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## Talking with Mitali Perkins



Mitali Perkins has traveled and lived all over the world. She knows well what it means to adjust to new cultural environments while maintaining a strong sense of one's own cultural identity. The same is true of her fictional characters, who often find themselves trying to negotiate a variety of social and cultural expectations. *Rickshaw Girl* tells the story of Naima, a Bangladeshi girl who disguises herself as a boy to find work painting rickshaws in order to support her family. In *Secret Keeper*, Asha becomes friendly with the boy next door, something that went against 1970s social norms in Calcutta. In the First Daughter series, Sameera's father becomes a U.S. presidential candidate, and White House staffers worry that Sameera's Pakistani heritage is at odds with her identity as an American. Perkins' stories are at once deeply rooted in the historical and cultural histories of her characters and in universal themes of filial loyalty, love, friendship, and belonging, and they allow readers to see the connections that link us all.

Perkins' recent book *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices* is an anthology of writing by young people who use humor to expose, embrace, critique, and even celebrate cultural stereotypes. In the introduction, Perkins offers three ground rules for using humor to talk about race: good humor pokes fun at the powerful, not the weak; good humor builds affection for the "other"; and good humor is usually self-deprecatory. Perkins' website, Mitali's Fire Escape! A Safe Place to Think, Chat and Read about Life between Cultures] includes a blog and a discussion page where readers can engage in a dialogue about her books, other books, and anything related to reading and writing. In the following conversation, Perkins talks about multicultural children's literature—where it's coming from, where it's going, and how stories are empowering for all readers.

**BKL:** Are you noticing any trends in contemporary multicultural children's literature?

PERKINS: I feel that multicultural publishing has come through several phases and is at a bit of a crossroads at the moment. Back in the 1960s and '70s, most authors of children's books were from the majority culture, and they were writing about kids who came from the margins. When my first book came out, in the '90s, there was the sense that there needed to be more

people from other races and cultures represented in literature. In fact, my first book was published in response to a Little, Brown contest. They were looking for people who were writing stories of their own cultures. Interesting questions about authenticity came up: Who can write for whom? The stories that first came out at that time were mostly about exploring culture—what it was like to be different.

WHAT'S been changing over the last 10 or 15 years is that authors are being more conscious and including a wider range of characters from nonmainstream cultures. You run into a bit of a dilemma, because sometimes authors are just throwing in names, such as Juanita, but the characters don't necessarily fit the setting or the time period. So you run into awkward attempts, which are well-meaning but which are not necessarily the right ways to try for diversity.

Now there's a real call for stories that don't always focus on how difficult it is to be different. Instead, we have stories in which race and culture are part of the character's identity but not necessarily the only thing. Characters are responding to the challenges of growing up. I think it's a really great development to see, for example, Lenore Look's Ruby Lu stories or Grace Lin's books, in which characters happen to be Asian, but they're really just funny books, and any kid would enjoy them.

**BKL:** According to a recent Cooperative Children's Book Center report on publishing trends, of the 3,600 books it received in 2012, less than 8 percent are by or about people of color. Do you think this is a factor in publishers' choices?

PERKINS: I think the main dilemma has been [the perception that] books featuring multicultural characters are just for kids within those cultures. And the challenge that we're facing now is how to get wider audiences to read books about kids who aren't white.

THE bottom line is that publishing is a profit-driven industry, and the question is, "Who will buy these books?" School and library markets are interested, but they've shrunk in the last 10 years. So the question then is about whether a sci-fi thriller with an African American protagonist is going to sell as well as some of the recent YA best-selling blockbusters that have become movies. Fortunately, it seems like there's a wider conversation throughout the whole industry among publishers and editors who are thinking about these issues. But we're not sure how much the conversation has impacted the markets.

THERE'S a growing population of librarians and teachers who understand that all kids need books about all kids. It shouldn't be that it's only during African American History Month that kids read a book about slavery. There's a fantastic metaphor about windows and mirrors [visit [leeandlow.com/p/race.mhtml](http://leeandlow.com/p/race.mhtml) for more about the origins of this metaphor], and I talk a lot about the idea that every book is a mirror that will teach you about your own culture and a window through which you can learn about another culture.

