

Lorraine Sat: Recently became a writer after working for three years in the publishing industry. Her short story, 'Circus', was Highly Commended at the 2019 London Short Story Prize. 'Circus', like all good short stories, is almost impossible to describe. To put it as simply and as vaguely as possible, I will say it is a story about a sensory journey through distant memories and children coming of age. She is now going to read the beginning of her story.

Isha Karki: Thank you, Lorraine.

Circus

That summer the circus came to our village. Cirrrcusss, we said, rolling and hissing when Hari dai taught us the word. Years later, when we tried to remember what happened, What Exactly Happened, memories overlapped, like how the same thing had two or more names where we lived, borrowed from That Side and This Side. Mato and mitti for mud, where mothers and fathers, knee-deep, spent days coaxing things buried too deep. Bhok and bhuk for the ache in our bellies. Some words were the same: khel for play, jadu for magic, and chhi – the sound mandirwalas made when they saw us.

That summer, we drowsed under the ghaam plotting what to eat.

This is what we ate:

1. Sani's Auntie's Sharifa

Sani's auntie had bought sharifa seeds at This Sidemarket. We squatted barefoot, slapping away mosquitoes, pretending to help with the planting but really marking every seed with hawk-eyes. We imagined its fruit: Sani said it would be like nariwal, hard-shelled and covered in hair, which was stupid because nariwals grew near the sky. We returned every week, but nothing sprouted, so we went back to chasing chickens and running after bulls. We lobbed dried gobar at each other. When lumps of it broke against our heads, its wet centre glooped on our hair and we shrieked. The stink clung for days. Sometimes, our mothers dunked our heads in water till our arms flailed but often our tap, behind the huts, was cracked and empty.

Lorraine Sat: Thank you so much for this, Isha. The first thing I wanted to talk about was pronouns. 'Circus', as we just heard, is from the perspective of one narrator using the collective 'we'. Then I read another short story of yours called 'All in Good Time' where you use the pronoun 'you', and another short story of yours called 'Alchemy' where you also use 'we' again. I was wondering how you came to that decision. How do you choose the point of view for your stories?

Isha Karki: Thank you for a great question. As you have mentioned, I do like to experiment a lot with narrative voice. I'll just tell you a bit about the background of how I came up with a story like 'Circus' itself and how the narrative voice fed into that.

I had not just, but I had read this novel called *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, and in that novel there is a child narrator, Darling, and she has a group of friends and they go around, and there's just this amazing sense of play and adventure and creativity. I listened to the audio version of it, and the narrator, Robin Miles, was really amazing. Brought it to life.

I think at that point, I hadn't really written a child narrator before, so I was immediately drawn to a new challenge. I thought, this is great. I tend to normally write quite dark things, doom and gloom, so I thought it would be a good challenge to try something that captures joy or that sense of play. So that was where the idea formed. At the same time, there was a competition with the theme of 'circus'. When I first saw it –

Lorraine Sat: The Spread the Word competition?

Isha Karki: No, it was a different competition altogether. This was much, much earlier in the year. I saw the theme, and it did not resonate with me at all. I just couldn't think of anything. But I really love prompts and I love having a theme. I think it allows you as a writer to work within limits and challenges. So I was thinking of a story. I had these things going on – a child narrator, circus maybe – I was like, how can I do this?

I was also remembering one of my favourite childhood novels, which is *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Have you read it?

Lorraine Sat: Yeah.

Isha Karki: You know how the narrative voice is – on the language level, there's just so much experimentation and play, and there's this sense of this is the children's world, this is how they think, this is how they're creating. That has always stayed with me. So I had all these influences coming in, and I thought with writing the story, I had this idea, which in the end turned out to be too long for that previous competition, and then the deadline passed and I was like, "Well, I clearly am not going to meet that deadline."

But the seed of the idea was there, and I really wanted to try writing in the 'we' voice to create that sense of friendship and collectivity for this story in particular. I think with 'Circus' and with 'Alchemy', which also uses the 'we' voice, in both stories I am exploring characters and narrators who have othered identities. Their identities exist in a marginal or liminal way to the rest of the community that they're in. Being an immigrant, Nepalese, being an immigrant in London, I'm always in that liminal space myself, and I'm always drawn to exploring characters who are in that space.

What I wanted to do with the 'we' voice was to centre the othered, basically, and to give them their own – to create a world where they are the centre and they're inhabiting it.

Lorraine Sat: I know when I was trying to write a sum-up for 'Circus', I wanted to bring up community. I was going to say it was a reflection on the meaning of community, but I thought

that sounded too obnoxious and shallow. But there is definitely, thanks to the 'we', a real study.

