



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Interview with Robin Gregory

Abhimanyu Pandey

In her own words, Robin Gregory, is a devoted wife and mother, and student of mystical teachings. Born in Pensacola, Florida, she grew up in California, accompanied by seven siblings, and surrounded by horses, real cowboys, and the occasional rattlesnake. She has always been drawn to helping others, a trait that began, to her mother's horror, with bringing home swallow chicks stricken from their nests. She has worked as a journalist, lay minister, and infant massage instructor for mothers and babies at risk. Her studies include Literature and Creative Writing at University of California, Santa Cruz and Stanford University's Writer's Workshop. She lives with her husband and son in a Carmel cottage old enough to make you sneeze. The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman, her first published novel, has won 14 awards and is shortlisted for more. More about her is available on her website: www.MadMysticalJourney.com

The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman was published in the USA in 2015. The novel depicts, through kinship with otherworldly beings, a disabled boy masters miraculous powers that his adoptive father refuses to recognise.

Moojie Littleman is not just another orphan with extraterrestrial friends; he is not just a kid who falls into a series of magical, mystical adventures involving love and family and watermelons. He is, above all, the most unlikely and powerful hero ever known. Moral allegory, magical realism, and lyrical prose, The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman tells the story of a disabled boy who is sent to St. Isidore's Fainting Goat Dairy, where determination to 'belong' stirs up trouble and leads to a surprising destiny – if only he can survive one last terrifying trial.

A.P. Tell me a little about yourself and your family, the one in which you grew. Are you a full time writer?

R.G. I have always been a bit of an introvert, an outsider who lived vicariously through wild, extrovert friends. Too much of a dreamer, I didn't fit neatly into any category of friends, so I got along with everyone, in the background, and sort of invisible. My mother always said I was 'otherworldly,' and to this day she likes to smile and ask, 'Who are you?'

I grew up with seven siblings in Central California. My father was a Navy pilot and rifle smith, and my mother stayed at home to look after us. Domestic chaos didn't allow for story time. Except for annual visits with our Granny, we weren't exposed to many books. She read books by Maurice Sendak and A.A. Milne. I loved to draw, and created my own little picture books. When I was a teenager, journaling made life more bearable. After high school, a friend introduced me to Gabriel García Márquez, Franz Kafka, Nin, Jack Kerouac, and Ernest Hemingway. I spent many wine-soaked hours with artist, writer and musician friends, doing hilarious improvisations of fictional characters while discussing politics or gender issues or arguing how to make Alice B. Toklas brownies.

My first attempts at fiction were short stories, a screenplay, and a melodramatic novel, all of which I'm relieved to say didn't get published. When I finally got serious about college, I wanted to get a degree in French. Most of my electives were lit classes. One class away from graduating, I switched to World Literature and Creative Writing, and took another year to graduate with a B.A.

If 'full-time writer' means my writing pays the bills, I'm certainly not that! I write four to ten hours a day, around my family's schedule, and also work as a field assistant with my land surveyor husband.

A.P. What in your opinion led you to becoming an author?

R.G. I never actually thought of being a writer. I just had to write, like breathing; it was necessary to my sense of well-being. Writing is a theatre to stage worlds, to have characters play out my life lessons. It's a way to challenge commonly held beliefs about the nature of reality, and to explore my place in the greater scheme of things. And who I am wants to shake things up a bit! There is a part of me determined to subvert cultural conditioning and mass constructs of meaning. Early on, so much religious, political, social, familial, and material nonsense piles into our young minds. It leads to fear and fear limits our ability to love. Writing *Moojie Littleman* was a way to imagine transcendental love – not romantic or parental love – but the love that leads to miracles and wonders beyond our understanding, unconditional love that radiates from the very core of our being. I believe humans are wired for this experience and, one way or another, it is our ultimate purpose.

A.P. Which authors have you admired most and what are your reasons?

R.G. I've probably read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by 'Gabo' García Márquez, ten times. To this day, I'm amazed at how Gabo reaches right out of that book and lights something pure and vital inside me. The book gave me permission to take writing outside the box. When Gabo's Prudencio Aquilar comes back as a ghost to haunt José Arcadio Buendía, it is guilt that he stirs up, not terror. With the same nonchalance, Kafka treats Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug in

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The Metamorphosis as if here were waking up with bad hair. It's funny and tragic and fascinating. When I first read *One Hundred Years*, I was astounded. I later discovered that Gabo had the same reaction to Kafka. We both asked ourselves: Can you do that?

A.P. Though the interview is to be on *The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman*, I would request you to first tell me what you have written and published till now. Did you ever want to write poetry?

R.G. Over a decade ago, I worked as an intern for a local newspaper, and then freelanced as a journalist for a while. During that time, I started writing what became *Moojie Littleman*. It took 13 years for me to get it right. I'm drawn to poetry for the same reasons I'm drawn to magical realism. But I haven't tried to publish any poems yet. Some of my favorite classic poets are Hafiz, Rumi, Emily Dickinson, and William Blake. I admire the works of more recent poets, Billy Collins, David Whyte, Sherod Santos, and Lynne MacMahon.

A.P. What inspired you to write *Moojie Littleman*?

R.G. First, my son. In spite of his difficulties, he is kindhearted, courageous and bright. He has taught me not to judge by appearances, and to forgive others for hurting me. I wanted to put some of his life lessons together with mine in a story that would lend a hand to others who are suffering.

