



Big Little Book Awardee . Author (Bengali) . 2017

NABANEETA DEV SEN

It would be difficult to slot Nabaneeta Dev Sen's writing in the more recognizable genres of 'children's fiction', or, categorise her readership by age-groups. She works with a range of genres, ranging from the semi-autobiographical to revisionary fairy tales or retellings of folk tales, mysteries, adventures stories and tales based on everyday situations tinged with the surreal. Powered by a whimsical yet empathetic imagination and stitched together with superb observational skills, she succeeds in pushing the frontiers of most of these otherwise well-worked genres and themes. Her protagonists—insects, birds, beasts and humans, resist stereotypes; each one is individuated.

Little girls abound, whether lotus-buds or a woodcutter's daughter or regular middle-class kids but with no trace of exam fever. The ambiguities of sibling bonds, especially between sisters, are explored and celebrated, often taken from the world of the author's daughters and her mother. In the collection of stories in *Ichhamati*, the name of the princess in the title story, puns on *ichha*—wish or desire, and Ichhamati, the river beloved in the literary landscape of Bengal. In this collection of fairy tales, names that would both be familiar from the tradition of Bangla folk tales coexist with the witch from Russian folk tales *Dainiburi Baba Yaga aar Puturani* (Baba Yaga the witch and Puturani). *Chikchik and rajhans-dadu*, (Chik-chik and Grandpa Swan) has the author weaving in the familiar landmarks like the Howrah

Bridge and the the Alipur zoo, yet traversing a huge geographical spread, with a migratory bird from Ulan-Bator conjuring up Manasarovar. The gifts of Nabaneeta Dev Sen are not to be found in one work but are scattered in gem-like profusion across her short stories. While most of them revolve around urban middle-class life, they also provide, often unexpectedly, vignettes of urban-rural-provincial intersections and contradictions. The city stories straddle decades, and explore the uncertainties of apparently certain lives. Nabaneeta Dev Sen is one of the few writers of her generation and after, to humorously and darkly weave in the bric-à-brac of everyday life into each one of her tales, whether real, surreal or outright fantastic.

