

SFL Portolan Project

Interview with Ajit George and S.B. Divya

Los Angeles, U.S.A., 2019

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi, this is Mary Mohanraj. I'm here with Ajit George and S.B. Divya. And we're here for the Speculative Literature Foundation at the World Fantasy Convention in Los Angeles, 2019. And I'm going to talk to them a little bit about what they do in science fiction/fantasy, and sort of what their, how they got into the field and what they're working on next. So maybe Ajit, if you could start with a little bit about how did you come into the genre? What is it that you do, etc?

Ajit George: Sure. I came into the genre first, by going to Clarion West, and that was in 2004. I'm a huge fan of science fiction and fantasy and I think, I was the first child born in the US and felt very alienated by maybe a lot of traditional literature and science fiction and fantasy allowed me to imagine other ways and other possible roles for myself.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And were you born in the U.S.?

Ajit George: Yes, I was the first child born in the US. Born in New York.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And your family is from ... ?

Ajit George: My parents are from Kerala, yeah.

And after Clarion I, my full time work kind of took over. I'm Director of Operations of an NGO that's based in India.

But I kind of returned to the genre more through games. I started writing games from the perspective of an Indian American because there was, like next to no representation of Indians or South Asians at all in games. And I've kind of been working in that for a while and then now working on a novel based on my work, my full time profession.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, we're gonna come back to that. And S.B. if you could introduce your own background and how you came into the genre.

S.B. Divya: Sure. So my background is that I have been a lifelong reader of science fiction, fantasy and a fan. I started writing a little bit in my teens and gave it up when I went off to college to be a scientist, and then an engineer. Being the good South Asian that I am but also because I love those subjects. I kind of

dropped writing for a long time.

Ajit George: [laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [laughter]

S.B. Divya: And after having a child and kind of losing myself a little bit for a few years ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm ...

S.B. Divya: ... I decided to reclaim some of that for myself and that passion and try to get published. And this all happened just back in 2013. My first flash fiction piece got published by Science Fiction in 2014. I started writing primarily in short fiction - science fiction and fantasy. And then I was very fortunate to have the novella picked up and released as a standalone book

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And that was Runtime?

S.B. Divya: That was Runtime.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Which I loved. I thought it was just terrific. It was a great, fast paced, exciting read with some really interesting ideas and now that's out again, not just as an independent novella. But you have a collection out. Is that out yet?

S.B. Divya: Yes. So I also very recently was approached by Hachette India to publish a collection of my short fiction in the Indian subcontinent in English. And that came out at the end of August. And it's available, as far as I know, in all the major bookstores and all major cities within India.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Within India?

Ajit George: That's awesome.

S.B. Divya: So that's super exciting.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, that's super exciting. And congratulations.

It does make me like, really frustrated because I want to read it. And so, if maybe, if we could talk a little bit for those who are not familiar, it seems like there, right now still, like big barriers between publishing in India versus here.

It's not like, I feel like if a book comes out in the US, at least, you know, at least a fair number of books also come out in the UK. Right. And you can still get them in Australia, and so on.

And vice versa to some extent, maybe not for Australia.

Yeah. So, and for India, it seems like it's mostly flowing from the US to India, but not the other way. Is that fair?

S.B. Divya: Ah, that is definitely fair. Yeah. I don't think there's a lot coming back from India to the US, there might be more coming from India to the UK and vice versa.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I feel like we need people, like publishers, to go and hunt up what's being published in India and ...

S.B. Divya: And bring it over ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And bring it over here, right?

S.B. Divya: I think so. Based on the sort of bookstore browsing I did while I was there back in January of this year. There is ... the big, the sort of bestseller genre fiction in India right now is mythology inspired retellings. So novelizations of ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Ramayana

S.B. Divya: [inaudible] Well, no even just minor characters from some of the epics right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh interesting ...

S.B. Divya: And just taking different perspectives on those and I think some of them are really, really interesting, right? You know, and kind of diving into the motivations and all the things that the epics never really do.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm

S.B. Divya: That becomes, I think, culturally challenging to bring over to the US because people don't have that rooted context of what you're deconstructing ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right.

S.B. Divya: ... which these books very much are doing.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So like, as a parallel then, like Marion Zimmer Bradley, what she did with Mists of Avalon where she took the matter of Britain and did a feminist version. It's easy for people to access because they're already, like our culture is based on the Arthurian mythos. And that whole background, right, and if people don't have that context ...

S.B. Divya: Exactly.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, that's super interesting.

