

We didn't talk to each other about love, come to think of it, ever. We lived as if love had nothing to do with us, all of us, daughters, wives, aunts, grandmothers and grandaunts. We lived in a world where everything, like marriage, was arranged to cause the least confrontation between people."

These words might resonate with many Indian woman, for behind each one is a hidden story that begs the question, 'what do we really know about her'? In her debut novel, *What We Know About Her*, Krupa Ge writes about womanhood as experienced by three generations of women with a fresh feminist perspective. The book is centered around Yamuna, a young doctoral student searching for meaning in her life through the stories and apparent secrets of her maternal grandaunt and famous artiste, Lalitha; stories her family seems to want to leave undisturbed. In her quest to uncover exactly who her ancestor was, Yamuna discovers the answers to what it means to be a woman, back then and now.

The novel is built around the tenet of marriage in India and how it has evolved from an unquestionable transaction between elders to a fight for an independent journey of love, albeit besieged by familial expectations. She captures the identity struggle that every woman faces at some point in her life. To put it in Lalitha's words, "What does dignity mean to us? Being a family woman, or being able to pursue art... Why can't a woman decide for herself what she wants to be? Isn't there space for all of us to do what we want to do in this new, independent India?"

Rich imagery
The author sets her story against the stunning backdrop of the rich imagery of Madras and Banaras, teeming with lyrical words in the vernacular and familiar South Indian visuals of crowded railway stations, hot coffee and Carnatic music. This is the quintessential book for any Indian who is being

'I'm every woman, it's all in me'

Ankita Victor chats with Krupa Ge whose debut novel poignantly explores feminism, identity struggles and everything in between in the Indian familial context



The author examines womanhood as experienced by three generations of women.

torn in different directions by their own ambitions, family and the desire to find love and make their own path. *What We Know About Her* is one woman's answers to questions emerging out of the music of her ancestors' past. Through the story of Yamuna and her grand

aunt, the book poignantly inspects the heavy mantle of womanhood that is passed down from one daughter to the next.

Krupa Ge is a writer based in Chennai. In 2017, she won a Laadli Award for a weekly column on women in cinema. She feels her novel

is for anyone looking for a certain kind of story — a bit of romance, a bit of nostalgia, some biting reality, and some amount of mystery. *DHOS* caught up with Krupa to answer a few questions on writing, feminism and inspiration. *Excerpts from an interview*

What inspired you to write this novel?

More than a decade ago, my mother told me a real-life story that stayed with me. The imagery, the way she described the events, I can replay it all in my head even now. It was the story of my grandmother's wedding being fixed. It was beautiful but also very bittersweet in hindsight, for my grandmother was only 14 when she married. A child bride. I started to think about writing a romance set in the past after this, in the times of child brides.

What has shaped your outlook on womanhood and feminism?

Personal experiences, stories from and of the women in my life, the strong sense of sisterhood from women who've stood by me through these years, reading great women, knowing them... life itself.

If there's one thing a reader could take away from the book what

would you want it to be?

It's not always possible to do the right thing, we are products of systems after all. But despite it all, it's possible to make connections, to push the boundaries that are separating us, one step at a time. It's okay to ruffle feathers. 'Bad girls' aren't so bad.

What or who do you look to for inspiration when you sit down to write?

When I am writing, I am not really thinking of inspiration. That is more an act of creating, of grappling with the empty page, a process with its own rhythms. But I am inspired by women who write whatever it is that they want to write about. Bama, Jamaica Kincaid, Anita Desai, Mieko Kawakami... this list is very long.

What is your hope for mainstream feminist literature?

My hope is that the brilliant women writing across languages in India will be able to make a living from writing. Right now breaking even as a writer, as a woman writer, seems impossible.



Krupa Ge

A delish sort of faith

Faith is believing what you do not or perhaps cannot see; food is all about seeing, hearing, sensing, tasting, smelling. What happens when you approach faith without its tiring prop-ups of dogma, religion and prejudice? If you instead nourish your spirituality with the delicious aromas of culture, history and community, faith becomes a welcoming sanctuary — away from the very fashionable religious polarity and the very normalised sneering at syncretism of present-day India.

