



The Biggest Surprise of My Writing Life

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AS A YOUNG GIRL, although I loved reading books and writing stories and wanted more than anything to become a writer one day, I was never sure how people became proper authors. Nobody ever took the time to tell me the truth of the matter, that all the books stacked like sweets on the library bookshelves didn't appear there by magic; someone had to sit down and write each one. That was a big surprise, the first of many about the writing world.

I come from a long line of home-grown storytellers. At extended family gatherings my mother would cook big pots of fragrant Indian food and suddenly stories about our beloved farm close to the Himalaya would spring into the conversation. My imagination was bursting with images of vast green fields of wheat, a cheeky wild monkey called Oma who adopted our family and got up to all sorts, mixed in with the stories my dear grandmother told.

Since I couldn't find any stories like this in the library, I decided I was going to write one myself. My children's book was going to be a story inspired by my roots in India and my grandmother's belief in reincarnation. I was going to surprise everyone and put a book on the shelf that would be like a mirror for many children and a window into a new world for many more.

The story, 'Song of the Mountain', was an adventure about a girl called Asha who, guided by the spirit of her grandmother in the form of a



lammergeier bird, goes on a dangerous journey through the Himalaya in search of her missing father.

My writing journey, just like Asha's was long, with many set-backs, but just like Asha I felt the presence of my own grandmother throughout the ups and downs; she wouldn't let me give up when the rejections came.

When I entered my manuscript for the *Times*/Chicken House prize in 2016, I never imagined my story had much of a chance.

One dark winter night while waiting for my boys in the school carpark I had a call that would change everything. It was Barry Cunningham — the magician of children's stories and director of Chicken House Books and his news, that 'Song of the Mountain' had been shortlisted for the prize, absolutely blew me away.

In June 2017 on a baking hot day at the incredible Savile Club, I had the biggest surprise of my writing life when the judges announced my story as the overall winner of the iconic *Times*/Chicken House prize.

'Song of the Mountain' changed its name to 'Asha and the Spirit Bird' and my little story became an actual book that children could borrow or buy. More importantly my childhood dreams of becoming an author had finally come true.

And no, it didn't happen by magic, I had to sit down day after day and write one word after the other until it was finished.