

Story of the Story-Teller: A Conversation with Ramendra Kumar

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Ramendra Kumar (Ramen) is an award-winning writer, storyteller and inspirational speaker with 42 books to his name. Ramen's writings have been published by many of the leading publishers in the country and translated into 30 languages. They have found a place in several textbooks and anthologies. He has written across all genres ranging from picture books to adult fiction, satire, poetry, travelogues, biographies and on issues related to parenting and relationships. He has been invited to literary festivals held in Denmark, Greece, Sharjah, Sri Lanka as well Indian events including the prestigious Jaipur Litfest to conduct storytelling sessions and creative writing workshops. He has also been empanelled by Pearson India Education Services as well as several schools to conduct workshops. He was nominated as a Jury Member for the Best

Children's Author Category of The Times of India's 'Women AutHer' Awards 2020. Many of his stories have been showcased by popular audio streaming, apps both within and outside the country, such as Spotify, Gaatha, Talking Stories Radio – London et al.

An Engineer & an MBA, Ramen was serving as the General Manager (Corporate Communications), SAIL, Rourkela Steel Plant, when he took Voluntary Retirement to pursue his passion, in August 2020. To know more about the writer, you can visit his website www.ramendra.in & his page on Wikipedia. Dr. Sagar Kumar Sharma interviews the author and unfolds the pages of his life.

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Received 01 Dec. 2024; Accepted 20 Dec. 2024. Available online: 25 Dec. 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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Sagar Kumar Sharma (SKS): *How did you discover the writer within you? Tell us something about the beginning of your creative journey.*

Ramendra Kumar (RK): I always wanted to be a writer ever since I can remember. I wrote my first poem when I was around seven. It was possibly the most ridiculous poem ever written. It went something like this:

Topsy & Tim went for a swim

Topsy swam well and broke the spell

Tim swam badly

And went home sadly!

I took my maiden ‘masterpiece’ written in my spidery scrawl, to Babuji, my father. I was feeling a bit apprehensive. I thought he would remark, ‘Ramen, why are you wasting your time writing silly poetry? You should solve math problems like Chaddha Uncle’s daughter Sweetie or study science like Oindrilla aunty’s son Putul!’

But he didn’t say any of these things. He read the poem carefully, picked me up, gave me a tight hug and said just one word: ‘Wonderful!’

If today I am a writer with quite a few books and awards, it is because of that one soul caressing gesture.

My journey as a writer continued in fits and starts. I took up writing seriously only when I was in my Engineering. Here too, at every step of the way Bauji was there with his unobtrusive guidance and unconditional support.

SKS: *Many of your books are for children. Can you please tell us how you came about to write children’s books?*

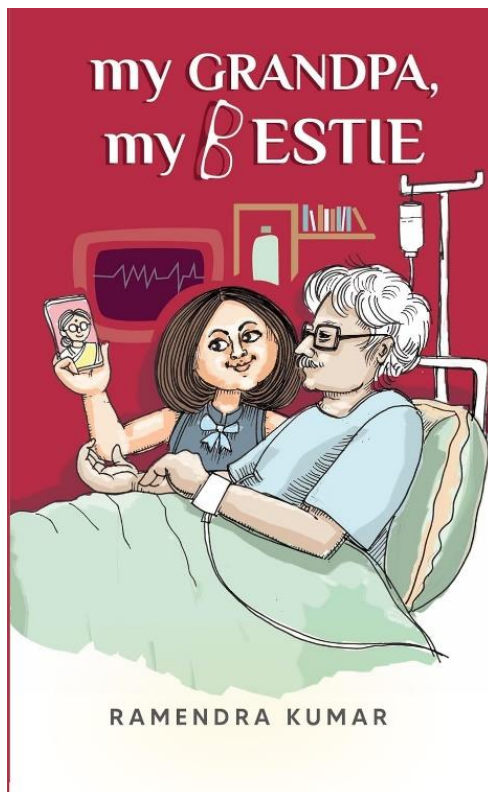
RK: During my college days I started by writing satire and achieved a modest degree of fame and notoriety over the years.

