



Q&A with Navjot Kaur

Award-winning author and elementary teacher, Navjot Kaur, spent much of her childhood nourishing her imagination in her own personal Faraway Tree (which strangely resembled her attic). Born and raised in England and of Sikh-Panjabi heritage, Navjot is fascinated and inspired by diverse environments and culture.

Her first children's book, *A Lion's Mane*, won the 2010 Skipping Stones Honor Award for Multicultural and International Awareness. She believes that our children can become advocates for social change and uses her writing as a way to inspire them to grow into responsible global citizens. Her latest book, *Dreams of Hope*, will be released in June 2011.

In this interview, Navjot talks about how being a teacher made her a better writer, the invaluable lessons embedded in her books, and the revolution the publishing industry needs to undergo:

How does your background as a teacher influence your writing?

It has been a privilege to observe learning from the perspective of a child and young adult. Often, we hear about the negative stereotypes associated with youth today, but through my experiences of teaching in different demographic communities, I have been inspired by the strengths and possibility in each child. Teaching children to think critically can be quite a challenge in a world of media images mixed with hidden biases, but when they learn to think deeply about what they see and hear, change takes place in many ways. Authentic experiences are what essentially define my writing today. For example, John McPhee's creative nonfiction work inspired the style for *A Lion's Mane*. I fell in love with his intertwining of facts with the narrative form and explored it through the writing of this title.

When did you first realize you wanted to become a writer?

I don't remember a time when I didn't love to write. I would practice all kinds of typography as a child before I even knew it was a skill! I was pretty shy growing up so writing was my way of expressing my thoughts and exploring ideas. Language inspired me and it wasn't long before scribbled notes to myself emerged, forming the serifs of stories I have yet to write.

A Lion's Mane is about a young boy discovering who he is as he explores the significance of the lion in different cultures. What was the most interesting thing you learned from researching the common connections between various cultures?

This was a healing journey. Although *A Lion's Mane* was inspired by my son's fight against many



odds during his first year of life, the global connections reminded me of the strength in unity. It is not only about other people understanding what the Sikh turban or being Deaf represents, but I learned that it is also about raising my child with meaningful experiences that will raise his own awareness about the global world.

In *Dreams of Hope*, your characters go on a journey to discover the beauty of their world. What kind of dreams of hope do you want children to take away from this story?

I think each child's experience will influence their personal dreams and hopes for the future. In a world struck by natural disasters, I often think about what I could be doing to better respect the environment and the natural beauty that surrounds us. In *Dreams of Hope*, a Father hopes for his daughter to take flight in life and dream big, especially when dialogue seems to be focused on female foeticide within the South-Asian community. In turn, there is his daughter's dream to listen to the innate messages of peace from the mountaintops sheltering the endangered *Chirus* and to the hope of the oceans that are vital to the health of the planet. I also recently met a little girl who commented, "Oh look, she's just like me," while looking at an image from the book. That was her hope - to see herself - and her dream came true.

Why do you think it is important for children to become critical thinkers and global citizens from an early age?

Prejudices and biases are formed as early as two years old. If these perspectives are not informed as a child grows, these views can fuel incidents of bullying and direct negative stereotyping. When children learn to think about everything they see and hear, they become better informed and this can lay the foundation for understanding and respect of all global citizens.

What should the publishing industry do to better represent diversity and cultural identity in books?

The publishing industry produces what it feels consumers want. The markets they gather that information from are where they direct their titles and sales. There are publishers emerging who are promoting change within their catalogues and awards; independent bookstores like Another Story and The Magic Suitcase advocate for change through their book lists. However, until diversity of thought and authentic experiences are represented within the decision-making process, the publishing industry will continue to reflect multicultural titles but not necessarily diverse and inclusive experiences.

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