Author Shoba Narayan's new book 'Food and Faith' is a beautifully produced attempt at seeking this increasingly elusive sanctuary. Apart from making you yearn to travel (oh! when will those days return!), it will also ensure trips to the kitchen in a vain search for remembered *prasadam*s like *laal pedas* from Kashi, Jewish *halwa*, *paal payasam* and the like! Of course, lockdown kitchens store nothing of the sort and you sort of drift back into your room with just a faint waft of warm ghee somewhere in the recesses of your brain.

Of food and folklore
The author says in the introduction that what started out as a book on 'sacred food' became for her a journey that "prompted larger questions about faith and its place in our lives and society." Essentially about Hindu places of worship, there are a few exceptions like her celebrating Rosh Hashanah in Mumbai and the visit to the Ajmer Dargah.

Each chapter covers a place of worship, and happily, can be read at random; the no-nonsense writing elevates it from being a mere travelogue and with its combination of folklore, philosophy and immersive descriptions of the *bhog* and the community kitchens, reading it is a sensory experience (except for the constant hunger pangs). All chapters end with a section titled 'Takeaway' where the author is leaning back after the journey and reflecting on where it lead her, what it taught her and how she will imbibe it within herself. What is commendable is her easy honesty; there is no flinching from admitting her faults nor is there any holding back of skepticism.

I particularly enjoyed the chapters on Udupi, Palani and Kashi. I have felt the same uneasiness the author expresses when she learns that "Brahmins are fed separately" in Udupi, despite the temple having held a special significance throughout my growing-up years. The age-old sibling rivalry story of Muruga and Ganesha, (which is narrated with loads of wry humour), brought back memories of childhood reading and re-reading of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics as did the anecdote about people guilelessly asking for bottles of *panchamritham* when they hear you are visiting the god who stands atop the hill.

In the preceding chapter on the Ajmer Dargah, the reader is advised to try out if she can whirl like the dervishes. As Ms Narayan puts it, "to whirl like the dervish involves a suspension of the ego and a desire to connect to the divine." Who can deny that this is indeed what faith asks you to do? Of course, if you can suspend your ego and connect to the divine while munching on a Mathura *peda*, then there's no stopping you!

RASHMI VASUDEVA



BOOKRACK

GREEN HUMOUR FOR A GREYING PLANET
Rohan Chakravarty
Penguin, pp 232, Rs 399
This is a curation of gag cartoons and comic strips based exclusively on wildlife and nature, perhaps the first of its kind. At a time when global warming, wildlife crimes and man-animal conflicts are at their worst, this is sure to provide readers some much-needed comic relief.

YOUNG PANDAVAS: THE ROYAL TOURNAMENT
Anupam Arunachalam
Hachette India, pp 128, Rs 250
Sahadeva, Nakula, Arjuna, Bhima and Yudhishtira are all set to graduate from Guru Dronacharya's school, having learnt to lead armies and fight battles. And now they must display their skills in a grand tournament before the entire kingdom.

SAMPOORNA MUDRA VIGNAN
Dharanipragada Prakash Rao and Dharanipragada Deepthi
Self Published, pp NA, Rs 550
This promises to be an encyclopaedia of mudras. It covers 810 mudras with pictures and explains the procedure, time-frame to perform the mudras, their physical, mental and spiritual benefits.

REFLECTIONS ON MUGHAL ART & CULTURE
Roda Ahluwalia (ed)
Niyogi Books, pp 352, Rs 3,000
Enter the splendid world of Mughal India and explore its rich aesthetic and cultural legacy through fresh insights offered by 13 eminent scholars. This beautifully illustrated book is sure to appeal to connoisseurs, collectors and scholars alike.