When my daughter Ankita was around three years old, my responsibility as a parent was to put the little one to sleep by telling her stories. Instead of narrating the age-old fairy tales and fables, I started spinning yarns for her. I found she lapped them all up. I typed them out and

sent them to children's magazines. The stories started getting published and thus began my journey into the idyllic world of children.

After my son Aniket was born and reached the right age, he became an even more ardent member of my exclusive two-member fan club. He would insist that I tell him a new story every day and he and Ankita would fight over the themes. While Ankita wanted the fairytale, happy ending type of tales, my in-house Rambo wanted action and sports. So naturally, Papa Scheherazade ended up telling both types of stories and thereby enriched his repertoire.

Our daily tryst with tales created indelible memories. Sitting on the bed, on long summer nights, cold winter evenings and rain drenched twilights we used to laugh, jump, sing, dance and yes, sometimes shed a tear or two as we explored the world of magic and mystery, action and adventure, sentiment and values. The tales created a gossamer fabric of love and togetherness which, I am sure, we shall always cherish.



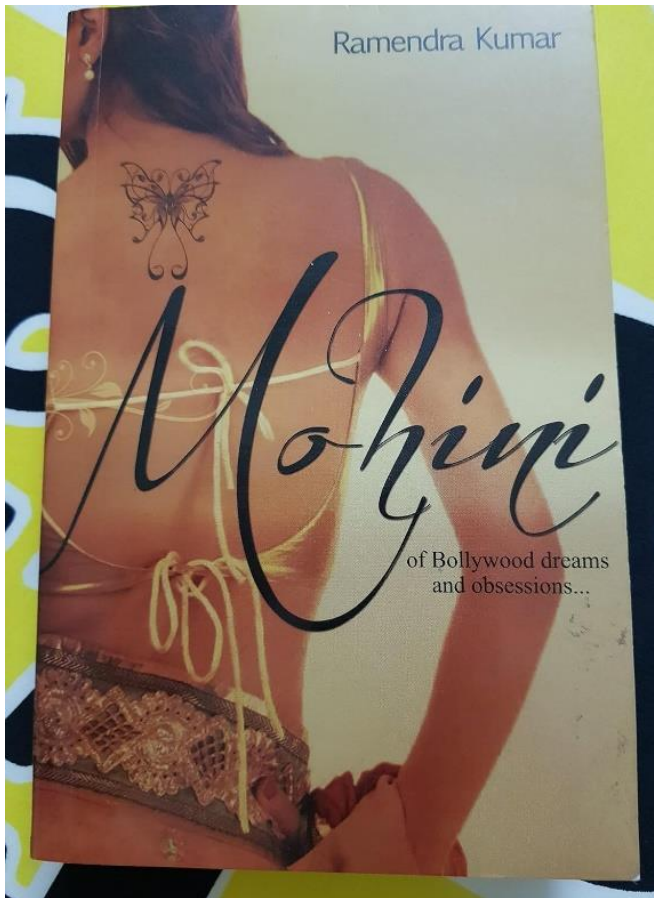
SKS: *Your writing for children is critically acclaimed. With wide work experience, you are well versed with the harsher realities of life. Do you talk about them in your children's books? How do you present such facts to children without sending a note of despair?*

RK: I basically want to tell a story which is entertaining and has a tiny value subtly tucked in somewhere. It is not thrust down the young reader's throat. My objective is to weave the value into the story in such a way that the reader internalises it without even realising it. To me entertainment without a value is useless and value without entertainment is boring.

I have written many award-winning stories which talk about hard core realities like communal violence, war, mental trauma, exploitation, abuse et al. However, I have made sure that each of these stories ends on a note of the most important four-letter word in these fractured times – Hope.