S.B. Divya: We were talking about Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell and I was like, it didn't speak to me personally much, because I've not been steeped in [*inaudible*] and Gaelic, you know, mythos. And so I had a really hard time getting into that book. And I know so many people who love it, and it just, it didn't work for me. So I think having that context sometimes is necessary.

But I've also heard from people in India that you know, Bollywood is getting very interested in science fiction, especially right now, and that the genre field is growing. And I think that's partly why Hachette India came to me. Not because they're expecting my collection of English, you know, mostly American-centric science fiction and fantasy to sell well and become a bestseller in India.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I hope it does [*laughter*]

S.B. Divya: [*laughter*] More just to establish my name is really what they wanted to do and hopefully, you know, have me be like a good crossover author that can kind of bridge that gap.

Right. And we have, we have a few others who are doing that [*inaudible*] right. We have [*inaudible*] and Priya Sharma.

Yeah. So much like what's happened with the Chinese science fiction world. I think there needs to be a two fold growth, a local growth within India, of authors within India and then the diaspora kind of going back and forth.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I think there are more I mean, I was just hearing there's like a second I want to say Sri Lankan science fiction fantasy literary festival. Have they ...

Ajit George: I don't ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... like maybe it's not science fiction and fantasy but a second Literary Festival.

Ajit George: Yeah.

Like there was for a long time just the Galle Festival. Now there's another one and that's promising right, like let it let it grow, let there be more publishing houses, let there be more [*inaudible*].

I'm curious. Are you familiar with Nina, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*?

S.B. Divya: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I wonder what you think? Anyway maybe, maybe this is a complicated question but I think this ...

S.B. Divya: I would need to revisit it. It's been a while since I... [inaudible]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. Yeah. But it's but it's interesting because it's another, like it's a, it's a Ramayana take but it's coming out of you know, a woman from the West taking, who has ties to India, redoing this, this really [inaudible]. I thought it was a very interesting film version of the Ramayan. It's this animated film ...

So, okay, I'm going to redirect and turn to Ajit. If you could talk a little more in specific about your like, the games you've worked on that are maybe relevant to all this and, and your nonprofit work. connect that to the novel maybe.

Ajit George: Yeah. Growing up with games was sort of my pathway to self exploration. building my own competence. Role-playing allows you to explore identities that are not your own, but also to maybe form your identity better, with less of the fear that you're gonna be judged because you're not playing yourself, you're playing a character and so you can experiment with how your voice may sound, and who you are. And as a brown kid growing up in a deeply white set of schools and communities, I felt alienated constantly and really, really had a hard time with it. It was very, very painful for me growing up. And role playing games were one of the few refuges along with books that I could find that gave me my own space and my own voice and to experiment. But all of these role playing games were like made by older, white men that had no context of my lived experience

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Was this kind of like classic D & D ... ?

Ajit George: Sure, exactly a lot of D&D. I eventually moved to stuff like from White Wolf, which is more like 90s gothic horror and that was great. And a little bit better about gender representation, but not about people of color, specifically not about Indians.

And in the last couple years, I got back into gaming. And, you know, the field hadn't really changed a whole lot. There was some exotic, exoticization of Eastern culture or South Eastern culture or South Asian culture, but not any great representation

and not being written by, you know, people of color or Indians.

And I started approaching some of these game designers and said, "Hey, like, you know, this is, this is a real issue, this is a problem." And, weirdly, I think, maybe times had just changed.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah.

Ajit George: Instead, they were like, okay, would you like to write for us? And I was like, Okay, yeah, I will.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm. [laughter]

Ajit George: I'd be happy to do so.

And so I think I wrote - role playing games are especially, especially White Wolf is really famous for their city guides. And D&D also has, like, the city of Waterdeep, or whatever.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Ajit George: But they're all like Western cities or Western inspired cities. And so I wrote, as far as I know, the first city Guide to the City of Bangalore, and what that looked like from a supernatural perspective. I also explored class and past issues through it.

And I go to Bangalore twice a year. I've been doing it for the last decade of my life so I know the city pretty well, and I've seen its evolution. And that was really exciting.

And I wrote for another game called Misspent Youth, which is sort of like, it's kind of an outgrowth of a punk movement of like, you know, taking on the machine or the man or the government. And, but I took it from rural - I wrote a piece about five women living in rural India, and the struggles they had against rural patriarchy, their husbands, the chicken farm that they work for ...

