



A Symphony of Words

SIYA BHAGAT

A Symphony of Words

A Symphony of Words

SIYA BHAGAT

imprint!

Copyright © 2024 Siya Bhagat

Illustrations by Falgunni Shah

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored or transmitted by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise without the written permission of the author.

Published for *Imprint!*

A division of Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd.
Mumbai, India.

Printed at Vakil & Sons Pvt. Ltd.
Mumbai, India.

ISBN-978-81-8462-205-8

Price:

www.vakilspublications.com
info@vakilspublications.com

All proceeds from the sale of this book will go to 'The Welfare for Stray Dogs'.
The Welfare of Stray Dogs is a Mumbai-based organization working to eradicate rabies and control the street-dog population in a humane and scientific way.
www.wsdindia.org

Dedicated to Skye



A way from the frenzied chaos of the subways, from the glitz and glamour of the upcoming malls, from the looming concrete edifices and the swarms of vehicles, down a sinister alley, shrouded by emptied out trashcans and lost, forgotten apartment buildings, the haphazard sign reading *Bertie's Books and Library* almost melded into the soot stained brick wall, barely visible.

Tucked inside the pulsing heart of the city lay the unassuming, old bookstore; from its exterior it appeared just as abandoned as its neighbours. Yet as soon as the fogged-up glass door was gently pushed open, the minuscule shop overflowed with an overwhelming amount of life.

Piles of books adorned every corner of the tiny shop. It was stuffed to the brim with books and loose pages and weathered manuscripts, oozing from every

crack, pushing through every crevice. Whilst a thick coat of dust encased most books in a muted shade of grey, the winding titles embossed in gold and jets and snow were still visible, sprawled across each battered spine. Old maps and theatre posters engulfed the fragile walls, an odd record player or typewriter emerging between shelves.

From behind the largest stack of books, out shuffled a wizened old woman. A plethora of wrinkles was spattered on her face. Electric blue eyes hidden behind silver rimmed spectacles blinked inquisitively at Mila, before creasing up at the corners, as the woman's mouth twisted into a large smile. She half-hobbled, half-ran towards Mila, flinging her arms around the young girl as the familiar scent of old books, cinnamon, and mothballs wafted into Mila's nose.

‘I’ve missed you so much,’ whispered her aunt.

Mila had only encountered her a few times growing up, mostly at family holidays. Every time they met, her aunt would hand Mila a new book, wrapped carefully within used newspaper and rope. Those tiny packages were like treasure chests, time machines and a genie’s lamp all at once for little Mila; sending her into a blissful trance, transporting her across continents, beyond universes, through the depths of the sea, or with the birds in the sky. As the last few pages were turned, the spell slowly faded away, cut off with a thud as the book was put away. Accompanying these books were handwritten letters in shiny paper envelopes, a deep purple wax seal enclosing their contents. Five year old Mila would haphazardly scrawl back replies; from a few words to sentences, and, gradually, paragraphs and pages, until

one day she stopped, her time and interest fading away as she grew older.

However, whilst wandering down the seemingly infinite rows of books that graced the store, Mila felt familiar pangs of excitement bubbling up inside her heart; she was in a sort of trance as her fingers grazed the old books. She picked up the nearest book and as she flipped through its worn pages, an intensely warm, comforting, yet bittersweet feeling flooded her body.

She held the book close to herself, against her pounding heart. It seemed as though the book was alive too, pulsing gently beneath her fingers; the ink that stained its pages being its precious lifeblood, the cardboard that held it together, its unrelenting skeleton. She pressed the book against her chest, breathing in its lovely book scent, when



‘Sorry, I—COUGH COUGH—feel a bit choked—
COUGH—could you please—COUGH—let go?’

Mila’s eyes, previously shut tightly in bliss, snapped open as she nearly dropped the book she was holding. Did it just speak?