Isha Karki: Yeah. I think what's really good about the 'we' voice is that while it does create that sense of community and friendship, it also brings in the reader and distances them in the same – it does two things. You're observing and you're part of the friend circle, but you're also not. You're seeing things from their point of view and you're welcomed into it, but you're also not. You're outside of that. So it's almost making the reader the outsider in a way. But yeah, I think it does insider/outsider work for the reader.

When I try a new narrator voice, I get really obsessed with it. [laughs] I ended up around a similar timeframe writing three different stories, which were all different but all used the 'we' voice. I just found it very fruitful. And similarly with my other story, 'All in Good Time', which is written in the second person. That was my obsession a few years ago. [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: [laughs] Moved on now.

Isha Karki: Yeah. I think that was also because I read a really good short story. It was 'The Thing Around Your Neck' by Chimamanda Adichie. It's incredibly powerful. That was maybe – I think I had read other stories that used the second person narration before, but I think that was the first one where I saw it and I just felt this power, and I was in awe. I was like, "I want to try this." So I began writing in the 'you' voice.

I think sometimes I like doing something that goes against the grain a little bit. I did a few stories, and the second person narrative actually felt really natural to me. But I know it's really contentious and loads of people hate it. But there are some really good stories. Another one is 'Your Authentic Indian Experience' by Rebecca Roanhorse. That's online, and that's also an amazing example of another narrative that uses the 'you' voice.

But I think with 'All in Good Time', because it's such an uncanny and eerie story, I wanted that dread and uncanniness to be quite subtle. Writing in the 'you' voice I think helped create that sense of eeriness. It could be you. It could be anyone. It could be nobody you know. It's happening to you, it's happening to lots of people, it's happening to no one. I think it creates that really – you're just in it.

Lorraine Sat: It gives some power, I would say.

Isha Karki: Exactly.

Lorraine Sat: Feels a little bit like an aggression, and at the same time makes it more personal. It's very interesting.

Isha Karki: Yeah, exactly. The short answer to your question was that I like experimenting with narrative voices. [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: It's definitely more original. Anyway, the second question I wanted to ask you was on time and memory. I've noticed it's kind of a recurring theme for you, and in 'Circus' particularly, memories are overlapped. They are thick with smoke and we're never quite sure what happens to who, or if it even happened in the first place. I was wondering about your relationship with time and how relevant you think memory and time are in literature in general.

Isha Karki: I'm going to ask a separate question. Am I talking too fast?

Lorraine Sat: No. Just be in the moment, just having a conversation.

Isha Karki: Okay, because I talk so fast in normal life

Lorraine Sat: I honestly loved everything you said. I could've talked on the topic for ages.

Isha Karki: All right, thank you.

Lorraine Sat: You're great. You're doing so great.

Isha Karki: I'm going to respond as if there wasn't this in between. [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: Yeah, this did not happen. [laughs]

Isha Karki: That's a really insightful comment. I think maybe I hadn't fully realised that those were driving themes in my work, so thank you for that.

Lorraine Sat: Any time. [laughs]

Isha Karki: I think what really interests me in my writing is exploring how the past intersects with the present, how it surges up and how it really shapes the future and completely forms you as a person. When I say that I'm particularly interested in looking at memory and trauma, I do that pretty much across all of my stories in some way or the other. It might not be very obvious; it might be quite subtle.

I think with 'Circus' as well, what I wanted to explore was what happens when you experience and/or see moments of violence or when you experience moments of physical or psychological trauma. How does that stay with you in your life later? How does that become a memory, and how does that memory remain in your mind, your body, your actions? Do you even remember? If you do, how do you do that?

I think with 'Circus', maybe that's – 'maybe', as if I don't know [laughs] – that's what I was exploring: looking back on this event that happened to the narrators, to of them, when they were very, very young. Maybe they didn't understand what was happening, and when they remember, they wonder what happened. I'm glad you picked up on the ambiguity, because

that was obviously done on purpose to try and encapsulate that kind of ambiguity of memory, particularly in relation to traumatic experiences.

Another layer in the story is these characters are growing up, and there's all that sense of play and adventure, and they're having fun and they're doing all these things, they're getting up to all these antics, but the memory is also edged with that experience of caste and class prejudice, which is quite subtle, but it's the way that they're being treated by other people. It's on the edges. I think what I wanted to explore was looking at how you can still have these really happy memories, but it is almost like the joy of childhood being forced to face the darkness of the world. That's what I would say I was doing with 'Circus'.

Lorraine Sat: When you read the story, at the same time you're reminded of your own childhood and the games you played, but you're also a little afraid. There's this constant sense that something bad is about to happen. They're playing with fire, and it's definitely...