And really, I know these stories personally because that's the communities that I work with, so I was able to speak authentically from my witnessing of that. They're not my lived stories myself, but I've got as close as I can as an NGO worker working directly with those communities. That was incredibly powerful too ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Sorry. I was just gonna ask if you can, for people who don't know your organization and what you do,

Ajit George: Sure. Yeah, I work with the Shanti Bhavan Children's Project. I'm its Director of Operations. And we work with marginalized communities, mostly Dalit or untouchable communities within South, South India, that are under the poverty line.

So multiple levels of marginalization, caste discrimination, and then of course, income or class issues. Fifty percent of our community are women, so there's gender discrimination as well. And there, the complexities of problems that they face are so enormous that it's hard to you know, you know encompass, but a lot, a lot of different complexities there.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe can you talk a little bit about how has, I mean, I know it has - but the ways in which South Asian culture makes its way into your work, into your fiction writing?

S.B. Divya: Yeah. Shall I start?

Ajit George: What do you mean should you start, yeah.

S.B. Divya: I think the biggest one is one that's not immediately obvious, and that is that - it's thematic. It's family. And the importance of family in someone's life that's often not reflected in western science fiction and fantasy, which is very much about the individual.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I actually, sorry to interrupt, but I just ...

S.B. Divya: Yeah, go ahead ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... I just watched the first episode of Raising Dion ...

S.B. Divya: Oh yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Which is this, have you seen it yet?

Ajit George: I'm familiar with it, yeah.

S.B. Divya: I saw it. I saw the first episode, yes ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No. But the ... I was ... one thing that I was watching it with, with Jed. And one thing he commented on is that this black woman is, who is ... has a young son with superhero powers, she's embedded in community. She's surrounded by people who care for her, and which is really rare to see in, like, we're starting to see a little more ensemble stuff. But like the classic Western superhero often, like all the family has fallen away.

S.B. Divya: Right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Batman is alone, you know. He's maybe got a servant, but that's it right?

S.B. Divya: Right.

Ajit George: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And so she's surrounded by that. And they still can't help her because this is such a huge thing that's beyond anything they've ever experienced. But it's been, it was really, it was a really interesting thing.

And even in ... when I, when I teach writers of color in science fiction and fantasy, one of the things that I've noticed with the Latin American writers, Latinx writers is that family is huge in their story ...

S.B. Divya: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: More so than anything else, any other area that I've seen. And that's a really interesting [*pause*] element

S.B. Divya: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: You were speaking about it better than I was ... [*inaudible*] it's striking

Ajit George: [*laughter*]

S.B. Divya: It is. And I think there are a lot of cultures that are writing in genre fiction now, where that's being brought forward, family friendships. And then in terms of direct South Indian influence, there are specific stories I've written that are set, you know, in [*inaudible*] in Bangalore, in ancient India. And I think that's it, it always kind of creeps in, you know, there's always some character in the story that is either, overtly or subtly, has a piece of my background and myself in that character, otherwise, it doesn't feel like my story. And so, sometimes it's subconscious. Sometimes it's a very, very conscious decision. But always there is something there. And I think, I think that's true for everybody, you know.

Ajit George: Yeah

S.B. Divya: Regardless of what your background is, it's gonna turn up.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: In your work ...

S.B. Divya: Whether you are aware of it or not ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, no. When my, my characters have to decide whether to like go and stage a raid to protect the alien encampment. They stop and like fry samosas first, right. Like, the middle of the night, you must feed everyone and then, go. Right.

All: [laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, Ajit maybe do you want to jump in ...

Ajit George: Yeah, sure. I feel like we're all on the same page here because community is huge to me. And I think, I know I'm very challenged by a Western individualistic point of view, the lone hero that goes off and saves the day. I think this is both a problematic tale and also an unrealistic tale. And I think that's how we get a nation that believes that billionaires are great. They're sort of the lone heroes, they're taking over the world.

All: [laughter]

Ajit George: The rest of the population really doesn't matter because there's sort of a backdrop to their, to their stories of Jeff Bezos or something like that. And I really fight against them and don't believe in that. I am very community based, family based for sure. But even deeper, weirdly, is actually larger communities. I really, really believe in the community and my storytelling really goes around community based ideas.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, I have a question, though.

Ajit George: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Maybe to flip on this a little bit maybe, is that, you know, I write a lot of queer characters and some that maybe don't go over so well with the more traditional, conservative Sri Lankan family community, right.

