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World

Drawing out talent to create children's books

DECEMBER 14, 2009 by: David Pilling

By day, R.C. Pradeep Kumar runs the gauntlet of Sri Lanka's political and ethnic divide as a cartoonist working for a Tamil daily newspaper. By night and at weekends, he turns to the less politically sensitive pursuit of drawing illustrations for children's books. His latest creation concerns a clever rat who uses his wits to open a jar of *murukku*, a fried snack popular in Sri Lanka among humans and rodents alike.

Mr Kumar's second career as a book illustrator may sound like a fairly obvious extension of his first. But in Sri Lanka, and many poor countries like it, the children's book publishing industry is rudimentary or virtually non-existent.

When Room to Read, an educational charity that promotes child literacy in the developing world and which the Financial Times is supporting in this year's appeal, began its quest to fill school libraries in poorer countries with children's stories, it soon ran up against this practical, if unexpected, problem: the books simply did not exist.

In many of the countries in which it operates – including Cambodia, Nepal and Laos – most parents and school authorities are too poor to pay for picture books. As a result, local publishing houses do not produce them.

Even in relatively better-off Sri Lanka, says Elsie Kothalawala, a retired Open University professor and an expert in early learning, there is a dearth of picture books published in Tamil or Sinhalese, especially for under-fives. Middle-class parents tend to buy their children foreign books, she says, depriving their children of stories relevant to their own culture.

For the poor, that leaves a few second-rate texts or books aimed at much older children. "Lack of books has affected the quality of our pre-schools," she says. "We don't make sufficient use of story telling and conversations with children."

Room to Read soon realised that its dream of establishing thousands of libraries across the developing world would be impossible if it did not help create the books to fill them. Mahesh Pathirathna, manager of Room to Read's local language publishing in Sri Lanka,

says: “Our charity is focused on literacy and acquiring a reading habit. But without quality books, you can’t do anything.”

In Sri Lanka, where Room to Read has published 18 of its own books and a further 50 in partnership with third-party publishers, he says the charity has had a tangible impact on the publishing industry. It runs competitions and workshops to help create high-quality children’s book manuscripts, some of which are then offered free to local publishers. To sweeten the deal further, it promises to buy a certain amount: with print runs as low as 2,000, the charity’s offer to buy one book for each of the nearly 700 Sri Lanka school libraries it has established transforms the proposition.

V.V. Pathmaseeli, a corporate consultant and published children’s author, went through one of Room to Read’s writing workshops. “When we look back at what we were producing before, the standard was pretty bad,” she says, crediting the charity with generating a big improvement in quality. “We have to understand children and think about the world from their point of view.”

In countries even poorer than Sri Lanka, Room to Read has had to shoulder the burden of publishing itself. But by using exclusively local artists, it has kept the cost down to about \$1 a book. So far, it has published 334 original titles and printed 3.2m books in seven countries.

In Sri Lanka, Mr Kumar receives roughly \$150 (€101, £92) for illustrating each story. It is not enough to quit his day job. But at least he can buy good paint and brushes for his next assignment.

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