
I want idlis and rava kesari to be just as ubiquitous as khichdi or sheera: Lakshmi Iyer, author of 'Why is My Hair Curly?'

By: [Swapna Raghu Sanand](#)
November 20, 2020 1:48 PM

Reading and writing go together. To write, I must read and read across genres, which is why I guess my writing is sporadic.



many are the writers who use their own childhood experiences to construct their national narratives. For those who have grappled with being bullied or mocked over how they look or their weight, it takes considerable grit and creativity to look back and create a story that inspires. Take Sayaka Murata, whose working life in a convenience store in Japan, paved the way for her to become the bestselling author of 'Convenience Store Woman', which sold a whopping 1.4 million copies. Her decision to write about her own experience in a novel became a huge hit with young readers worldwide.

Back on the home front, Lakshmi Iyer, author of 'Why is My Hair Curly?' draws her inspiration from her own life. A software engineer with an MBA from LeBow College of Business and a certificate in Creative Writing from Simon Fraser University, Lakshmi's family is the subject of an upcoming documentary titled 'Our Daughters.'

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Coming from South India, she grew up reading Enid Blyton books, as most young Indian readers did way back in the 70s and 80s. In this candid interaction with The Financial Express Online's Swapna Raghu Sanand, Lakshmi Iyer says, "As a child, I grew up on a diet of Enid Blyton books followed by Nancy Drew, Perry Mason and Sherlock Holmes. All the protagonists I read about were white, they lived where the weather was cold. They ate scones and clotted cream. I had no idea what most words meant. I relied on my imagination and the dictionary to bring them to life for me. It expanded my

horizons and made me learn as a child that the world was a wide, wide place. By whitewashing and making books generic, we are depriving children of exposure to rich regional cultures."

Born in Tamil Nadu, Iyer immigrated to America and made a conscious choice to be a mother to cross-cultural children. Her experience in grappling with issues such as infertility, adoption and depression helped her writing process which she also terms as 'therapy'. In her own words, "As a first-generation immigrant, my husband and I adopted children across racial lines a decade ago. I am always searching for books that can bring home the India I grew up into them. I also look for stories that are contemporary in terms of the roles mothers and women play in them."

What made you write 'Why is My Hair Curly?' and what is it with that quirky title? How did it all begin?

I was born in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in the mid-seventies. As a seventy's child, I got to see the change from a primarily local economy to a global one. I still remember our very first television and rotary phone. My summers were spent in the villages near Thanjavur. I immigrated to America at the turn of the century borne along by the technology boom and the exodus of technology professionals from India to America.

I was offered the opportunity to write children's fiction (not my primary genre) and I gave thought to the kind of story I wanted to tell. I write best from lived experience. I also feel to be authentic, as a writer you must research or know what it is like to feel/live through that experience. Adoption is a large theme in my life. It is natural that my fictional debut features that.

As a child, I was bullied for being fat. I grew up believing my worth lay in my looks and tried hard to be part of whichever clique was popular then. I was a voracious reader as a child, and it is sad that I felt I had to dumb myself down to fit in.

All these themes find their way into the book in different ways. The idea that as a child, you can own your uniqueness is a lesson is something I want my children to imbibe and by extension the children who read my book.

As for the title, all credit goes to the publisher Vidhi Bhargava. She is the one who came up with it and I think works well.

elaborate on it?

It absolutely is a deliberate choice. Westland Books is an Indian publisher and the primary audience is India. I could have made the book generic to appeal to a wider audience, but I believe in the power of stories to serve as portals to worlds we do not know exist. I want children who call their parents Amma and Appa to see themselves in books. I want idlis and rava kesari to be just as ubiquitous as khichdi or sheera or even for that matter pancakes and muffins.

I must give a shout out to my publisher and editor who had my back and agreed to let me write the story the way I wanted it to be.

Your parenting journey has been an integral part of your interviews with the media. Can you share this with us and the journey so far?

It was in my late twenties I realized I had this visceral desire to birth a child and to mother in a figurative sense. Infertility made me take a detour on this parenting journey, one that I am very grateful for. My husband and I adopted twin white girls in America. A few years later, I found myself unexpectedly pregnant and now I parent three girls. Conversations on race is a staple in our family. Given the very visible nature of our adoption, we have a very open conversation on what it is like raising children across racial and cultural lines. Adopting in America means we also have access to birth heritage and birth families. We think of ourselves as a blended family unit and that works for us.

A lot of that weaves its way into the book as well. Openness in adoption is a mindset. It is an attitude and a belief system that centers the well being of the child.

What are the aspects of your parenting journey that challenged you and when you came through with it made you feel wiser as a parent and as a writer?

I think I set out to be a mother with a naivete that comes from being raised in a culture that does not value open conversations on what it is like to date, marry, procreate or parent. We often talk about it in oblique ways. We tell ourselves when challenges appear, they will magically disappear with time.

Grappling with infertility and being open about it on my blog made me realize how many of us deal with it silently. Sharing my journey as a parent through adoption along with all the highs and lows has given me a community to fall back on for wisdom and advice when I stumble.

Trauma informed parenting is something I am learning now. Trauma in adoption is a given. It manifests itself in many ways. In families built through biology, the term special needs are tainted and tinged with stigma. We don't talk often enough about how much as parents we need to prepare and educate ourselves in order to be good advocates for our children.

As a writer, my journey has been cathartic. Writing has been therapy in many ways. Looking back, I feel I may have been clinically depressed at some point without realizing it. This has been a journey in many ways for me and I am still a long way from the destination I am headed towards.

Tell us about writers and the factors that inspired your writing.

Roots by Alex Haley was a transformative book for me in my late teens. I have always enjoyed classics like Pride and Prejudice (and most works by Jane Austen). Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier is an eternal favorite. The Count of Monte Cristo is a book I have read many times over. Over the years, my choice has been eclectic. I move between contemporary women's fiction, mystery and intrigue and creative nonfiction. There are periods of time like now when I do not feel like reading books at all.

blank out when I sit in front of the computer.

Reading and writing go together. To write, I must read and read across genres, which is why I guess my writing is sporadic.

Any insights on the next book that you are planning to write?

Ideally, I would like to tackle complex issues like race and bigotry. I am finding it hard to sit down and make the time to outline and write. This year has been a roller coaster in terms of trying to work full time, market a book during a pandemic, run a home and keep tabs on three children who are in school virtually. I still hope to get the book out of my head at least in a few months.

Would you ever consider writing about the pandemic in one of your books?

It is interesting you ask that. It is one of the threads I am playing with in the work in progress narrative I am working on.

Any advice for aspiring writers?

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