It's so important for kids from societies without power to see themselves in books. Especially when they lack power, or come from communities in which they don't see their adults having a lot of power. At the same time, it's important not to introduce books just from a cultural angle, so we don't say, "This is a book about a kid in Bangladesh; let's learn about Bangladesh," but rather, "This is a book about a kid who made a big mistake, and now she has to make it right."

**BKL:** *Your characters are often spunky and funny. Do you think humor is a trend in multicultural literature?*

PERKINS: I would say yes and yes! The younger generation, especially, is more comfortable using humor to talk about race and culture. In the introduction to *Open Mic*, I included some ground rules for using humor that I think are really important. Some of the humor that's out there about race and culture can be dangerous. It can separate us and make us more divided.

HUMOR that unites is fantastic. Sometimes, we talk about race and culture using heavy words, such as *margins* and *oppression*, which can weigh people down. I would like to write with humor more. My next book is set in the Sundarbans, one of the poorest regions of West Bengal. It's amazing; I've met kids in the Sundarbans who are hilarious. I've met kids in refugee camps in Thailand who love to laugh. So it's not hard to write humor coming out of their mouths. And then readers keep reading, because who doesn't like someone who makes you laugh?

**BKL:** *You've written that you see stories as a place of safety for young readers. Do you think providing this space is an expectation of authors of color and/or of multicultural stories in particular?*

PERKINS: No, I would not say in particular. I think it is the call for every storyteller. Stories are places to explore different risks. A young reader can enter a world through his or her imagination and ask, "What would happen to me if I lost my parent or if kids at school bullied me?" A reader can imagine whatever it is a protagonist is going through and see different responses, and I think all stories do this. That's the power of stories: they allow children to imagine themselves on different heroes' journeys. Stories give us courage to face whatever we have to face in real life.

**BKL:** *What do you think about labels that categorize sets of books by racial or ethnic content?*

PERKINS: I would love to see a time soon when we don't need any of those labels, and all kids will read all kinds of stories and find their own connections. *Secret Keeper* is set in Calcutta in the 1970s, and I've heard adults say that they didn't have [a Bengali] population in their communities, so the story was not pertinent. Yet I've had kids from rural America write me eight-page letters saying that they loved the story and felt as if Asha reflected them.

I almost feel like the adults should get out of the way a little bit. The child reader will surprise you as to how they find their

windows and mirrors in every different story. So, if the adult is saying, "This is about this," sometimes that gets in the way of the child's imagination. When I was reading the Lord of the Rings trilogy, I was reading it as a Bengali immigrant child, and what I got out of it were so many points of connection that an adult could never have told me about. The power of stories is that the reader makes his or her own meaning, especially when a child rereads a story; there's something going on between the kid and the story that maybe adults shouldn't even look at too closely. Just let the magic work!

**BKL:** *Please share your views on identity-based book awards.*

PERKINS: I really do feel like it is not an issue of race and culture but an issue of power. There are communities in America that have less power and there is poverty, and people have not had many chances to tell their own stories. That's a different issue than an educated Bengali person who is growing up in the middle class. To lump us all together as multicultural because we're not white puts too much focus on race and culture and not enough on power. I would not want to see an Asian American literary award that is based on the race of the author. Awards that are defined by the race of the author bring up many difficult questions about defining people rather than power.

WHEN I write about poor kids in India or Burma, I have so much power relative to the kids I'm writing about. That issue, to me, is more problematic than the issue of a white person writing about a black person. There's a power I have that my characters (and the real kids on whom they are based) do not have. So it's complicated, because there's probably a window of time in which we need to showcase voices from communities that have been oppressed because their stories have been appropriated and controlled by people who are powerful. We're a culture in transition, and hopefully that day will come when we don't need labels anymore because stories are being told very freely by all kinds of people.

**BKL:** *So would you say multicultural literature has a hopeful future?*

PERKINS: Yes! There are so many ways for storytellers to get our stories out there, and we should celebrate all of those. I think kids are getting stories from the media and video and social media in a variety of ways. I saw a video about a skateboarding school for girls in Afghanistan. The girls feel so much power when they accomplish these feats, and I thought it would be great to write about a girl in Afghanistan who wants to win a skateboarding championship. It would be a different story than Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* (2001), but both are powerful. The more stories, the better, and the more places they are showcased, the better, especially if they have been vetted through a good editorial process. As adults, we need to travel with and guide the kids, listen and learn a lot, and let the stories do their work. Storytelling is powerful—there's no doubt about it.