The harshest criticism I have faced is that my stories for children always end on a note of optimism. My response is that today the child is exposed to angst and agony, sorrow and suffering within and without. I do not want her to grow up to be a cynical individual. Through my writing I want to offer her a reason to smile and to look for the rainbow in the stormiest of skies.

My icon has been Hrishikesh Mukherjee – need I say more?



SKS: *You have also written Mohini, a book that received enormous success. Primarily a children's writer, how was your experience of writing this book?*

RK: I had written a political satire in which one of the key protagonists was a film heroine. Her character fascinated me and I thought of developing it further. Slowly she metamorphosed into Mohini the eponymous character of my first and only bestselling novel for adults.

I have always been hugely fascinated by Bollywood – both its on-screen as well as off-screen avatars. My parents too were film buffs and our conversations often veered to the art and craft of film making as well as the happenings beyond the celluloid. I loved watching movies, reading about films and collecting trivia. I regularly participated in Movie Quizzes and in my college days, at one point of time, my team was the best in Hyderabad.

I really enjoyed writing the book. I love everything about films and scripting a story about Bollywood was huge fun.

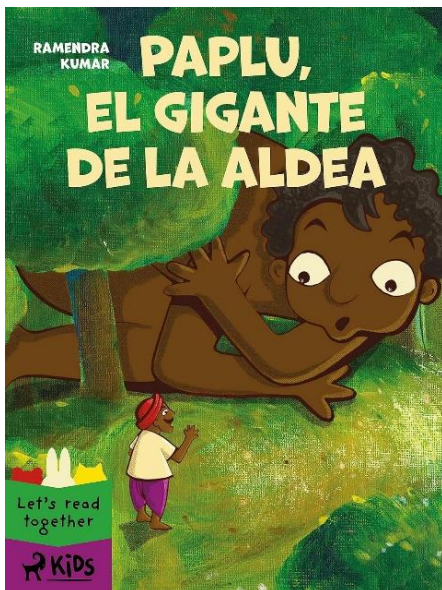
SKS: *While writing Mohini, did you find the author inside you that writes for children being any kind of hinderance? Or was it of some help?*

RK: I believe in transcending genres in writing. I have written children’s fiction (picture books to YA), biographies, graphic book on the JJ Act, POCSO Act, travelogues, articles on relationships, poetry et al. As long as you are creative enough, you can write in any category. And switching genres helps in accentuating your imagination and sharpening your creativity.

SKS: *Tell us something about Mohini.*

RK: A beautiful and charismatic actress, a sensitive and immensely gifted director, a scheming, wily but brilliant manager – Mohini is the pulsating saga of three individuals, each driven by an obsession. Set in the backdrop of the bold and brazen world of Bollywood, it is a tale of passion, intrigue and suspense. The narrative moves at a roller coaster speed and captures love in its myriad shades: infatuation, romance, commitment, lust and obsession.

An ambitious starlet wants to conquer Bollywood and to achieve this aspiration she’ll stop at nothing. In her relentless climb to the peak, she manipulates minds, breaks hearts and tramples over souls. Using her body and her guile she reaches the peak only to find that she has lost what she cared for the most – the love of a man who loved her to distraction. Enscoced in this tale of machinations, betrayals and bitterness is a love story – a pure and pristine one.



I feel it is a must read for anyone looking out for a gripping plot and well etched characters.

SKS: *What type of messages do you like to convey through your children’s books?*

RK: I have dabbled in different types of genres such as fairytales, fantasies, folk tales, fables and realistic fiction. However, my favourite is realistic fiction or the ‘Here and Now’ genre. I write about kids who are ordinary but have to face situations which are abnormal. How they go about

fighting adversity not with wands but with will power, not with spells but with intelligence, not with potions but with pragmatism - is what my stories are all about.

I have written about children who are victims of terrorism, riots as well as those who have to face the realities of a handicap, a broken family, alcoholic parents and marginalization of every kind. Then again, my stories are not all about agony and angst, pain and perseverance – they are also about the fun, the joy, the pranks and the sheer unadulterated bliss of being young.

