

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Farhana Zia on *Lali's Feather*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Lali finds a little feather in the field. Is it lost? Lali sets out to find feather a home, but one bird after another rejects it. The feather is too small for Rooster, too slow for Crow, and too plain for Peacock. Once Lali decides to keep the little feather and discovers all the things she can do with it, the other birds begin to recognize its value.

Q: What inspired you to write *Lali's Feather*?

A: *Lali's Feather* sprang from the belly of my chapter book, *Child of Spring*. Lali is a younger version of one of the characters in this book. Materially speaking, the children of *Child of Spring* have very little but they are rich in resourcefulness when it comes to having fun. I am an advocate for children giving their innate curiosity, imagination, and creativity more of a go. To some extent, my own imaginative play as a child is also behind *Lali's Feather*.

Q: Do you see any of *Lali's* playful and imaginative side in yourself?

A: I think there was a bit of Lali hiding in me. It was a long time ago but I have vague memories of imaginary friends, make-belief castles, flying carpets, and delicious meals comprised of grass and leaves.

Q: What would YOU do with a feather?

A: Tickling your nose comes to mind first! I would also sharpen the quill to a fine nib, dip it in an ink pot, and try my hand at Arabic calligraphy.

Q: How did you react when you first saw Stephanie Fizer Coleman's illustrations?

A: I am grateful to Stephanie for putting her best self in this project. I couldn't have asked for better illustrations and particularly, for a better Lali. I am thrilled with the vibrant colors that make each page pop and make Lali and her friends so alive. Stephanie's done a great job with facial expressions. I particularly love how she captured Lali's sorrow upon losing feather to the wind. I also love the way she dressed Lali in that adorable outfit and the long braid that suits her to the T!

Q: Is there any significance to the particular birds you feature in this book?

A: These are all birds of my childhood. I saw them clucking in a courtyard, nesting on trees, or featured in children's stories or in popular film songs. For instance, there's a popular Hindi song about a peacock I still hum that begins like this: *Peacock danced in the jungle but no one noticed him*. I have lovely memories of ducks in ponds and noisy crows on the branches of mango trees. I googled information about the blue jay and its beautiful blue feathers made me go *Oo* and *Aa*!

Q: Why did you choose to include a combination of Indian expressions and English language in *Lali's* story?

A: English narrates my story and Indian expressions give my characters their cultural distinction, as much as what I make them wear, eat, or celebrate. I tend to use

certain utterances over and over again...*Hanh* for yes, *Na* for no, *Wah* and *Jai ho* to express appreciation and celebration. I also resort to Indian expressions when I want to convey surprise, dismay, or joy. I could use *Oh dear* or *O no*, but an *Oo ma* or *Aiyyo* goes right to the heart of the matter. It's like eating a favorite Indian dish with fingers. A knife and fork work fine but fingers bring out the best flavors!

Q: Why do you think it's important for children to read books featuring diverse cultures and characters of color written by authors with similar backgrounds?

A: Such books benefit all children. This is not a mere academic claim...I've seen the advantages play out routinely during my book readings. I watch faces light up when the child behind the face has identified with the character...when terminology is familiar to the ear...when traditions and ways of life have actually been lived and experienced. I watch for the look of empowerment that follows knowing the book that was just read was about you. I watch also for the benefits to the mainstream children who are not from the culture. I observe them take away important first lessons in awareness and sensitivity. I know this because they tell me afterwards that learning about unfamiliar things helped them feel less fearful or suspicious. During my book reading presentations, children have opportunities to get up close and personal with unfamiliar experiences. Among other things, they roll out roti dough, dress up in a sari, and wear a hijab. For that moment, they feel connected. They understand that underneath it all, all children are the same with similar wants and dreams.

While I never intended to write only for this group or that, my books have earned the multicultural badge. This forces me to be mindful that what I write should always ring true. I use my advantage of being less separated from the social and emotional nuances of the experience to tell a story that is authentic and believable.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from reading Lali's Feather?

A: It would be lovely if they were inspired by Lali and went on to explore the magic of everyday things in their own world. I also hope they will love the book enough to want to read it again and again.

Q: How is writing Lali's Feather and your other picture books different from writing chapter books for

older readers? What challenges do you face when writing for different age groups?

A: Writing in these two genres can be equally painstaking and exhilarating. Sometimes I think writing a picture book is like working on a minimalistic flower arrangement. You have less to work with and you keep things lean and simple. A chapter book is a busier bouquet with lots of colors, trimmings, and textures. In both cases, the challenge is to achieve a stunning effect. The story line in my picture books is more linear. I try to make the protagonist relatable—someone who will elicit a strong emotional response from the youngest reader and be followed from beginning to end. My chapter books have a lot more going on in them. The themes and messages for readers are more multidimensional in terms of interests and emotions.

Q: How has your career as an elementary school teacher influenced your writing?

A: I was lucky for the opportunity to observe both the simplicities and the complexities of the child's world albeit from its rim. I was able to bring some of what I saw and noticed to my stories—a certain look, wish expressed, an interchange, etc. One scene in my chapter book, *The Garden of my Imaan*, is a takeaway from an experience of a Muslim student who got bullied at school. The main character of my picture book *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji* bears resemblance to a former student of mine of Indian heritage. There are a couple of unsubmitted manuscripts on file where the school scene features strongly. I hope these will become books too.

Being with young people for most of the day kept me energized. A great deal of my writing happened when I was active in the profession.

Q: What do you like most about writing for children?

A: It makes me happy to share with them a bit of who I am, where I come from and what I hold dear. I like inviting the child reader into my fantasies and my imagined experiences. Writing something that will resonate with a child is a daunting task but it keeps the creative juices flowing and keeps me on my toes for the next fresh idea. The entire writing process is invigorating. I am always humbled that what begins as an idea in my head takes on shape and form to be eventually held and cherished by a child somewhere. This is the best part of writing for children.

Q: *What's next for you?*

A: I have a few works in progress in various stages of completion that I revisit now and then.

I sent a picture book and a chapter manuscript to my agent recently. All the while I look for a new idea. Perhaps, it will pop up if I don't try too hard. It generally does, but sadly, not fast enough. I continue to hope for one more manuscript to catch a publisher's eye. Hope always springs eternal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Farhana Zia is an elementary school teacher who grew up in Hyderabad, India. Her stories blend humor and tradition, memories and contemporary moments. Her first picture book, *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-Ji*, received a starred review from *Kirkus Reviews*. She lives in Massachusetts.