



'WRITING FOR CHILDREN IS A RELIEF'

She is fun, she is not the least bit preachy and she loves words.

Meera Nair, the author of *Video* and *Maya Saves the Day* — a book for children that will tempt you to pick it up for a quick read more than once — is not one to tomtom her achievements.

Yes, she has won a number of prizes, including the 7th Annual Asian-American Literary Award.

And, you may have read her in the *New York Times Magazine* and in *India Abroad*.

She has won the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship twice.

If you check in at her Web site, you will find out she has taught fiction at the New School, New York University and Brooklyn College's Master of Fine Arts program and has led the University's Writing London Study Abroad summer program in the United Kingdom. Oh yes, you will also find she is currently the Writer-in-Residence at Fordham University.

But, if you really want to find Meera, go chase a few words or check behind some dusty bookshelves. You're sure to find her there, savoring the magic that words can spin.

Tell me a bit about yourself and your passion for writing? How did it all start?

I wanted to be a writer since I was 10. We had a cupboard in my room in Goa. From floor to ceiling, each of its shelves had stacks of books.

I think I must have read Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* when I was 13. Then there was Charles Dickens' *Three Men in a Boat*. I grew up in a house that had more books per square inch than furniture.

And, my parents mostly left me alone to read. To make matters worse, my father was a journalist, a writer and he bought me more books. He took me to libraries.

I had asthma as a kid and, when I couldn't sleep, my mom read to me through the night. At some point, it felt completely natural to say I want to be a writer. It was what I was used to — writers.

But why children's books? Isn't writing for children the most difficult of all forms?

I didn't start out as a children's writer and frankly, I don't think of myself as one. It just hap-

A wonky world view. Endless curiosity. And naming a puppy Boothalingam. Meera Nair shares what makes her love the genre with **Savera Someshwar**



pened that I wrote one that was for children.

I don't really know if it is the most difficult form of writing. It seems easy for some writers — curse them.

For me, all writing is difficult. When it's going well, it's great and you disappear into this other world for a few hours, but there are bad, bad days when the words just don't come, when you are stuck in a swamp of goopy mud.

What's the best and worst feedback you have got from kids?

Children either love a book or they are like 'meh.' They don't know how to pretend or say 'it's interesting (*grins*):'

My daughter was my first reader and she had some really smart things to say about Maya (*the protagonist of Maya Saves the Day*). She told me about all the parts she thought were pretentious and I took those bits out.

I think I liked watching my friend's kid Naya devour the book on a subway ride into Manhattan. She just inhaled the book and, wouldn't even talk to her friends while she read it. Then she said, 'I like the puppies.'

What do you enjoy more — writing for adults or writ-

ing for children?

I mostly write for adults but frankly, writing for children is a relief. I can stop telling sad stories for a while. It allows me to let down my hair and be silly. And, saddle a puppy with a name like Boothalingam (*one in Maya Saves the Day*).

As someone who loves writing

for children, you must be following up on its growth in India. How do you see it?

I only know what I read — same as anyone else. I hear the market is growing.

What's exciting to me, who grew up in a time when there were no Indian authors writing for children, is that kids now have a

chance to read stories that reflect their lives. They can see themselves in the stories — there are characters who have skin color, hair and eyes and names like theirs and, eat the food they eat, wear the clothes they do, and do the things they do.

What, according to you, is a good children's story?

One that treats a child as an intelligent human being and doesn't talk down to them.

One that realizes that they respond to the same things in stories as you do — characters you care deeply about, a fully realized world that you can see and feel and touch and smell, language that is smart and fun, storytelling that makes you want to happily go wherever the author is taking you.

Any advice for budding writers?

I always have the same

piece of advice for anyone wanting to be a writer. Read greedily, deeply, widely, desperately, as if all the books in the world were going to be burnt tomorrow. If you don't read you can't be a writer — sorry, reading happens to be the requirement.

Also, rewrite. You will risk the wrath of the writing gods if you don't rewrite your work. All good writing is rewriting. It's revision and the word says it all — revision, to look again. Lots of amazing, magical things happen during revision and if you don't rewrite, you will never know.

What makes for a good writer of children's books?

A good sense of humor. A skewed, wonky, child's eye view of the world. Endless curiosity. An ability to write good dialogue. The skill to make readers turn the page. Someone who doesn't feel the need to preach the moment s/he spots a small being.

Do you test your books before they are published?

I do try them out on my daughter who is now 12. She is a very sharp-eyed critic and often makes very good suggestions. I send versions to my husband, who is a journalist, and generous writer friends.

What are the things that absolutely should not be there in children's book?

I am not into books that treat kids like they are in constant need of urgent reform. I am anti-advice and anti-moralizing.

Kids live in a world where everyone is constantly telling them what to do. I think it would be nice if books didn't also give well meaning advice. Also no guns, absolutely none.

In this multimedia, social media age, do you think books can and should be presented differently? Or does the age-old magic of print and paper still hold sway?

Sure, go ahead, you techy types, present books in every which way that helps us to read more of them.

But for myself here's what I petition that Great Reading Room in the Sky — kids love real books, made of real paper pages that rustle and dog-ear, and stain with drool when you fall asleep on them.

I pray that kids never stop loving that moment when they open up a new book and smell the scent of those words wafting out. ■