SKS: *You have also written poems. Poetry for a cause, or poetry for pleasure? What do you prefer?*

RK: Ideally, I would prefer poetry for pleasure which can also serve a cause.

SKS: As a writer, what is your major concern?

RK: The clique formed by publishers, editors, writers, reading clubs and festival organisers. It is like the old boy's club which rules the world of children's publishing. While it has thrown up some amazing writers most of them churn out ordinary stuff which is peddled and pushed as brilliant fare by the members of this caucus.



SKS: *How do you envisage the future of children's literature, as also young adults' fiction in India?*

RK: It has a very bright future. Writers are exploring new themes which were an anathema some years ago. Especially in YA fiction topics such as LGBTQ issues, sexual exploration, domestic abuse, divorce etc. are being touched upon in an objective, yet sensitive manner

without passing judgement. We have several new and not so new voices which are doing exceptional work in this area including Jane Desouza, Gopalakrishnan, Paro Anand, Deepa Agarwal, Venita Coelho and Shruti Rao.

SKS: *You have produced works of great critical merit. They have been well received in India as well as abroad. How do you critique your own writing?*

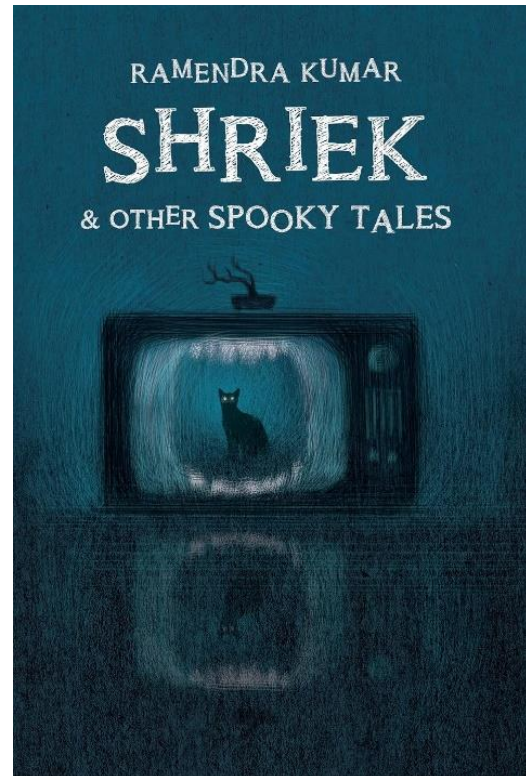
RK: I don't! I just enjoy the process of writing!

SKS: *I am familiar with your liking for P. G. Wodehouse. Would you like to tell us what you like about him the most?*

RK: Writers of every genre have enriched English literature with their genius. Some have been admired for the intricacy of the plots, others for their finely etched characters. A few have won rave reviews for the language while some have been applauded for the style. But rarely has an author been universally acknowledged for the complete mastery of the language, plot, style and characterisation.

Yes, the wizard in question is Pelham Grenville Wodehouse – the pasha of plot, the czar of characterisation, the maestro of metaphor, the sultan of simile and the indisputable lord of the language.

Today a hundred years after he first started writing, his popularity is unabated. If you go to any good book store you are sure to find an entire rack or more, devoted to the writings of Wodehouse. He may not be included in the echelons of writers who write on agony and angst, who create a realistic collage of life – but he is one craftsman who writes in a genre which is the most difficult – humour. To sustain this style of writing for so long and over so many years, is a mind-blowing achievement.

