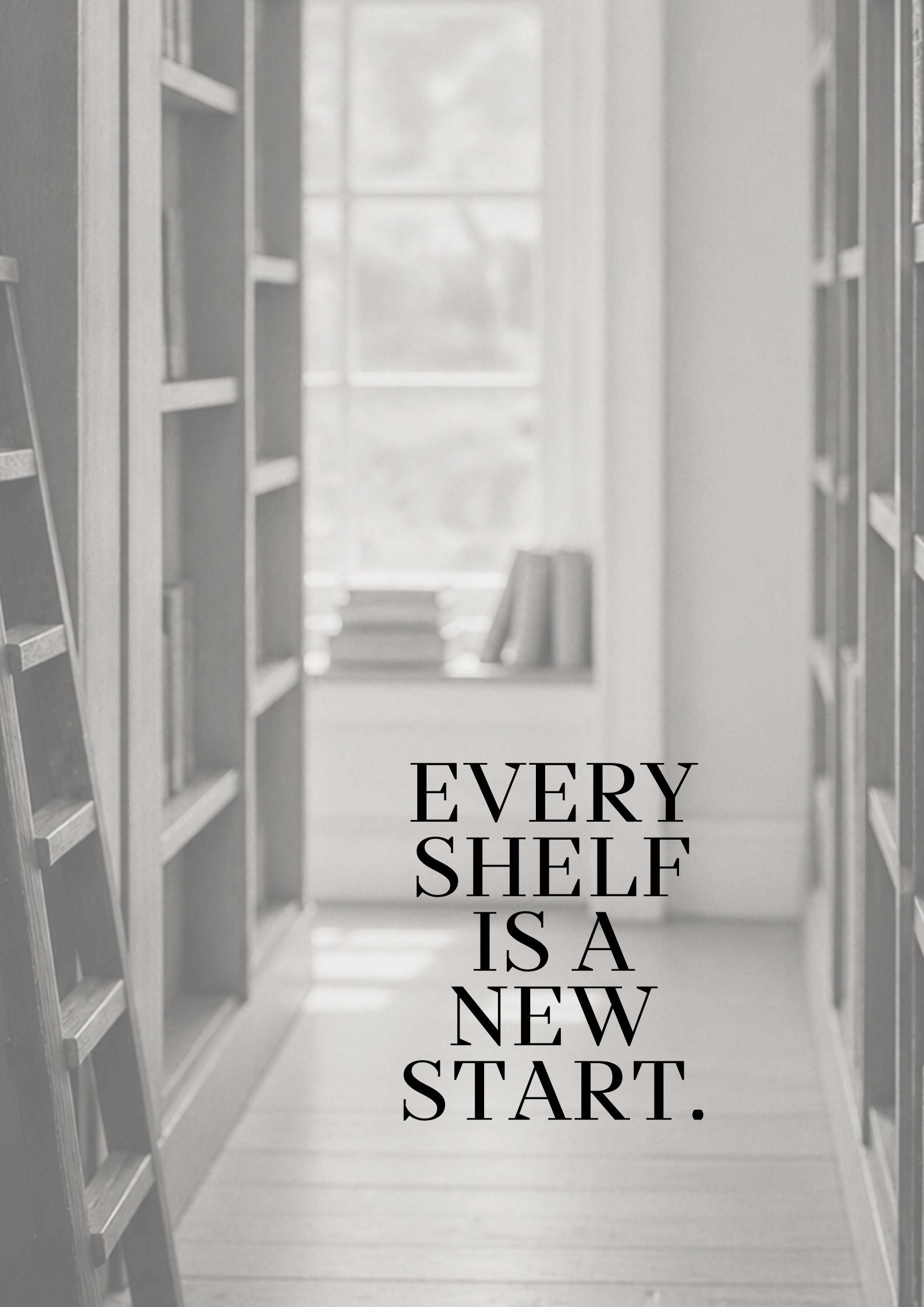
novel were extremely relatable – I felt a personal connection to them. The women in the story, though often caught up in sibling rivalry, are deeply interdependent and find ways to support one another as they navigate a changing world. Their own search for identity and independence unfolds against the backdrop of India's freedom struggle.

The novel made me think about women's empowerment and the invisible work women have always done. I believe the same can be said of makers and craftspeople in India. I've always believed in craft and making, and in the invisible work that goes into creating something meaningful. One of our greatest strengths as a country is our rich tradition of art and craft.