Ajit George: Right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Do you, in, maybe this takes it to the diaspora a little bit. Like, how is your work received in those communities? And do you ever feel like, you know, maybe you're, you are bringing some Western, some American ideas into the work as well, that maybe they are not relating to so much or they find pernicious? I don't know [laughter]

S.B. Divya: So, I'll speak to Runtime for this, because there's a, there's a component in there, you know, right on page one, there's their gender pronouns. And there are characters who are non binary

and there are characters who identify with a different gender label that I made up for science fictional purposes. But I have had my 80 something family friend, former godparents in America read it and enjoy it and start trying to use third person

Ajit George: Wow [inaudible] ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Awww

S.B. Divya: ... pronouns in his email to me about it. And then I also have you know, an uncle, like actual uncles not figurative uncles, in India, read my work and respond very favorably and they were, you know, they admitted that they didn't quite get all of it, but they were kind of like, this is really cool that you're writing about this thing. I've never heard about it. And there's some words here that I don't really, I'm not entirely sure I know in spite of being well educated in English,

Ajit George: Yeah ...

S.B. Divya: ... but there was no pushback.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, oh that's lovely ...

S.B. Divya: I'm sure there are people somewhere who would ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I got hate mail but yeah ...

Ajit George: Yeah?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah.

S.B. Divya: But yeah, at least from within my family and sort of immediate circles.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's great.

S.B. Divya: I have not seen any pushback. And ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm curious if ... I want to ask you about class a little bit. Because when I was first writing. I was a student in an MFA program with Kenan Kimani who, you know, is a, she wrote, generally girl, and it was one of the first South Asian short story collections that had, it had sexuality, pretty overt and just, I don't know, it blew me away. I was like, "how did you have the courage to write this"? Right, you know. And, and she kind of looked at me bewildered because she came from, it's an upper class, I think Bombay family. And, you know, her parents proudly came to her readings, and they loved that she wrote

about this, and they had no issues with it.

And I was like, "Oh, my parents had some issues," right?

Ajit George:

Yah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

So I don't know. I wonder whether maybe it's just, you know, individual family reactions or I wonder whether class factors into this to some extent as well or religion

S.B. Divya:

I'm sure it all goes into it ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Yeah.

Ajit George:

Yeah.

S.B. Divya:

you know how conservative is as your family, not just class but the other C word that no one wants to talk about, which is caste, right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Right.

Ajit George:

Right.

S.B. Divya:

I come from the privileged caste in India, which is really interesting. Coming from being a Brahmin there, not wealthy, but well educated and then coming, you know, to the US as an immigrant and being part of the the outcast part of society, right and not as included in mainstream. So I think yeah, definitely, all of that informs it. I have a distinct memory from a story I was writing in college, before I gave up writing to be a scientist. And I was working on it over break at home, and my mom peeks over my shoulder and, it wasn't even sexuality. It was just the F word. And She's like, why you got to do that? She's like, why do you have to use this language, you know, in your stuff?

Ajit George:

[laughter]

S.B. Divya:

And I was just kind of like, okay, so I can't work on this year because I can't be you know, my authentic self. She's over it now. There's swearing in my stuff and it's all good. But, um, but yeah, I think you know, those constraints are definitely there and especially when you're when you're starting out like if you're trying to please everyone, including your family, it's gonna you're gonna have a hard go of it.

Ajit George:

Yeah, I was such a rebellious kid growing up that now they're just sort of happy that I will have conversations with them and not be in an argument with them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [laughter]

S.B. Divya: [laughter]

Ajit George: I think they're pretty accepting. My game writing like I haven't shown them because I just feel like they aren't going to get it and understand it. My mom stalks me and so like she's picked up on some of it already anyway. And she bought my wife's book - RPG- which was pretty ominous, like feminine and Gothic addressing this stuff, she doesn't quite get it.

But like I might get my mom can like read my wife's work, then she'll probably read mine, though as a work in this novel, I am cognizant and worried a little bit about how they're going to take some stuff, especially since it's so close to home with my work, which is connected to them as well. So there are some fears there. But I'm also like, I got to write this thing, and it'll be what it will be and hopefully they'll be okay with it. You know.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I'm gonna ask you one more question which is ... because we don't have a lot of time, Ajit has to get to the airport, sadly. But if you could talk maybe a little bit about, for people who might be watching this or listening to this from South Asia. A little bit about the publishing industry, do you find barriers to publication? Do you feel like it was harder for you as someone of South Asian descent here in America, or do you think ...

Ajit George: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Or, you know, was it fine and are there going to be even more barriers for someone from South Asia still living there?

