

**Learning has to be encouraged, not imposed**

Ms Girija Rani Asthana has written fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults for thirty years, in both English and Hindi, including picture books, short story collections, biographies, and poetry. In addition to writing more than two-dozen books and one hundred short stories, she conducts workshops on creative writing, story illustrations, story dramatization, and poetry. She serves as vice-president of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children and president of Bachpan Society for Children's Literature and Culture.

**Enjoy some excerpts from a recent interview:**

**Since you work extensively with children and young adults, please tell us a little about your childhood and youth.**

I was the youngest of three siblings, and the only daughter, but was never spoiled. I loved to play cricket with my brothers and cousins. We used to all live as one big combined family, which provided a warm feeling of geniality and a deep sense of security. Since my father was often transferred due to his job, I completed my education in different cities. I was a good student; I really loved to study. Psychology in particular really interested me, which is why I completed my master's in that field.

**How did your journey begin with the transformative art of storytelling?**

It was by chance actually. When my children were young, I told them stories, especially during mealtimes. Though my style was effective and I was appreciated at home for it, I never took it seriously till one day much later, sometime in the mid-1980s, when my kids were grown. My neighbor coaxed me to consider taking up this art as a profession. I attended workshops on developing story ideas from raw plots to full-fledged stories.

**After acquiring essential tools in the storytelling domain, what was your next step toward a professional endeavor?**

Over the course of time, I began conducting storytelling workshops in schools for children in different age groups. The idea was not to be limited only to narration, but to use this art as an effective teaching tool. For example, through the text and pictures in a storybook, interesting questions can be put forth to kids, enabling them to apply their minds, leading them to think of answers themselves, rather than being spoonfed information. This is an important step in learning itself. So far I have written about twenty-five books, in both English and

Hindi, which are used in teaching a number of subjects and skills such as general knowledge, history, life and social skills, among others. In addition, I conduct storytelling sessions in schools, NGOs, book clubs, etc. I have done storytelling internationally as well in England, Vienna, South Korea, and Macau, to name a few countries.

**How have you used storytelling to impart knowledge to children?**

The important thing to understand in pedagogy is that learning has to be encouraged, not imposed. Over the years, I have found the biggest challenge in reading. "Mugged-up" material is merely recapitulated. This is not learning. I started an initiative in my home called "library in the house." Children from all sections of society are welcome to borrow books, read them at their own pace, and come back to engage in interactions in which they themselves decipher the answers with the power of their own thinking, either individually or as a group. Their minds are, hence, stimulated and activated. In the beginning, not many children knew how to read, but through simple didactic methodologies, they have begun to read at their own pace. It has been a slow but steady process that has left them, and me, with a deep sense of satisfaction.

**Any message for students and teachers that you would like to share based on your experiences.**

I think it is important for children to maintain their inquisitive trait, which I feel is often lost in the humdrum of the day-to-day grind. For teachers, a balance between the role of a friend and guide is imperative. I always emphasize how important it is for both children and teachers to read. Books are man's best friends, and rightfully so. They open doors to a whole wide, new world with opportunities and possibilities galore. Reading also serves as the basis for a number of other arts like poetry writing, painting, illustrative art, graphics, voice modulation, mimicry, and so many others. To conclude, I would sum up with this George R. R. Martin quote: "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only one."

*(The interview has been compiled by Sarah Berry, communications and media consultant, S M Sehgal Foundation)*