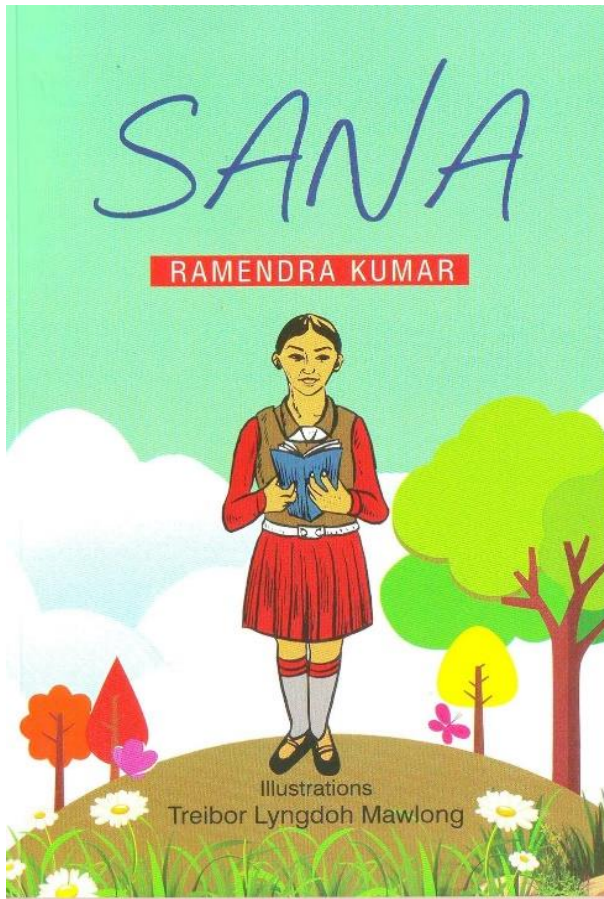


SKS: *Do you have any writing ritual?*

RK: The story starts with an idea. I then start developing the characters and plot inside my head. I get down to writing only when the rough sketch is ready. I type the semi-final version of the story on my lap top and then leave it to marinate. After a day or two I revisit the draft, finalise it and then ‘lock’ it. This is the final version which is sent to the editor/publisher.

SKS: *A word of advice to the budding writers?*

RK: Rather than giving advice let me share a few thoughts and experiences on writing:



Why do I write? Do I write for money? No. With the money I make from writing, I can't feed my Labrador for a week.

Do I write for fame? Of course not – I was invited to the Sharjah reading festival and they took me to Abu Dhabi. There a girl asked me, “Sir, you have written so many books, won so many awards and have made quite a few appearances at the international level – how come we haven't heard of you? If ever any remark brought me down to earth real fast, it was this!

Then why do I write? It is because writing is my obsession.

If you want to be a writer, make writing your passion.

Writing is all about imagination, observation and experience. And the more you enhance these aspects the better you will turn out as a writer.

Writing is about ideas. And anything can spark an idea. A writer should always be in the space of creativity. She should forever be open to all these tiny sparks flying around her.

Don't wait for an ideal scenario to write. There was a Sahitya award winning poet who used to go to Srinagar to sit in front of Dal Lake to write poetry. If I tell that to my wife, she will dump me in the washing machine! You may think that you will wait for the right moment – when the kids have gone to the summer camp and your husband starts snoring you will write. It won't happen.

Often when we used to go to the office and my wife would keep extolling the virtues of my father-in-law, I would simply switch off. (Of course, without her realising it) Sitting in boring meetings in my organisation, I often used to escape into my world of creativity, even while keeping a reasonably curious expression on my face.

Never fear rejection. It is a part and parcel of writing. From Rowling to Ramendra everyone has faced it. Even after 42 books, I can never be sure my 43rd will be accepted. I still feel the same anxiety mixed with hope. And if the manuscript is rejected, I spend some time pitying the intellect of the editor and simply send it to someone else.

Write in as many genres as possible.

Don't ever talk down to a reader especially if she is a young reader. Children are much, much more intelligent than you know or can even imagine.

Children are not idiots, adults are – as we grow, we gather more idiocy. If you are writing for children learn to enjoy their company their world of fun, masti and innocence and joy!

READ – as much as possible, different kinds of books, authors and themes.

Don't write for the market. Write what you believe in.

And above all, don't take yourself too seriously. Enjoy the process.