Ajit George: I think, I think there are barriers for any person of colour. I think there are deep barriers for any person of color. And I think about this question really deeply from multiple angles and I think and I tweeted about this. That like 70 to 85% of all jobs are gotten because of a network or connection. Simultaneously, every, for every black person that they have a friend, white people have like 91 white friends. And then 75% of America has, [inaudible] or white have no people of color in their world. The publishing industry is like any other business. And that means connections, networks. Being able to like be in the room at a con, that means income to be able to go to a con. There are multiple challenges. So when I first started out, I felt very daunted and it was like I had no roadmap. I'm older now and pretty savvy about how these things work. So like I have a leg up and I feel like I'm not too worried about getting my novel out there when the time comes.

But then there's marketing. There's all sorts of other challenges there. And I'm really thinking about that. But I do think I have an advantage of like a lot of groundwork.

And I think it would be deeply challenging for, like a young South Asian author to make inroads without support systems and without being taught without being networked in the right way. I think the industry is like any other industry and you've got to be very savvy to navigate it successfully or you're going to be stymied for many years.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I have to note here that last December, I was visiting Sri Lanka and I met a bunch of Sri Lankan science fiction fantasy writers: **Yudhanjaya Wijeratne, Navin Weeraratne, Manji**

Yud and I then ended up having a lot of conversations. He was a Nebula nominee last year. And he, he and I, along with other people set up a Facebook group for South Asian science fiction and fantasy. So anyone listening to this come find us and look for, I don't remember the name of the group, but look for South Asian SF. It should come up. Because I think that's so important if you can't make it to a convention, but being able to exchange advice, to ask questions, because there's a lot of misinformation out there too, right?

Ajit George: Yeah. I mean, you've been supportive of me. Like, you answered a ton of questions for me and were incredibly informative. I think you provided a service. I think we were both joking that you're like the mother hen who takes everyone under her wing.

S.B. Divya: Auntie. Auntie-ji. That's right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: *[laughter]*

Ajit George: You're very intentional about it, but you are very caring. I think you find the South Asians are like, kind of, like adrift and you try to pull them in and you try to give them ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, but you know, there weren't any, there were very few South Asians in the field when I came. I mean, Vandana Singh and Anil Menon were writing but I hadn't met them. They were not at conventions and so on.

S.B. Divya: *[inaudible]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And so yeah. But yeah, but they, other people of color did take

care of me. So in fact, at Wiscon, I got to see Nola Hopkinson who is an Afro-Caribbean Canadian writer, and she was at my first Wiscon and she helped us form the **Carl Brennan** Society, for writers of color in the field. And you know, there were five people of color at that, five writers of color at that Wiscon and now they have a POC dinner every year that has hundreds of people 20 years later. And so there's, you know, and I wouldn't have been there, if Wiscons actually hadn't actively made outreach, I was a broke grad student and could not possibly afford to go and they were like, "we will fly you out". And so there's also a way in which these some of these established minority, majority white organizations are doing very conscious active outreach as well.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Divy, do you, want anything to add?

S.B. Divya: Yeah, I will say that, in my personal experience, I have been fortunate not to feel any obvious barriers. I think I have, because I kind of came into this fairly late, a lot of those barriers have been broken down by people who came before me. And the conversations were already happening about Own Voices and diversity and so I happen to be catching that wave. So I'm very lucky.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right.

S.B. Divya: Um, but I will say that there's another side of this and that is, so I'll put my editor hat on. Right. And I'm currently co editor at Escape Pod.

But how I got there is interesting. And people had to open those doors. And you know, the first door that was open was, Rachel K. Jones reaching out to me through an online writers group and saying, "will you come **flush** for us? Like, I would love to have you"?

And I was, you know, as with many of us, overburdened with writing, with family life, with a job. But I said, "You know what, this is an opportunity, and I should probably say, yes, and at least try it." And so I did.

And a year later, Norm Sherman, who's pretty much a straight, white male, said, "Hey, our assistant editor is stepping back for reasons and we would love to have you step into that role. Will you come?" And I was kind of like, same, you know, same thought process. Okay, well, can I handle the commitment? Can I deliver? But I thought, yes, I should. And so I became

Assistant Editor.

And Assistant Editor is a very interesting role. Because in our structure at least, the assistant editor's the gatekeeper between general submissions of short stories from authors from anywhere, to who gets passed up to the Editor-in- Chief and who ultimately gets published. And so sitting in that role for me, that's a privileged position.