Isha Karki: Literally playing with fire. [laughs] I'm glad that comes through. I think when I was writing it, I really was consciously trying to recreate what games children would play. I actually have a bad memory myself. [laughs] So with these things, I have to try and think back and clarify certain memories that I had and lift them and try to use them in my writing.

Lorraine Sat: My third question was about the construction of 'Circus'. It's obviously an insane structure. I've never seen anything like it, I think.

Isha Karki: Yay. [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: And I'm quite the short story reader. So I was wondering how you came up with that, and also, how much editing did that involve?

Isha Karki: I think you give me too much credit. [laughs] When I first was writing this – I call my first draft 'draft zero' because it's such a 'blegh' of everything, all the ideas I'm having, all the scenes, not necessarily in order, or snippets of scenes and stuff. When I was writing that first draft zero, there was no idea in my mind about the structure. I was focusing very much on the voice and creating that sense of fun and joy and play. I was very much focusing on that.

But I think as I wrote, because there are so many anecdotes in the story itself, it's almost like a series of games that they play, things that they eat, things that they experience. I was writing and I was just getting a bit frustrated by the story. I thought it was too unwieldy. I didn't think it worked. I put it aside for a few months, actually, from when I first started because various other things happened. So I did put it aside for a few months, which I don't really tend to do with stories unless I'm having a lot of difficulty with it. I just was focusing on other projects at the time.

Then when I came back to it, I was reading it and it was still in that draft zero. I was just finding it too unwieldy. But the London Short Story Prize deadline was coming up and I really wanted to

enter something to it. I use deadlines as motivators to get a draft done. Even if sometimes I miss the deadline, it's a good motivator for me. I really need that structure in order to get pieces done. So that was great because that was coming up, and I was like, "I really want to submit something if I can."

I was reading it and I was so unsatisfied with it, and then I was like, it reads like a list, so maybe if I try making it into a list and doing something – experimenting with the form in the same way that I'm experimenting with language and creating that sense of creativity, but on the level of form. Actually that makes a lot of sense with the thematic exploration, actually trying to show it.

Lorraine Sat: There's definitely the sense that 'Circus' is a memory, that it's as if you're trying to – we have memories, but they're never in order, so it's trying to bring it back to the way it was even though that's impossible.

Isha Karki: Exactly, to itemise it in some way or to create some sense of structure or order in order to understand what those experiences might have been. So I did that, and I wasn't convinced that it worked. In a way the content really shaped the structure and the form. I never went into the writing of it thinking "Oh wow, I'm going to try this new form." Often my writing process is that. I'll have an idea and then I'll do that, whether that's voice or structure. But with this one, I think the structure of it came quite late and quite close to the deadline.

The way I normally write, I've got that draft zero and then I edit it to the first draft, as I call it, and then I do very, very close editing. I tend to overwrite quite a bit. If a word count is 3,000, I might sometimes write 6,000, but then I'll cut it down to fit that word count. I really like that process.

Lorraine Sat: You like editing?

Isha Karki: I do.

Lorraine Sat: Wow, you must be the only person. [laughs]

Isha Karki: It gives a different sort of satisfaction when you're chiselling away at the words really closely. When you're doing that, you're really forced to be very judicious in your word choice, to really pick the words that are most impactful and to prune things that maybe aren't necessary. It's quite a satisfying process. Actually, I'm not sure how many drafts it would have been, because I do it in layers where I'll edit this particular section, and then another section, but I do quite a few drafts.

Lorraine Sat: Do you never fear that you've overedited it? Is that something you struggle with?

Isha Karki: I think usually, because I finish stories for some sort of competition deadline or some external deadline, I almost don't have time to worry about that. Often I'm quite a last-

minute worker. 'Circus' I submitted literally a few minutes before the deadline, but I am used to doing that.

Lorraine Sat: I'm the same.

Isha Karki: When it's like that, you're kind of forced to forget that doubt of 'is it too overedited?' But I think moving forward, I am hopefully working on a short story collection.

Lorraine Sat: Wow, congratulations.

Isha Karki: Thank you. It's very much in the drafting stage. I think with these stories, if I'm not submitting it elsewhere, I will struggle with that. I will struggle with, how much should I edit it? What word count should it be? Is it too long? I think that's quite natural. I think it's one of those things that with practice, maybe you get better. Maybe some people have a surer confidence in their own ability to know. But I'm not sure. I'll get back to you on that. [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: My fourth question was about the fact that you're, as far as I know, at least, solely a short story writer. I was wondering if you were hoping to maybe widen your horizons at some point, and if you could tell me what attracts you to short stories. I know you've already started to talk about it a bit, but if you could go on about working with Spread the Word, the London Short Story Prize, and that experience.

