

Exclusive Q&A with Author Mahesh Pathirathna and Illustrator Nuwan Chaturanga

Meet Mahesh Pathirathna, Room to Read’s Associate Director of Literacy in South Asia. Mahesh has been with Room to Read for 15 years leading author and illustrator workshops.

“Lassana Gam Hapannu” (or “Whiz Kids of the Beautiful Village”) was published in Sri Lanka in Sinhala, then published in Nepal in Nepali, and is forthcoming in Tamil and English. For the illustrations, Mahesh enlisted Nuwan Chaturanga, who he met at a Room to Read workshop.



Q: Tell us about your work with Room to Read.

Mahesh: I work with local children’s book creators from different parts of the world to enhance children’s literature. Over the last 15 years, through Room to Read’s book publishing project, I have worked with thousands of local writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, and government officers from several countries in Asia and Africa to support the enhancement of children’s literature.

Nuwan: I was an undergraduate at a fine art institute when I was first chosen to participate in a Room to Read illustrators workshop and then to illustrate a book. We do not have children’s book illustration courses at university in Sri Lanka and all I learned about children book illustration I learned after joining to Room to Read workshops. So far I have done more than five books for Room to Read.

Q: What inspired you to create this book?

Mahesh: I personally enjoy gardening. Living in the city, I have seen how lots of children do not have the opportunity to enjoy the feeling of a garden. At the same time I have seen how some places try to have their own little space with trees. All this together inspired me to think about this storyline.

Nuwan: First Mahesh shared his manuscript with me and asked whether I would like to work on it. I liked the story. My family also has a little garden and I feel close to this topic.

Q: How did you collaborate on this book as author and illustrator?

Mahesh: First I shared the outline of the story with Nuwan to see the interest. It is important that an illustrator feels that story is suitable to his or her style and interest. Then we met to determine the type of characters and story frames. Nuwan completed the character maps and storyboard and we revised those a few times. Both of us enjoy working together.

Nuwan: I liked the freedom I got when we discussed this book. Normally writers demand a lot and don’t allow me to add my interpretation as an artist. But Mahesh asked me to use all the creative freedom. This gave me space for learning the art of picture books.

Q: What is the children’s book publishing industry like in Sri Lanka?

Mahesh: Children’s book publishing is not in a great place for a few reasons. There is lack of demand for high quality children’s literature as there is no progressive culture of reading.

Nuwan: Books with original and creative illustrations are not very common. Still many adults do not understand the role of illustration in children literature and therefore place less value on children’s book illustration. There are no places to learn about children’s book illustration and get more professional qualifications as an illustrator. I work on children’s literature for the pleasure of using my skills in more meaningful ways.

Q: Why did it feel important to you to create a book with diverse characters?

Mahesh: I grew up in a very multicultural town in Sri Lanka and had friends from very diverse backgrounds. I have co-existed with people of different ethnicity, religion, caste, class or disability from a young age, and Nuwan also lives in a very multicultural town. So we wanted to see the society we see in our life without stereotyping. We wanted the book to normalize and generalize diversity.

Nuwan: Mahesh always asked me to look at society and observe the different characters. He said it is good to have different people featured but without disturbing to creative flow of the story. We wanted to have diverse characters without calling special attention or inviting sympathy.

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