Second, I came across a book called *The Genius of the Few*, by Christian and Barbara Joy O'Brien. It's a study of the earliest written creation story which is dated 3500 BC. In it, there is a supernatural race of beings who came to Earth to civilise humans. *Moojie Littleman* is an attempt to bring ancient mysticism to modern life in a fresh, natural way. Moojie's coming of age and awakening takes him from external to internal causality. He is trusting and childlike in his understanding. His inward surrender to powers beyond his understanding, and his fight for self-determination can be compared to the Native American struggle for civil rights. Moojie's desire to 'belong' is an echo from the past, and his kinship with the clan of the Light-Eaters an integral part of his destiny. On the heels of America's shameful relocation of aboriginal tribes in the early 1900s, Moojie picks up the human rights torch and relights it on a personal level.

A.P. Does the word, 'Improbable', in the title of your book, have any connection with Salman Rushdie's definition of, or views on, magical realism? If not, is it merely to warn the reader what to expect in your novel?

R.G. How do we make sense out of a world that makes little sense? 'Reality is not always probable, or likely,' Jorge Luis Borges said. So how do we account for the improbable in storytelling? Perceived by the physical senses, reality is a ping pong ball paddled about by opposites. Humanity has for so long assigned meaning to things, events and people, in order to control the flight of the ball, to feel safer maybe. But those meanings sprout from the very same ground that causes fear

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and isolation. After a while, some of us start to suspect that this polarity keeps us sort of schizophrenic – and we have become victims of our own unconscious perception.

How can a writer address intuitive experiences or events that can't be explained away or interpreted by logic? And why is this important? I'll let Noam Chomsky answer for me: 'The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.' While he is referring to political debate, I think the same applies to any form of debate. Whether it is the history or terrorism or global warming, evolution simply cannot progress when the universal dialogue is limited to the rational, i.e., self-preservation. This is so true in America's present political climate.

A.P. Do you feel that magical realism helps in the narrative of a novel like *Moojie*?

R.G. Unlike fantasy, magical realism is a powerful deterrent to mass inebriation. It opens up new dialogue about old ideas. Heightened language with surreal elements come into the conversation, and we can explore events that exceed the grasp of mass consciousness. Magical realism offers a hallucinatory aspect that captures chaotic – and often meaningless – cultural traditions that have been recorded as if they had a worthy purpose. It processes experience the same way dreaming does. While the title *The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman* was coined after reading the above quote by Mr Borges, I can't deny sharing Mr Rushdie's desire to commingle 'the improbable and the mundane' in order to give rise to a purer conception of reality. That really is the heart of magical realism, isn't it?

A.P. What do you achieve by killing Moojie's mother so early in the novel?

R.G. With his mother's ongoing support and protection, Moojie would not have been challenged to master his power. He would have been her son, subject to her fears, and caught up in the conflict between his parents. His mother is over-protective, and actually prevents his taking the risks he needs to take. Being an orphan gave him the opportunity to draw deep from his own resources, to raise the bar of his own expectations.

A.P. On page 193, Moojie seems to have a realisation that the only way the law of gravity can be subverted is through magic. Is this your own feeling at times? Do you believe in the extra-rational and in intuitively grasped perceptions?

R.G. What an interesting question! That is a crucial scene because it shows Moojie not yet understanding that magic can be conjured for self-serving purposes, while miracles involve deep surrender of the perceived 'self.' Moojie is still in the bud stage of awakening. He believes that his physical form, family and society, are the cause of his life.

As Moojie struggles with his grandfather, Sarru'kan, and his father, the line between magical realism and visionary fiction gets blurred. Moojie eventually shifts from external causality to internal transformation. By learning to forgive the past, he is able to surrender fully to life, to his

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destiny, without fear. The curtain of separation in his mind parts, and a new, holistic perception appears. He begins to understand that he is not a victim. This happened to me as well.

A.P. By keeping your hero, so young, weak in some way, and unhappy particularly in the early part, do you think you achieve something similar to what Charles Dickens did in some of his novels?

R.G. Charles Dickens inspired me to challenge social prejudice and limited thinking through a child's point of view. 'You have to write the book that wants to be written,' said Madeleine L'Engle. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children. In that sense, *Moojie Littleman* is sort of a social protest, but it also hints at quantum physics, a more open-ended description of possibility. The difference between *Oliver Twist* and *Moojie* is that *Oliver* is pure and virtuous, and always in danger of abuse, corruption and exploitation. On the other hand, *Moojie* is strong-willed, troublesome, even to the degree of self-sabotage at times. In the end, he undergoes a transformation, whereas *Oliver* remains the same.

A.P. What other books are you writing? Are they in the same mode of narration?

R.G. I'm producing the Audio Book of *Moojie Littleman* and talking with a producer about a film adaptation. A whole lot has to happen before I know if the film will be made. I'm also working on a collection of short, meditative poems. Also, I plan to edit a short story collection that includes stories about a leopard who dreams he is a modern man; a professor and student who fall in love while dissecting a cadaver; and Euripides and Sophocles girl-watching at an ancient marketplace. Yes, they all seem to come out with a similar mode of narration, turning things upside down and inside out – but more adult in nature, more unsettling, mind-altering. I can't deny that a *Moojie Littleman* sequel is looming in the background. I don't think I'm done with him!

Abhimanyu Pandey is a researcher in the Department of English, University of Allahabad He is writing a DPhil thesis on Multiculturalism and the Contemporary Novel. Mr. Pandey has published on Multiculturalism, Kamala Markandaya, Jhumpa Lahiri, The Tailor's Needle. He has worked on the nature of Voice, Sylvia Plath, Tagore, E.M. Forster and Magical Realism and is in the process of submitting his articles for publication.

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