Isha Karki: I have only written short stories so far, but they have varied quite a bit in length – everything from 1,000 words, I would say – I'm not very good at flash fiction – to 10,000-12,000 words and maybe even more than that. So I definitely am keen to try on the other forms, and I can absolutely see myself writing a novella, a novel, maybe a collection of interlinked short stories in the future. As I said, I am focusing on the collection at the moment, but I'm absolutely open to that. I think each new thing will be a new challenge.

I first started writing short stories because I guess I wanted to practice writing. I think what's so absolutely wonderful about the form of the short story is how much you can experiment. Each story can contain a different idea, a different world, a different character, a different voice, a different narrative voice, and you don't get bored – or if you do, you can put it aside. The stakes are lower in that sense than if you were investing in a novel, which obviously would take much, much longer.

I think what writing short stories has allowed me to do is really practice my craft and practice all these ideas, practice different genres as well. You don't have to feel locked into one particular voice or one particular genre, and I find that quite liberating. I think it's really perfect for a growing writer. Not everybody will love it, but I think if people are interested in trying the short story as a way of practicing craft, honestly there could be nothing better.

But obviously, I have learnt through writing but also through reading loads of short stories as well. That's the main thing. I think it's so good in terms of developing editing skills as well, as I was talking about, because you have to.

Lorraine Sat: Chiselling away the words.

Isha Karki: Yeah. With the form, you can't just have excessive words or a scene that doesn't work. You think about, how tight can I make it? What's the arc of the story? What is necessary? The short story is so much about what you're leaving out as well as what you're saying. I find that quite invigorating.

In terms of Spread the Word, I'm on the London Writers Award Program at the moment, and it's been incredible. It's a 9-month long development program, and we have a critique group – who I'm actually seeing later. There are six of us, and I'm the only one working on a short story collection. Everyone else is working on novels. But we swap extracts and we critique each other's work.

Lorraine Sat: That sounds so great.

Isha Karki: Yeah, it's really great. It's very nurturing, it's very supportive, and everyone is really invested. Everyone is very intelligent and perceptive. You get very different perspectives on your work. And then we also have masterclasses about craft or career from industry specialists.

Spread the Word are amazingly supportive. Because, obviously, I was on the program when I did place on the prize, they were all so incredibly happy for me, and that was so nice. I think they're a very supportive organisation.

Lorraine Sat: That's great. I wanted to talk about you becoming a writer, which I know is only recent. I read somewhere that you said you finally gave yourself permission to become a writer. Would you mind talking about that? I think everyone – I mean, not everyone because not everyone wants to be a writer, but I think there are a lot of people who struggle with that.

Isha Karki: Yeah, of course. Actually, what you said earlier about a recent writer is only chronologically true, maybe, because I've been a reader and writer from a very young age. My favourite pastime was reading everything, and both me and my sister were really into books. That's what we did for fun. No other activities, just books. [laughs] We used to do writing together. We used to give each other prompts. We'd never finish anything, but we'd be so ambitious. We'd start new stories that were basically novels. We'd write two chapters and then we'd abandon it.

So I had that growing up, and I was a big fan fiction reader as well. I think that has –

Lorraine Sat: What kind of fan fiction?

Isha Karki: I shall not reveal my secrets. [laughs] So that has been part of my formative experience. I've always been in the writing world or the reading world. But at that time, I didn't think that writing or being a writer was a viable career you could have, because I don't think you do think that unless maybe a writer comes to your school on a visit – which I think is happening more and more now, which is great.

But I think unless you're exposed to that or unless you have parents who have maybe come from a literary background or a writing background, it's not a thing you think is a vocational career that you can have. My parents came from a generation where they really wanted both me and my sister to do the very traditional careers, like lawyer, doctor, any of those things.

For ages, I just didn't consider it as being something that I could do beyond stolen moments. And then as I want to uni, I did English Literature at university and then I went into publishing. Obviously I love books and I wanted to support books and spend my time doing that, but I think I was also coming at writing from a sort of angle.

I think also, early on, I just didn't talk about my writing to many people. I found it really exposing. It's quite a vulnerable thing to talk about.

Lorraine Sat: Yeah, you definitely feel like you put yourself in.

Isha Karki: Exactly. You always put yourself into the writing, even if it's not very based on your own experiences. So there was all this – I didn't talk about it, and then when I went to university and started my career in publishing, I still continued writing and I knew that it was important to me, but then I had a career break. I went traveling for a few months, and then I did a Master's, again in English Literature, and I think during that time I thought, "This is perfect. I can spend all my time writing and reading."