## Sampling Perkins

**Bamboo People.** 2010. 288p. Charlesbridge, \$16.95 (9781580893282); paper, \$8.95 (9781580893299); e-book, \$9.99 (9781607342274). Gr. 5–8.

**First Daughter: Extreme American Makeover.** 2007. 192p. Penguin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142411544). Gr. 7–10.

**First Daughter: White House Rules.** 2008. 224p. Dutton, \$16.99 (9780525479512); e-book, \$13.99 (9781101215371). Gr. 7–10.

**Monsoon Summer.** 2004. 272p. Delacorte, e-book, \$6.99 (9780307433572). Gr. 7–12.

**The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen.** Rev. ed. 2005. 180p. Little, Brown, paper, \$14.99 (9780316734530). Gr. 7–10.

**Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices.** 2013. 144p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (9780763658663); e-book, \$15.99 (9780763667191). 813. Gr. 5–8.

**Rickshaw Girl.** Illus. by Jamie Hogan. 2007. 91p. Charlesbridge, \$13.95 (9781580893084); paper, \$6.95 (9781580893091). Gr. 3–5.

**Secret Keeper.** 2009. 240p. Delacorte, paper, \$8.99 (9780440239550). Gr. 7–12.

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## Common Core Connections

The activities suggested below, all based on novels by Mitali Perkins, address a range of benchmarks in the literature, writing, and speaking and listening areas of the Common Core State Standards for middle-grade and middle-school students.

**In the Classroom:** After reading *Bamboo People*, students can use a Venn diagram (or the iPad Venn diagram app) to compare and contrast the experiences of Chiko and Tu Reh and the ways in which these characters respond to harrowing circumstances. Students can write “Simulated Journals” from Chiko’s or Tu Reh’s perspectives, recounting specific events in the novel and embellishing them with details that reveal the characters’ thoughts and feelings. As an extension activity, students can be asked to use information from the novel to infer the thoughts and feelings of Daw Widow, Lei, and Mother.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3.** Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3a.** Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

**In the Classroom:** Following their completion of *Secret Keeper*, have students use the free online presentation tool Prezi (Prezi.com), to create a visual representation that charts the secrets Asha is keeping and show how they are connected to significant events in the plot. After a lesson about point of view, students can examine how information is communicated by a narrator (the author or a character) and create a “T Chart” with two sections labeled, respectively, “What We Know” and “What We Don’t Know,” to compare the similarities and differences.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3.** Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6.** Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

**In the Classroom:** Select salient lines from *Rickshaw Girl*, and ask students to make inferences about the kind of person Naima is. Using a “Double-Entry Journal” format, students can respond to the lines from the text, explaining with supportive details their understanding of this character. The edges of the journal can be decorated with designs inspired by Naima’s *alpanas*, or designs. After exploring the website Rickshaw Art in Bangladesh (rickshaw-paint.net), students can create a presentation using

iMovie, Prezi, or PowerPoint in which they embed an audio narration in Naima’s voice, talking about the cultural, historical, and technical elements of rickshaw art.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1.** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.5.** Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

**In the Classroom:** After students have read *First Daughter: Extreme American Makeover*, have them demonstrate their understanding of important events in the sequence of the story by creating a fake Facebook page for Sameera. It should include significant secondary characters as “friends,” pictures of the White House staffers’ efforts to make her appear more American, posts with comments about the political issues she raises in her blog, and other salient elements appropriate for the characters in this social-media environment. Students can create a “Plot Profile,” in which they identify significant moments in the plot, drawing and labeling them to describe how each moment contributes to the novel’s conclusion.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3.** Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3a.** Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

**In the Classroom:** As part of an author study of Mitali Perkins, have students read *First Daughter: Extreme American Makeover*, *Rickshaw Girl*, and *Secret Keeper* in literature circles. Teachers can arrange student discussion groups to include readers of each book and a set of thematic questions that apply to all three titles. Students can then engage in discussions that draw out the similarities and differences between the literary elements of the three novels.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1b.** Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1a.** Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.