

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

With *Mitali Perkins*



Illustration copyright © 2007 by Jamie Hogan

When Did you Begin writing?

I started writing at about age nine, scribbling my thoughts and stories in the orange diary my Dad gave me. It had a lock on it, which was important to me.

What was your first Book?

The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen (Little, Brown), the story of a California eighth-grader whose grandparents come to visit from India, was my first attempt to explore the strange place I call “life between cultures” through fiction.

Where Did you get the idea for *Rickshaw Girl*?

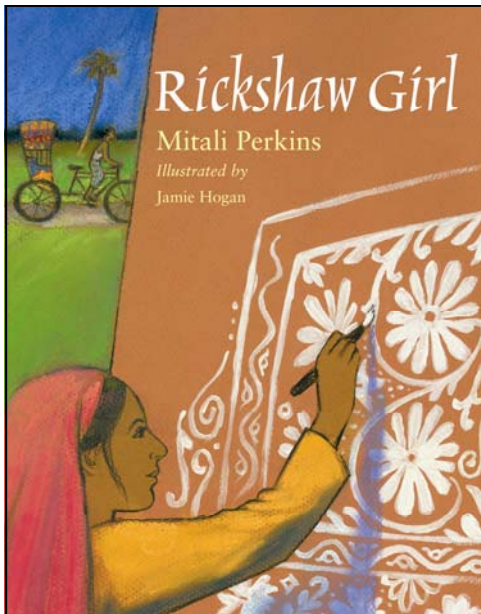
I was living in Bangladesh, the land of my parents’ birth, partly to find out more about the culture and the language. Bangladesh is a country bordering India that typically makes the news because of devastation or deprivation. That might be why I was astounded by the time, energy, and money spent to beautify the bicycle rickshaws that transport people and goods throughout the land. This rickshaw art and the *alpanas* painted with care by Bangladeshi girls, even in the poorest villages, revealed to me our universal human need for artistic expression. I was also learning about how microcredit is slowly improving the lives of some of these rural women, and I wanted to weave both of those threads into one story.

How long Did it take you to write *Rickshaw Girl*? what challenges Did you face along the way?

Rickshaw Girl started out as a picture book called *Rickshaw Boy*, believe it or not, but it just didn’t work in that format. Thanks to editor Judy O’Malley’s skillful suggestions and her recognition that the story needed a wider space to thrive, I was able to transform it into a longer book for tweens. Although I am Bengali (like Naima), I found it challenging (but rewarding) to strive for authenticity, as I am educated and literate, relatively wealthy, dwelling in a powerful country, and practicing a different faith. My hope is that I succeeded in telling Naima’s story in a way that would delight her if she herself could read it.

Your mother was a Champion alpana Painter just like Naima, the main character of *Rickshaw Girl*. Was she the inspiration Behind this character?

As an artist, definitely. And as a strong, courageous woman who doesn’t take “no” for an answer. But my mother was raised in an educated, middle-class family, so she had more options than my protagonist. Naima’s character was inspired more by the Bangladeshi girls and women I met who are struggling to make ends meet from day to day. And, of course, by myself, which brings us to the next question . . .



ISBN 978-1-58089-308-4 • 6 1/8 x 8 3/4 • 96 Pages

Do you see Naima in yourself?

Like Naima, I think I needed to hear the words of validation that are spoken by her mother at the end of the book: “It’s a good thing she turned out to be a daughter.” I wrote those words partly for her, partly for me, and partly for the many girls on the planet who still find themselves undervalued because of their gender.

Your writing is heavily influenced by your experiences growing up as an immigrant in America. What was it like “living between cultures”? Were you able to find a happy medium where you could embrace both Indian and American culture?

There are definitely losses, as I describe in an essay on my website called “[Notes to a Zero Generation](#).” You lose the ability to forget about race, proficiency in your mother tongue, the advantage of parents who can interpret the secrets of society, the stabilizing power of traditions, and the chance to disappear into

the majority anywhere in the world. But there are gains, too, once you settle into life along the border, and I tried to describe them in that essay:

You realize early that virtues are not the property of one heritage; you discover a self powerful enough to balance the best of many worlds. A part of you rises above the steamy confusion of diversity to glimpse the common and universal. You recognize the ache that makes us all feel like strangers, even in the middle of comfortable homogeneity.

How important is it for people to learn about different cultures?

It’s vital to discern what is common in the human experience and what is particular to our own cultures. Global encounters, whether face-to-face or with characters in a story, help us to disentangle our true selves from what our own cultural context is commanding us to become. Stepping outside our comfort zone also connects us with people who don’t seem to have much in common with us . . . at least, at face value. Our planet is in desperate need of such connections.

What are you working on now?

I’m revising a young adult novel set fully in India (tentatively titled *The Secret Keeper*) that is scheduled for release in 2008 by Random House, and finishing a two-book series about a President’s daughter adopted from Pakistan (*First Daughter: Extreme American Makeover*, Dutton 2007, and *First Daughter: White House Rules*, Dutton 2008). And Charlesbridge will be publishing *The Bamboo People* in 2009, my first novel featuring not just one boy protagonist, but two! Hopefully, *Rickshaw Girl* readers will be just the right age (middle school) when these books come out.

Visit Mitali’s Blog, *Mitali’s Fire Escape*, online at www.the-fire-escape.blogspot.com.



Illustration copyright © 2007 by Jamie Hogan