

A Date with Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond born in 1934 is an icon among Indian writers. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992. He was awarded the Padmashri in 1999 for contributions to children's literature.

Most of his writings show a strong influence from the social life in the hill stations at the foothills of the Himalayas, where he spent his childhood. His first novel was "The Room on the Roof", written when he was 17. He is the author of over 300 short stories and more than 30 books for children. This article presents excerpts from a visit of the Children's Literature team to Ivy Cottage, that has been Bond's home since 1964.

The Ivy Cottage at Landour is a stiff climb from the Seven Sister's Bazaar in Mussorie. Set on top of a hill side, it



gives the writer a bird's eye view of the maddening crowd below. The tiny cottage stacked with books coupled with the beautiful view inspires Ruskin Bond to write of the Himalayan Ranges.

Ruskin Bond, a simple man with child like innocence that was reflected in his large eyes, welcomed the team with warmth. His chubby cheeks, ruddy complexion, complete with oval shaped glasses made him seem like one of the genial characters straight out of his books. Eager to talk to this prolific writer we began at once.

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On being questioned about how he wrote his stories. He joked, "I write with my hands." He added, "I gave a famous publishing house something for publishing three years back, but it still has to be published".

On a more serious note he added that writing for children was the best way to know about the children's interest. A little girl once told Mr. Bond, "I like your ghost stories, but can't you make them more scary" Humour is a good theme he thought for children's literature. Children like funny stories. Sport is another theme which many children he feels enjoy. He felt children like games, hence stories involving a game like 'Treasure Hunt' or 'Helping someone in distress' are more popular with them.

Question: Which are the books you think children and authors should read?

Answer: R.L. Stevenson, John Buchanan, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, though it is a bit scary, Alice in Wonderland and a simplified version of Dickens he felt made for good reading. However, he said, "I'm not too sure that we should grade fiction as suitable for specific age groups."

Mr. Bond travelled down memory lane. His nostalgia was evident as he talked of his granny who lived in Ranchi. He also recalled that his mother studied in the famous Oak Grove School.

He mentioned that a python was the most fascinating pet that he ever had. It did not give him any trouble, because it swallowed cats and dogs and

did not need a lot of feeding. So it was very economical.

He also talked of his kindergarten days in Hampton Court, pointing out that the nuns were very strict in those days. He said, once a friend who was a teacher in Hampton Court asked Mr Bond to take his class as he was going somewhere. Mr Bond happily acquiesced till he underwent the harrowing experience of darts flying all over the room. Very soon a riot prevailed in the class and the principal came in and said, "Mr. Bond, you may go now."

He regretted the fact that reading has always been a minority pastime. Recollecting his own school days, he said that even then, in a class of 30-45 children, there were only 2-3 who were really fond of reading in the true sense.

Some years back, he visited Hampton Court where the Mother Superior showed him around the beautiful new library. When he asked her whether children had access to it, the Mother replied, "We don't allow the children. They will ruin the books." He regretted that many schools discourage children from reading books as they are more result oriented. He was concerned that in smaller towns and places, even if a child is interested in reading, there are not enough books. There is a paucity of literature. The school environment counts a lot in developing the habit of reading.

Talking of Mussoorie, he said, it is a place of high and low distances, Landour, where he lives is 7000 feet above sea level. When he first came to

Mussoorie, there were only 2-3 cars. Ponies and rickshaws were the only modes of conveyance then. Being a very quiet place, it was a heaven for this writer.

Many of Ruskin Bond's writings feature in the school textbooks, because they have a strong message for the children without being didactic. In the English textbook of NCERT, *Marigold Book IV*, Bond's poem 'Don't be afraid' dispels fear of night and darkness around children. He writes,

“Be friends with the Night, there is nothing to fear,

Just let your thoughts travel to your friend far and near.”

Bond is of the view that most of his writings are for general reading. He says “I write mostly for pleasure and the reading should ideally be for pleasure too. I do feel bad sometimes that children have to write questions and answers based on my stories.”

Mr Bond was very cooperative and charming. He readily accepted to write a few stories for us. Though he said that he had never written for children of Classes I and II, it would be exciting to give it a try. He also accepted that it was most difficult to teach Classes I and II and write stories for them.