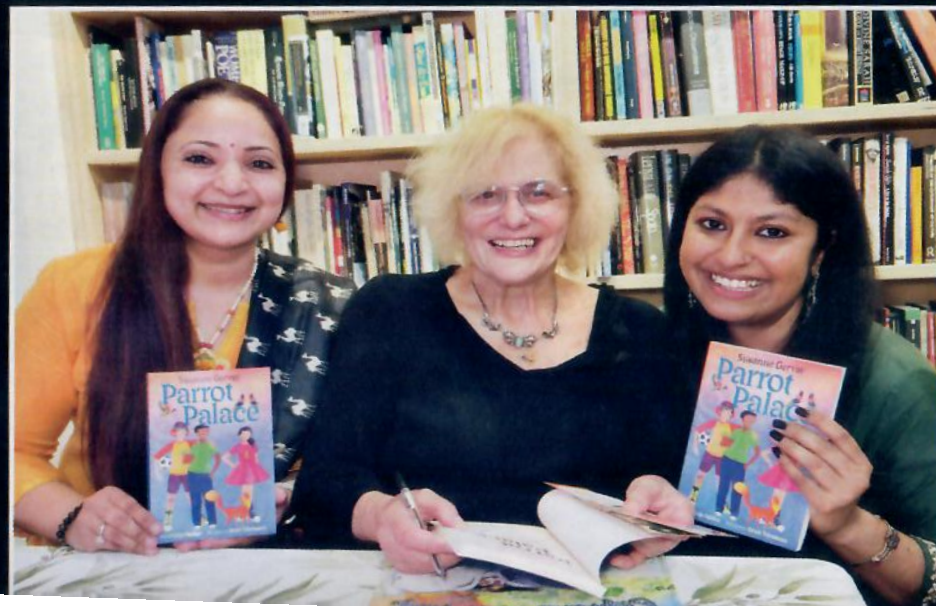
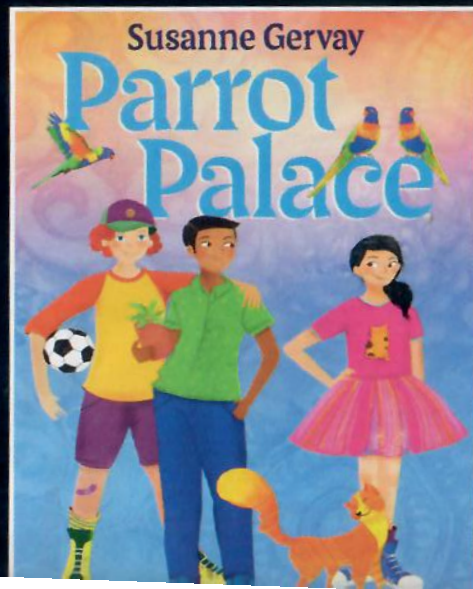


BOOKS

Neighbours and teammates

An apartment block becomes a microcosm of the country as three diverse children come together to solve a common problem





BY
SRUTHI SAJEEV

In *Parrot Palace*, an Indian-Australian named Hari, a Hungarian-Chinese girl named Lily-Rosa and a "dinky-di" Aussie named Mikey share a bond that gives them the courage to face their tough neighbour Mr Crabtree. Their differences give them the strength to face any challenge, big or small.

This is writer Susanne Gervay OAM's vision for young people in Australia.

This balance between delving into complex themes and creating engaging content for children is no cakewalk. And Gervay has spent much of her career trying to achieve the perfect mix. Take her highly successful series *I am Jack*, which delves into the impacts of bullying or *The Edge of Limits* which implores young men to actively stand up against overt sexual violence. *Parrot Palace* is another insightful addition to Gervay oeuvre of work. And the main character Hari is proving to be a fan favourite, especially within the Indian community.

"I've had parents tell me that their kids were excited to see someone who looked like them in the book. I think it's really important that kids are able to see themselves reflected in stories and to feel empowered as a result," she says emphatically.

As an educator, mother and artist, Gervay wants children to learn how to stand up for themselves through her books, and for her work to be a home away from home.

Certainly, seeing Bangladeshi illustrator Sarah Tabassum's beautiful illustrations of Ganesha and the family shrine is a rare yet validating sight. These illustrations are immersive and essential to giving children

insight into the different yet overlapping worlds of the central characters.

Whilst she knew her ideas had value, the challenge for Gervay was to portray South-East Asian and South Asian cultures without appearing tokenistic.

"I didn't want to hammer any values into the minds of my readers," she says. "I engage, empathise, but I'm not Hindu. So, what I did was research. I researched a lot."

Her previous experiences in India seep into the novel, in a way that feels subtle. She brings her understanding of Indian spirituality as well as the learnings she took away from speaking to young Indian-Australians as an educator, to illustrate what it's like to recreate a sense of home in a country far away from your homeland.

"Everything from leaving your shoes at the front, not trampling through the house, having a shrine - these are all just some of the simple things that I wanted to show," she says.

Holding her hand along the way was Pooja Mathur. Mathur was Gervay's go-to for any questions regarding Indian culture, and thus monumentally influenced the book - so much so that she's listed on the front cover.

But perhaps beyond all this, the yearning to understand one's identity and to belong is one that Gervay is deeply familiar with. Being the child of Hungarian immigrant parents, she's acutely aware of what it feels like to be out of place. She turned to children's stories as a way

of escape, preferring to pretend that she was one of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* or that she was a princess in a fairytale, instead of spending long hours alone at home.

But her main motivation to write came from her father.

"It's difficult to leave your home, you know. And he taught me all the lessons that he learned as an immigrant and I still remember them. He was the one who inspired me to deliver truths about the world through stories," she says.

Gervay does so with great courage. Writing *Parrot Palace* involved a massive leap of faith on her part. She hired an illustrator who had never worked on a children's book before, had to undertake immense research, and is delving into themes that are rarely found in children's books.

The latter is enough to scare a traditional publisher away. But if there's one thing that Gervay refuses to change about her work, it's the inclusion of complex themes such as multiculturalism, consent, identity and bullying.

"I don't tell children what to do, but I want my books to make them think and to question...I am absolutely passionate about ensuring that young people understand that we should be inclusive, to say "no" to racism and "yes" to being together. That is my agenda. And I want to get my message to the kids early on," she emphasises.

I am Jack was previously taught in Australian schools. Perhaps it's a matter of time until *Parrot Palace* appears in the school curriculum?

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