But it started giving me ideas, you know, there's things that come through that I'm going to see with a different lens. And by having the background that I do, and sort of the consciousness that I have, and the experiences that I have, I said, "Yeah, I want to now be the person opening doors for people because I'm sitting at that door."

And a year or so after that, Norm said, "Hey, I need to step back for reasons. Would you like to be Editor? And I said "Sure, but I really need help."

All: *[laughter]*

S.B. Divya: So I brought you know, so I asked Mur Lafferty if she would come back and help me and she very graciously and happily accepted. And you know we've been going on since. But again, now sitting in the Editor's chair, like I'm the ultimate gatekeeper, right. I get to decide with her ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And you have now bought a story of mine for which I'm super grateful. Delighted to have it at Escape Pod. So you know it all rolls around, right.

S.B. Divya: It rolls around right. And I go out and I try to be more intentional about soliciting stories from authors outside of the U.S. And sometimes it's hard. You know, just getting payments to them can be challenging right? And ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I've discovered some writers are fine with Amazon gift cards as an option, which has been an interesting, like trying to figure out how to pay them ...

S.B. Divya: Right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... can be - if they don't have PayPal, if you know, they're - the checks fee can be very expensive

Ajit George: Yeah, for sure.

S.B. Divya: Money transfers are not always accessible.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Exactly. So.

S.B. Divya: But. But I think it's worth, worth doing. And I'm, again very lucky that the people who own all of these podcasts and manage the money, which are Escape Artists, which is Alasdair Stuart and Marguerite Kenner, are extremely intentional about making these things happen, and I have their hundred percent support, both, you know, for gender, for people of color, for people, international writers. And so, and I think all of that is important, right? Like you have everyone all the way to the top saying yes, like, we want to do this. We want to enable people to make these decisions to help people come in. And that is really, really important, right.

It's not just about the authors being able to break through, but it's also about the publishers and the gatekeepers being willing to open that gate and saying, "Please come in. We want you." And to reach out to specific people and ask for their work. Because a lot of them assume that nobody in the U.S. would be interested, right.

Ajit George: Yeah, for sure.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That is, I heard that over and over and it was like, where is that perception coming from? Right, but

S.B. Divya: It's coming from, like Hollywood. Pop culture, right. Like we don't ...

Ajit George: The absence of any voices? Yeah.

S.B. Divya: We're not there.

Ajit George: Yeah, we're not there.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. So all right, well, I don't want you to miss your flight, so. We'll close with, if I could ask you to just remind the audience of maybe one thing of yours that you'd love them to go check out and maybe a recommendation of somebody else's work that you have really enjoyed lately that you'd like to recommend. So ...

Ajit George: Sure, I'd love people to check out our organization, Shanti Bhavan Children's Project. That would be the best because I think I'm really proud of that work. But you could look at Misspent Youth and the work I did there. That game was, I'm

really proud of what I did with that.

And sorry, what was the second part of the question?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Someone you'd recommend but maybe we'll switch so you can think about that.

S.B. Divya: I, for myself, I would say - I would love for people in the subcontinent to check out my collection. It is called, it's a very long title. It's called Contingency Plans for the Apocalypse and Other Possible Situations.

All: *[laughter]*

S.B. Divya: And it is a collection of almost all of my short fiction including an original piece as well as the Nebula nominated Runtime which I know is harder to get in India though you can buy it on Amazon and it's expensive.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I feel like I saw collection in, at Worldcon from a from another press in

S.B. Divya: Not from me

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Not from you? Interesting we should talk ...

S.B. Divya: *[inaudible]*

And in terms of recommendation, and this is half plugging me but half plugging someone else, I was recently very happy to run - rerun a story originally from Fireside but we're running it in Escape Pod. It is free to listen to and read. And it is called Light and Death on the Indian Battle Station by Keyan Bowes. And it is a Diwali story set in space with telepaths and incorporates one of my favorite mythological stories from my youth as well, which is **that of ...**

Ajit George: That's awesome.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's excellent

Ajit George: I'm just gonna plug my wife's game - Bluebeard's Bride. It won a bunch of awards and I'm incredibly proud of her and the work that she did with it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And her name is?

Ajit George: Whitney Beltrán. And yeah, it's a very fantastic game. I think it sort of opened a bunch of doors for her in narrative writing. So

it's, it's worth taking a look.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

All right, thank you so much. Ajit George, S.B. Divya. Just a delight having you. Thanks.