I was fortunate to be able to take an important strand of the narrative – Kantha embroidery – and make it the medium for the cover. Through our collaboration with Ashdeen, we worked with craftspeople from West Bengal to create an original embroidered artwork.

We also created a small edition of embroidered tote bags inspired by the cover, which, more than being a publicity tool, became a unique bookish artifact. The whole creative process was a memorable labour of love.





EVERY
SHELF
IS A
NEW
START.

ROUNDTABLE

BEYOND THE BESTSELLER LIST

Meren Pongen, Sales & Marketing Manager at The White Owl in Nagaland, and Jatin Lalwani, owner of The Basement Bookstore in Jaipur, spend their days connecting readers with books. In this roundtable, they talk about the books they recommend most often, the reading trends they notice before anyone else, and why human conversations continue to matter in an age of algorithms.

What's one book you recommend again and again - why does it always seem to work?

Jatin: The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini is my all-time recommendation to everyone. No matter what someone usually reads, this book touches them. It has friendship, guilt, family, history, and incredibly emotional storytelling that keeps everyone hooked. I've recommended it to beginners, people getting back into reading, and lifelong readers - almost everyone comes back saying it stayed with them long after they finished it. I myself have read it 9-10 times since the first time I read it in 2016.

Meren: Mari by Easterine Kire. It's both very personal and significant historically. It is set during the Battle of Kohima and narrates the tale of a young Naga woman whose life is altered by war. Because it is really a tale of love, family, grief, and resiliency, even those who are unfamiliar with Nagaland are able to relate to it.



What's something you've noticed readers in India are gravitating towards this year that isn't reflected on bestseller lists?

Jatin: For a bookstore that focuses on books that are either not available in India or very expensive otherwise, I can confidently say readers are becoming far more curious than what our usual bestseller lists suggest. At our store, I've noticed growing interest in many titles most people don't even know about in India. Sometimes it's the name, sometimes the cover, or just the blurb of the book that makes a person curious about it. At The Basement Bookstore, people aren't just asking for what's trending online anymore.

Meren: There has been a noticeable revival of interest in Naga literature here in Nagaland. In addition to new titles, readers are rediscovering authors from our relatively young literary tradition. Excitingly, we're also seeing increasing orders from all around India, indicating that people are becoming more interested in Northeastern stories.



What's a wonderful book you wish more people picked up?

Jatin: Especially keeping in mind that we just had Pride Month, I'd say Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe. It's one of the most raw and emotional LGBTQ novels I've read. At its heart, it's about friendship, identity, family, and learning to accept yourself. Benjamin writes with such warmth and simplicity that every emotion feels genuine. I wish more people picked it up because it's a book that leaves a lasting impact long after you've finished it. I absolutely love the relationship between Ari and his parents - must read!

Meren: These Hills Called Home by Temsula Ao. This collection of stories explores the human cost of conflict with subdued grace. While it's deeply rooted in Naga history, its themes of memory, loss, resilience, hope, and identity are universal. I wish more people across India would pick it up.

Has social media and AI changed the way people discover books?

Jatin: Absolutely! Social media has made reading feel more accessible and it's so much easier to find like-minded people. People discover books through Bookstagrammers and book clubs' recommendations. AI is becoming another discovery tool, helping readers find books - I myself sometimes take the help of AI to come up with reel ideas for our bookstore and a script to pitch a book to our customers. I think it does a better job at pitching books than Goodreads does. At the end, of course, it comes down to how we use them.

Meren: Without a doubt. AI makes recommendations more accessible than ever, and social media has assisted readers in finding new books. However, real conversations are still something that bookstores provide that algorithms cannot.



Complete this sentence - "People think they choose books. I think..."

Jatin: People think they choose books. I think... the right book has a way of finding you exactly when you're ready for it. There's always a timing for reading a book. Some books - if read at the perfect timing - could end up in your favorites.

Meren: People think they choose books. I think... that life has a way of putting the proper book in your hands when you need to know that someone else has experienced what you're going through.



A black and white photograph of a stone wall. A vine with heart-shaped leaves is growing up the right side of the wall. The foreground shows the rough texture of the stone wall, and the background is a blurred landscape with a body of water and distant hills. The text "THE QUIETEST THINGS ENDURE." is overlaid in the center-left.

THE
QUIETEST
THINGS
ENDURE.



Thank you for spending time with the third issue of our magazine.

Whether it was through a conversation, a new idea, a creative practice, or a book waiting to be discovered, we hope something in these pages stayed with you.

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