THE L-WORD
Aastha Atray Banan
HarperCollins, pp 176, Rs 299
This book is about modern love: from ghosting, polyamory, love in the times of social media to more everyday problems like dealing with heartbreak, infidelity and getting out of toxic relationships.

GOBBLEDYBOOK

A book recommending a person...

There's something very comforting about bonding with another person over the shared love for a book, or an author for that matter, says Shruthi Rao

Growing up, only one of my friends loved reading as much as I did. We also happened to love many of the same books, especially James Herriot's hilarious veterinary stories. One morning, I woke up to the news that Herriot had died. I hadn't even known until then that he was still alive, but the news of his death brought tears to my eyes. I had to share it with my friend. I reached school and spotted her at the other end of a crowded corridor.

"Did you hear?" I called out, and she responded, "Herriot died!" Then, like in a movie, we rushed toward each other and hugged, oblivious to the swirling crowds around us. It's been a quarter of a century, but I still remember the warmth of that moment (and she and I are still friends!)

There's something very comforting about bonding with another person over the shared love for a book (or an author, for that matter!)

There's a quote, origin unknown: "Seeing someone reading a book you love is seeing a book recommending a person." I understand that sentiment.

When we adults bemoan the fact that children don't want to explore new books, and that they seem to be reading the same books that all their friends are reading, we forget to stop and wonder why they do that. Don't we ourselves know the pleasures of recalling shared experiences, or connecting through the love of an old movie, TV series, songs or even old advertisements?



When a bunch of kids read the same books, they could be connecting with each other through the books. It could be an integral part of their friendship. They might be making memories that'll last for years. Children (and even adults) sometimes read a book they don't particularly enjoy, just because their friends are reading it, and they want to join in on the discussions. Isn't that how many book clubs work?

Bonding over books needn't only be with friends. My daughter and I spend hours in conversation discussing books that we've both enjoyed. Very often, one of us reads a book and pesters and bothers the other one until both of us have read it, and then we have a rollicking time discussing each character and situation to bits, coming up with jokes that nobody else understands, and rolling with uncontrollable laughter.

I recommend this to everyone highly — and it need not just be a parent-child activity.

Aunts, uncles, grandparents, anybody! Especially now, during the pandemic, when we haven't been meeting loved ones for months and years, it could be a good way to stay connected. Reading the same books separately and discussing them, like in a book club. Or getting on a call and reading a book to one another. Or even narrating a story to each other — there are many ways to make it work.

Read books, stay connected, make good memories — what's not to like?!

The author has written 10 books for children and can be reached at www.shruthi-rao.com

GobbledyBook is a fortnightly column that gives a peek into the wondrous world of children's books. Hop on! Or as Alice did, plunge into the rabbit hole.

READ OF THE WEEK

Anya Hindmarch is a mother of five, stepmother, entrepreneur and a globally renowned businesswoman.

In *If In Doubt, Wash Your Hair*, she shares what she has learned during her busy and eclectic life, what she still worries about, and what advice she has received along the way.

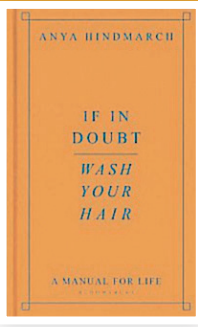
From practical tips and quick fixes

to profound observations about confidence and creativity, this inspiring handbook will show you how to live a little better — and why sometimes, the answer can be as simple as washing your hair.

Anya Hindmarch founded her company as a teenager in 1987. She has since grown it into an award-winning global brand known for its craftsman-

ship, creativity and sense of humour, including the hugely successful 'I'm Not a Plastic Bag' campaign.

An advocate of British design and arts, Anya is NED of the British Fashion Council and Emeritus Trustee of the Royal Academy of Arts and the Design Museum.



She was appointed Governor of the University of the Arts in 2010 and a Prime Minister's Business Ambassador in 2011, holds both and MBE and a CBE and is a Trustee of the Royal Marsden Cancer Charity.