"**Making children's books is far more difficult and challenging than making books for adults.**"

Chaaya Prabhat

PWI speaks to the Chennai–based graphic designer and illustrator about her work

By Payal Khandelwal

Reading comics and watching cartoons might seem like an almost nondescript part of kids' lives while growing up. This, however, turned into a strong foundation for a thriving career in graphic design and illustration for *Chaaya Prabhat*, and creating insightful and delightful illustrations for children now forms a significant chunk of Prabhat's portfolio.

She did her MA in Graphic Design from Savannah College of Art and Design, post which she worked in Hong Kong for about two years as a graphic illustrator. She is now based in Chennai, India. We speak to Prabhat about her design journey so far and some of her recent projects. Edited excerpts:

Q What led you to art and design in the first place?

I've been drawing for as long as I can remember. This passion for drawing gradually developed into an interest in design, illustration and typography. Also, I used to read a lot of comics and watch a lot of cartoons on CN as well as Disney movies while growing up, and this must have definitely influenced me.

Q How was your experience at The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Hong Kong? What were some of the key learnings for you there?

In multiple ways, SCAD helped me figure out what my skills were and how to adapt and apply them to professional work. They helped me shape my overall style of working and how to quickly think of new and original ways to approach a project. While at SCAD, I also discovered that I enjoyed hand-lettering and typography, and now hand-lettering is a solid part of a lot of my work.

Q You then worked in Hong Kong for a year. Could you tell us a bit about the kind of work you did there? And how did Hong Kong inspire you?

Hong Kong was and is a very inspirational city for creative people, though it may not look it from the outside. There's a strong creative community in Hong Kong that takes a lot of pride in creating new and original work.

I worked at PwC in Hong Kong for a year as a graphic designer and a graphic recorder. This involved me sitting through lectures and conferences and live-scribing or taking notes of the talks, that were happening in real-time, in the form of drawings and engaging typography. I would often scribe digitally on an iPad, which would be projected on a large screen to the audience to look at. This was incredibly challenging as I would have to quickly understand what was being said and translate the lectures and conferences into visual metaphors in real-time.

I also had several other opportunities and crea-

tive outlets in Hong Kong. I was part of a sketching group which would go and sketch a new location every week. I was also commissioned by a café to paint a mural on the walls of one of the busiest streets of Hong Kong.
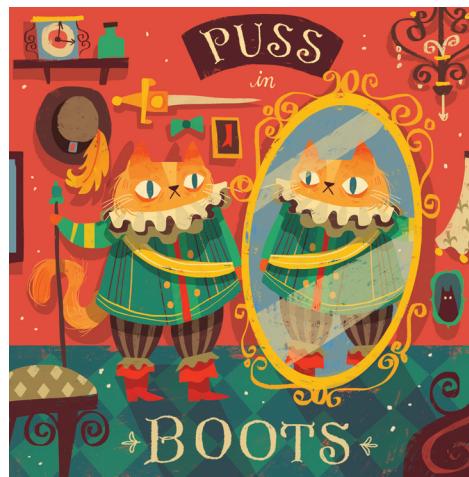
Q Why did you decide to come back and how was your initial phase of starting out in

Chennai, India?

