

# From character to plot

**CHAT** Author Lavanya Sankaran talks about "The Hope Factory" and the journey from short stories to novels

**A** very old fashioned story about a contemporary situation. That's how Lavanya Sankaran describes *The Hope Factory*, her recently published novel. It tells the story of two people on opposite ends in the class ladder - Anand, a successful entrepreneur, who is faced with the difficult task of procuring land for his factory to grow, and his family maid Kamala, who is concerned about the fate of her wayward, but caring, son Narayan. Their different, but eventually connected, lives play out amidst the contours of the rapidly changing metropolis that is Bangalore.

The novel, which took six years to finish, follows her debut effort *The Red Carpet* - a collection of stories set in the author's hometown Bangalore, which received acclaim at home and abroad. Talking about the transition, Lavanya says, "With a short story you are, by and large, writing about a character in a situation at some moment in their life. You use that moment to highlight all the stuff that is happening around them. That's how I started writing my creative writing seriously. To go from that to a novel is very different because a novel is a journey, you have to have an engine that moves the narrative forward. But I think the training short stories give you is to take every moment along that journey very seriously."

The structure of the novel highlights the disparate lives of the two protagonists, with the chapters alternating between their points of view, highlighting their individual situations and histories. "That was a very easy

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decision. One could have given a chunk to both. But I wanted both their stories to have an equivalent weightage... I did want both their stories to flow into one another. They're actually happening in the same moment in time. Towards the last third of this book, this becomes very important," the author says.

Lavanya says she begins with character rather than plot. But given how both the lives of both these characters are unfamiliar to her, how easy was it to get into their minds? "Kamala's story wrote itself. It was just like a gift. I just had to keep really quiet shut up and put it down. The character of her son also really sprang to life," she says. The trigger for Kamala's character lay in the writer's own experience with her domestic help, who would absent herself frequently from work, and the difficult step of firing her in the presence of her son. Anand was more complicated. The writer had to do a

level of research, including meeting lawyers and visiting shop floors to both mentally and physically get a feel for what his job would entail. "It also took me a little bit of time to step inside the mind of Anand... but when I found that what I had to do was remove myself from the page, and the minute I got my considerations, my life and the way I would look at things out of the book, he revealed himself completely. Who he became very clear."

The writer will soon embark on an international tour to promote the book, before it is readied for launch. Does she imagine an audience while writing? "When I am writing I have to put myself in a bubble, where I am not thinking of anybody else and nobody, not even a ghost of an audience, is reading. Because the second I start feeling that someone is looking over my shoulder, that's my writer's block moment," she says.



Lavanya Sankaran

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