



**Priya Mulji**



Follow Priya Mulji on [www.twitter.com/priyamulji](https://www.twitter.com/priyamulji) or log onto [www.priyamulji.com](http://www.priyamulji.com)



## Interfaith relationships

OVER the past eight years of writing this column, I've addressed a fair amount of issues around mixed-race/religion relationships. Often, it has been from an outsider's perspective, but now I have actually found myself in a serious relationship with someone from a different faith. When you find yourself in that position, you start considering the future and realising what's important for you right now, and in years to come. Not just for yourself, but for your partner, family and children.

Recently finding myself in such a situation, I began to wonder what the future has in store for an interfaith couple. The first thing that came to mind was the need to set some expectations in the relationship. If someone is asking you to convert, it's absolutely your choice and you shouldn't feel forced to do something. No one should ever ask you to convert against your own will.

It is great respecting the other person's beliefs and being involved as much as you can. I have grown up watching a number of extended family members marry partners from diverse races and religions. For example, my family is Hindu Gujarati and my brother married a wonderful Sikh girl last year. My family are not super religious, but my sister-in-law wanted a Gurdwara wedding and so we had one. We got involved fully and my brother wore a turban. It was about respecting the other's beliefs and making his partner's family happy. She was happy not only because she got her Sikh wedding but also realised her partner respected that side of her life.

So what happens when religions divide and you start having to compromise certain things in your relationship? In my opinion, it's important to firstly talk about what is really important. Do you want your partner to pray with you or is just being by your side enough? Also, address how your children will be brought up - both religions or do you wait until they're old enough to choose their own paths? What happens when someone dies? Do you have a cremation or a burial?

These are all valid questions that should be asked once you start thinking about a future together. Work out the non-negotiable aspects and make a plan about how you can move forward. All relationships require work, but just by understanding, compromise and love, there's no reason you can't make an interfaith relationship a successful one.

I will leave you with an anonymous quote, "Caste and religion are used only to divide people. It's only love and friendship that unite the souls."

# Bright new star in the children's book world

## POONAM MISTRY ON HER NEW BOOK AND EARLY LEARNING

by MITA MISTRY

**IN CHILDREN'S books, words and illustrations come together not only to create something that's important in learning but also engage young minds and help them bond with their parents.**

Poonam Mistry's new children's book *How The Stars Came To Be* does exactly that by engaging the senses with a beautifully illustrated story about a magical way to understand the night sky.

The British illustrator and writer has used an all-round skill-set to bring her folk tale to life for a new generation. *Eastern Eye* caught up with Poonam Mistry to talk about the new book, her interesting journey from illustrator to writer, and the importance of early learning.

**What first connected you to the art of illustrating?**

I've always had an interest in art from a young age. My earliest memories of childhood were of my sisters and I drawing together. At first, I actually thought of becoming a graphic designer. While completing my

foundation course in art and design, I visited an exhibition featuring the artwork of many contemporary illustrators. It was then that I realised illustration was the pathway more suited to what I really wanted to do.

**Tell us more...**

I have always felt pictures are very important in everyday life. When I was a student in secondary school, the only way I could really understand some concepts and topics being taught was by drawing diagrams or finding textbooks that had a visual representation of what I needed to learn. I

guess with illustration, it is conveying an idea or message without words. There's just something so powerful about pictures.

**Tell us about some of the illustrative work you have done?**

Early on in my career, I was mostly creating artwork for magazines and greeting cards. I was lucky to do a series of small prints for American Express, as well as work for ITV and BP Oil. It wasn't till 2015 that I began to look into children's publishing and potentially creating picture books. I also create screen prints and have painted wall murals in the past.

**What was the inspiration behind the story of your book?**

*How The Stars Came To Be*? Tate Publishing and I wanted to create a book that had a folktale feel to it, but with a slightly modern twist. We all loved the idea of stars and how they were formed. We took inspiration from lots of traditional stories told around the world to create this one. We wanted it to be not specific to any one and a story everyone could enjoy.

**Tell us about the illustrations and what inspires you?**

My illustration style is very much inspired not only by my Indian roots but also by art celebrated around the world (such as African textiles and Aboriginal art). Most of my inspiration comes from Kalamkari textile designs. They are beautiful intricate pieces of art produced on fabric and hand-drawn using natural inks. I love how detailed they are, and how each piece tells a story. I am in awe of the amount of skill that's required to make these. I also take inspiration from Madhubani art and other types of Indian folk art.

**Tell us about the illustrations in the book?**

This is the first time I've actually drawn people for a children's book. It has always been outside my comfort zone and something

I am rather reluctant to do. The girl in the story doesn't really have a specific identity, so I took this as an opportunity to mirror myself in the fisherman's daughter. I never saw myself in the books I grew up reading; so it was a perfect way to combat my fears of illustrating figures. I wanted the illustrations to showcase how beautiful the story is.

**What is your favourite?**

I really enjoyed designing the constellation spread in the book, as it was a new way of drawing animals. It's one of my favourite spreads in the book, along with the page of the moon orbiting the Earth.

**'Pictures are very powerful'**

**How important are children's books?**

They are so important. Not just for children but also for adults. Picture books can touch on subjects that books with just words can't. It creates a whole new world for children to explore and be a part of. It opens windows to the lives of children and people readers may not have experienced or seen and help to build empathy skills.

**Do you think children's books are getting lost in an age of technology?**

I don't think so. There is something special about physically holding a book. I think many parents encourage their children to read. I believe adults still buy books for their children or take them to their local library. There's a strong drive and push from schools to get children to pick up books and read too.

**What advice would you give parents in terms of children and reading?**

I watch my sister, who has two young boys, do the bath, book, bed routine, and they love reading and books because of this. It's important for parents to read to their children and take them to their local library to pick books themselves.

**What children's books did you enjoy as a youngster?**

*Peace At Last* by Jill Murphy was a big favourite of mine, as was *Elmer* by David McKee. Currently, I love all the books by Jon Klassen. Another standout title in my collection is *Ramayana - Divine Loophole* by Sanjay Patel, which is a gorgeous retelling of the story of Rama and Sita. I cannot recommend this book enough. The illustrations are spectacular, and the text is simple and clear for children to understand.

**What can we expect from you next?**

I will be starting work on a new book by a debut author at the end of September. I have also written the first draft of my own story, which I am very excited about. At some point, I want to start looking at transferring the illustrations I have done on to wallpaper and textiles.

■ *How The Stars Came To Be* by Poonam Mistry is available now on Tate Publishing



PICTURE PERFECT: Poonam Mistry; and (inset above) her book *How The Stars Came To Be*