At some point, I realised that I wanted to work independently, and for multiple reasons it made sense to move back to Chennai so I could fully focus on this. I didn't know what to expect once I moved back and wasn't sure if I would be able to get a lot of work, but luck has been in my favour and I've almost constantly been freelancing on a ➜
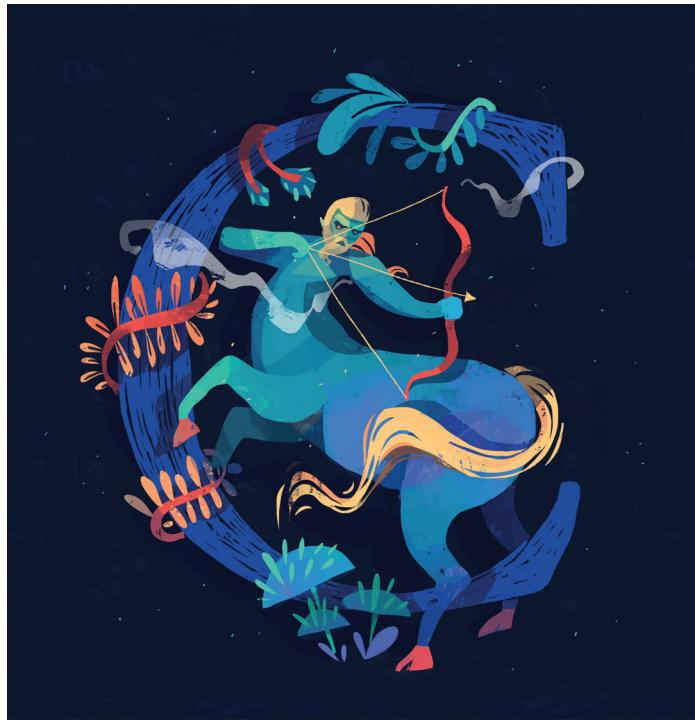
lot of interesting projects ever since I moved back.

Q **What are the advantages and disadvantages of working independently for you?**

I think the same thing could work as both an advantage and a disadvantage – which is that when working as a freelancer, I often have to do almost everything on my own. The plus side of this is that I can work flexibly at whatever location and time. This can become overwhelming at times though when I want to take a break. It's also quite a challenge having to take the final call on everything myself, but I'm starting to get used to this.

Q **You work on a lot of children's literature. What draws you towards it? Would you say that you specialise in children's books' illustration?**

I've always loved books for children, and anyone who works with children's books will agree that they are far more difficult and challenging than making books for adults, in a good way. I think my style tends to work very well with children's books and it's very satisfying to hold a book in your hands once it's finished and printed. It's even more exciting to see children enjoying my illustrations.

I'm not sure if I specialise in it, but certainly a large chunk of my projects so far have been children's books, and I definitely do enjoy it a bit more than the rest.

Q **Could you also tell us about the collaboration process for designing book covers?**

For book covers, the client usually reaches out to me with a brief summary of the book and asks me to conceptualise a cover that would visually represent the book. For example, I recently designed the book cover for *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, which is a classic. After going through the story and understanding the major themes of the book, I wanted to show a river which is a strong image in the story and also subtly shows the theme of the teachings of Buddha, which also recurs in the book.
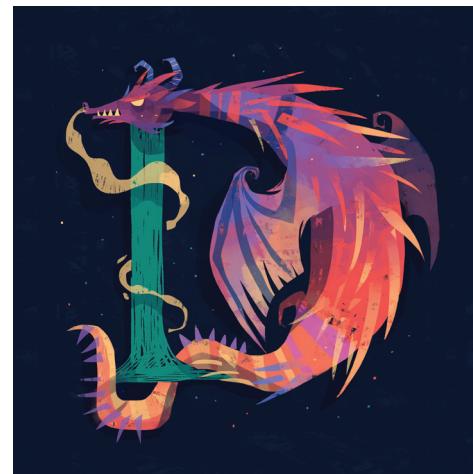
Q **Lastly, what were some of your key projects last year?**

I worked on multiple picture books last year, out of which four have been published - *There's a Hole in My Galaxy, Alphabet Kerfuffle, The Wise Man,* and *Life and Seed.* I also had an amazing opportunity to work on several mass snaps for Snapchat in collaboration with my sister, Sandhya Prabhat, who is an animator.

Another of my favourite from last year is '*A to Z of Mythical Creatures and Monsters*' which I did as a personal project where I drew monsters and creatures for each letter of the alphabet everyday for 36 Days of Type.∎

Chaaya Prabhat's Portfolio: www.chaayaprabhat.com

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