What I found actually was I went through a period of one year where I did no writing, and I thought I would never have another idea again. Before then I'd been quite – even though I'd had a full-time job, I'd been writing quite a lot. I'd been doing it.

Lorraine Sat: You never know when it's going to be a fruitful period. Sometimes it's when you're at your busiest and you think you should not be writing, and you could have two months off and not write one line. It's not something you can control, I guess.

Isha Karki: Exactly. But I think having that break, a career break and also having that break from writing – even though it wasn't a chosen break – really made me re-prioritise the things in my life and made me consider what was important to me. I realised that writing is incredibly important. It's the one thing that gives me joy, and I thought, "Well, if it is that, if that's what it means to me, I need to try and make it work. I need to give it the time it needs. I need to find the resources that I can," whether it's signing up for online courses or trying to apply for competitions, whatever that means. I just thought it was time to do that.

I think maybe when I was younger, I couldn't have come to that decision. I needed to have had those experiences to come to that decision. I think I'm at a point in my life where I'm really invested in practicing a lot, learning my craft. When I look back at this time in my life, I want to feel like I did give it the time that I could and I did use the resources that I could.

That's what I'm aiming for more than anything. And it has been fruitful. When I did decide to do that and I took another break from doing a full-time job – when you're not working – because we internalise so much of capitalist ideas of productivity and money and self-worth, and writing is so not related to money.

Lorraine Sat: It's not for profit.

Isha Karki: Right, exactly. I think it was a hard time where I knew that that's what I wanted to do, but there were all these messages that you've internalised from such a young age.

Lorraine Sat: Do you think being a woman also stopped you from giving yourself permission in a way?

Isha Karki: I think being women, we are definitely nurtured or conditioned in a certain way, and one of those ways is taking up the least amount of space that you can, being humble.

Lorraine Sat: Writing is such an affirmative...

Isha Karki: Exactly. Even saying 'I'm a writer' and asserting that identity or saying 'I'm going to put myself first, I'm going to put this first' can feel so self-indulgent. It can feel like a luxury or a privilege. Yeah, absolutely, I think you internalise, again, so many cultural messaging about agenda, about class as well, so many different things, that it has to feed into that, definitely. Actually, one of the things I'm trying to work hard on is talking about my work to other people, saying that I'm a writer.

Lorraine Sat: You're doing great right now.

Isha Karki: Thank you. When you achieve big things or little things, to try and actually stop and celebrate them, whether that's finishing your first story, finishing your tenth story, or placing in a competition – because when you're a writer, the goalposts are always moving. Whenever I achieve something, I'll be like, "Okay, the next thing." I'm so bad at that. So I'm trying hard to do that as well, to actually –

Lorraine Sat: Appreciate.

Isha Karki: Yeah, to look at what I have done and think, "Okay, you worked hard and you have achieved something, and that's good." Just to have created some space for yourself to soak that in.

Lorraine Sat: How did it feel the first time your first work was published?

Isha Karki: The first work that was published was actually quite a while back. It was in 2016. I was obviously very shocked. I was not expecting it at all. I was like a baby writer trying to stand my work up for the first time, and I feel like it was a fluke back then. But again, I think I was in a weird headspace where I didn't really talk about my writing to anyone apart from my sister, really. So when that happened, I didn't really speak about it to that many people. It's quite sad. It's like, why don't you celebrate this achievement?

Lorraine Sat: Did you feel shame?

Isha Karki: Not at all. I think it was the idea of exposing myself in some way, or I think I felt vulnerable because my work was out there. Nobody really noticed it, obviously. There's so much work out there, so many journals, so many things. People aren't reading everything.

But I wish I'd been a bit more confident back then. But it was an incredible start to a journey, I think, and having had those publications back in – I think it was 2016 – did instil confidence in me. I could always look back and be like, my work has been published in this magazine and this magazine, so it can't be that bad. Writing is so much a seesaw of self-doubt and affirmation. It's just up and down.

Lorraine Sat: Thank you so much for coming, Isha.

Isha Karki: Thank you.

Lorraine Sat: It's been absolutely lovely meeting you. Do you have anything coming up?

Isha Karki: Can I just thank you for your wonderful questions. This is my first time in an interview and talking about my writing, so it's been a really great experience. Thank you. In terms of what I've got coming up – I'm focusing on the collection, so maybe that. Maybe in two years, ten years, who knows? [laughs]

Lorraine Sat: Hopefully not too long, because I'd love to read it.

Isha Karki: Thank you.

The interview is by Lorraine Sat, studio production is by Marco Tarantino.