
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Kashmira Sheth on *Nina Soni, Former Best Friend*

Nina tried as hard as she could, but still somehow she forgot about her school project. Fortunately, a class lesson about Alexander Fleming suggests how she might make a great discovery—and thus a great project! But with little sister Kavita’s birthday party right around the corner, and her longtime friendship with Jay on the rocks, Nina has a lot to keep track of.

Q: *Who or what inspired the character of Nina Soni?*

A: My daughter Rupa inspired the character of Nina Soni. She is curious, intelligent, helpful, and enjoys doing projects, as does Nina. My other daughter, Neha, inspired Kavita.

Q: *Like Nina Soni, you are also Indian-American. Do any of Nina’s experiences remind you of your own childhood?*

A: There were a few of my childhood experiences that I was able to weave in to Nina’s story, like rubbing oil in my hair. Nina and I also share a love of Indian cuisine. In that way there is similarity between my childhood and hers.

There are differences, too. Since I grew up in India—in a different time and culture—some of my childhood experiences are not directly relatable to Nina. I used to travel to my elementary school by a horse-drawn buggy and Nina has never ridden in that kind of horse buggy!

The emotional landscape of my childhood definitely influenced this story. In *Nina Soni, Former Best Friend*, I tried to capture some childhood experiences that are universal, regardless of time and place. For example, Nina wants to be helpful, she worries about Jay and their friendship, and she misses her father when he is away. I hope these qualities and concerns of Nina’s will resonate with readers regardless of their cultural background.

Q: *You include many mouth-watering descriptions of Indian food in the book. What is your favorite Indian dish?*

A: My favorite dishes are street food called *bhel-puri* and *pani-puri*. These dishes are usually served together.

Bhel-puri is a mix of crunchy chickpea noodles, puffed rice, onion, potatoes, etc., served with sweet and sour tamarind-date chutney as well as spicy cilantro chutney. *Pani-puri* is a puffed bite-size whole wheat round filled with lentil, potatoes, and mint-flavored spicy water.

Q: *Why do you think it’s important for readers to be exposed to diverse books written by people who share those identities?*

A: Imagine looking in a mirror and always seeing other people’s images. That is how it is for many readers who come from minority backgrounds. These differences could be cultural, racial, physical, emotional, or neurological. When these children read books, or watch movies or TV shows, they never see themselves in the story. The message they get is that their journeys are not important or worthy of being told.

When a writer with a particular identity writes a story that includes characters with that identity, the writer knows nuances of the experiences of that group. This richness of knowledge seeps into the story, making it layered and believable for all the readers, and particularly the ones who share that identity. Those readers can see themselves reflected in the story—not as

a shallow, stereotypical caricature, but as full, truthful, and meaningful characters.

Q: *Many of your stories focus on family. What does family mean to you?*

A: Family has always been a cornerstone of my life. I grew up not only with my parents but also with my grandparents, my great grandfather and extended family members. As an adult, I lived not only with my husband and children, but also (at various times in our lives) with extended family members. My mother still lives with me. I love to spend time with my grandchildren now. They keep me connected to my readers, inspire me, and challenge me.

Q: *What do you hope readers learn from Nina Soni, Former Best Friend?*

A: I want the reader to fall in love with all of Nina Soni—her cultural background, quirkiness, and imagination. She is a unique person, like all of us. Just as Nina thinks Sakhi, her diary, is her friend, I hope readers feel that Nina is their friend. Then she won't worry about Jay not being her best friend so much!

Q: *Because your mother tongue is Gujarati, have you faced any challenges writing books in English? What do you find is the biggest difference between Gujarati and English?*

A: My mother tongue is Gujarati but Nina's family speaks Hindi at home. Nina's story is written in English. So I get to juggle all three languages.

Each language has its own strength and beauty. It is sometimes difficult for me to find the right word or a phrase in English that I have in my mind in Gujarati or Hindi. At other times there is no cultural equivalent for certain rituals or ceremonies and I end up having to describe them. The same thing happens with food. For example, if someone says I had toast with orange marmalade, most readers would know what the texture and taste of it would be like. If I write I had *khakhra* (sort of toasted roti) with *murabba* (raw, sour mango marmalade) I have to explain that. Done too often, it can get tiresome and take a lot out of the story. Done sparingly, it can add depth and richness to the story.

Another problem I encounter is some of my characters (particularly those who live in India) speak in Gujarati,

Hindi or one of the other Indian languages and I have to wrap my head around writing their stories in English.

English is rich in verbs whereas Gujarati and Hindi are rich in nouns. It is such a luxury to use different verbs in English to make the action come alive. But describing a physical thing in English becomes harder for me. For example, when I write in English, I keep using the same word for sun or moon, but in Gujarati and Hindi I have several choices.

Q: *You studied microbiology but later were a faculty member for a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing program. Did you always know you wanted to be a writer? Did you see yourself becoming a children's book author?*

A: I studied microbiology and worked in that field for many years. It wasn't until I started reading with my two daughters that I thought about writing. Unlike some authors, I didn't know I wanted to be a writer until much later in my life. As a child I loved reading but didn't start writing until my daughters were in elementary school.

Q: *You've written both picture books and chapter books for children and young adults. How does your approach to writing differ when you're writing for different ages?*

A: When I write I have a very clear idea of my protagonist. I write in the first person and usually start thinking like the character. That helps me to figure out her thoughts, emotions, and vocabulary. It also keeps me grounded in that person's world, and gives me the freedom to be five, ten, or fifteen years old.

I usually work on several projects at once and keep jumping from one story to another. (I am like Nina Soni in that way, with multiple tracks going through my mind.) Identifying with my characters and their place in the world and their problems keeps me connected to them no matter what their age or their situation. That doesn't mean I don't make mistakes. My writing friends who read my stories, or my editors, point out things that I miss and things that don't ring true. I am always grateful to them.

Q: *What sorts of challenges come with writing for such different age groups?*

A: The biggest challenge is to stay true to the character's concerns, experiences, and most importantly to his/her voice. A child at 5 does not think or speak the same way when he is 9. Also, a 9-year-old girl who grew up in India 100 years ago does not speak like Nina Soni who is also 9 but is growing up in America now. Their experiences are different and yet the human emotions of joy, love, friendship etc. are the same. Navigating all that is at times challenging, frustrating, and enjoyable, but always exciting and in the end, satisfying.

Q: *How have your past jobs inspired your writing?*

A: My science background seeps into my writing. In *Nina Soni, Former Best Friend*, you can see her mentioning mold and doing a pH experiment with red cabbage juice. I taught dance for several years and Nina takes Indian dance classes similar to the ones I taught.

Q: *What projects are you working on now?*

A: I have a picture book coming out in Spring 2020 from Peachtree called *Feast of Peas*. The illustrator is Jeffrey Ebbeler. Jeffrey and I worked on *Tiger in My Soup* together and I am very excited about our new book.

There will also be a second book in the Nina Soni series, *Nina Soni, Sister Fixer*, also in Spring 2020.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kashmira Sheth was born in India and came to the US when she was seventeen to attend Iowa State University, where she received a BS in microbiology. She is the author of several picture books, middle grade, and young adult novels. She lives in Wisconsin and Virginia.

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