Flinging the book back on the shelf as though it was a hot piece of coal, Mila shakily backed away from the books. She had to be imagining things, right? There’s no way a book could actually—verbally, at least— talk! Shaking her head furiously, trying to reason her way out of what she had just experienced, her unravelling train of thought was brought to an abrupt halt as loud, hacking coughs emerged from the book. It fluttered its pages crossly (Could books even do that?), and seemed to be exuding a slightly threatening aura as it reprimanded Mila, ‘I am a special edition, leather bound copy

of *The Great Gatsby*, this is NOT the kind of treatment I was made for! I was built for a life of luxury, not for sitting on a dusty old shelf, only to be manhandled by some careless youth!’ The book fumed, before bursting into loud wails. The book to its right, *Anne of Green Gables*, sympathetically turned towards *The Great Gatsby*, attempting to help it up, struggling. It apologetically whispered to Mila, ‘It’s his first day here. He’s from an extremely wealthy gentleman’s house, and the man recently passed away, so Gatsby’s a tad shaken! Could you please help him up?’ Still frozen in shock, Mila robotically placed the book upright, before walking away.

Now that she listened more closely, she realised that the continuous buzz that she heard as soon as she entered the bookstore wasn’t, in fact, a faulty radiator or a hidden hive of bees. It was the books!

Still shaken, as she gazed around the bookstore, at the thousands of books painstakingly sorted by genre and alphabet and author, crammed onto tiny shelves, she noticed that most of them were engaged in intense conversation with one another. The children's classics were immersed in a heated debate, arguing over which one was the most loved, the philosophy books, in hushed whispers, pondered the meaninglessness of life, the history books pompously boasted about their heroes and the books in the modern literature section, placed right in front of the Shakespearean ones, were attempting to decipher what Shakespeare's scripts were trying to say. Conversations flew from sporting teams to plant biology, from epistemology to third wave feminism. Mila, who was slowly getting accustomed to her seemingly absurd situation, felt as though she could listen to the books rant for eternity;

some books were hundreds of years old, whilst others were in their first year of print. With conflicting perspectives, never-ending revelations and endless wisdom, at that moment, Mila yearned for nothing more than to join in.

Utterly absorbed in the happenings in front of her, Mila jumped, slightly startled as her aunt tapped her shoulder. ‘I didn’t know that books could...talk,’ whispered Mila. Her aunt grinned. ‘Of course they do. But only for those who listen.’ Mila gaped, not fully following along.

Suddenly, the rusted door of the shop swung open. Customers. A tall woman, rapidly speaking to someone on her phone and her young son, wielding a bag of cheese puffs and a large stuffed bear, strode in. The boy tottered over to the fairy tales section, a wide smirk plastered across his crumb

splattered face. Mila winced as she saw him brush his crumb coated hands across the books. As he narrowed down on a brand new copy of *Cinderella*, Mila heard a loud shriek as the book protested wildly, ‘NO! I refuse to go home with this grubby little boy. He’s ruining my cover, and I’ll be in shambles before the end of the month!’ Her protests were all in vain though, as she was soon bound securely in brown paper and clutched tightly in the sticky paws of the young boy as he left the store with his mother. Taking in the interaction, Mila softly gasped as she realised that the boy and his mother hadn’t seemed to hear the books at all; they remained oblivious to the desperate shrieks of *Cinderella* and the recurring chatter that engulfed the store. Is this what her aunt meant when she said that only those who listened could hear the books?

But... what did that even mean?

Still puzzled, Mila barely noticed as another customer walked into the shop. This time, it was an old man in a construction worker's uniform. As soon as the man walked in, all the books began to excitedly chatter. 'It's Billy!' *Anne of Green Gables* squealed. *Emma* chimed in, 'Hi Billy!' A chorus of 'Hello' and 'Lovely to see you again' rang out throughout the store. When Billy picked up a book seated in the history section, contrary to how *Cinderella* reacted, the book seemed to combust with pride and happiness, and the books around sighed, upset that they weren't the chosen ones. After Billy paid for the book and left, all the books seemed a bit sad, until another customer walked in and they burst into chatter again.

Mila's aunt patted her on her back, and guided her up a rickety flight of stairs to a tiny room on

the second floor of the shop. ‘Your new home,’ proclaimed her aunt, cheerily. Too tired to question the size of her new lodgings, Mila placed her suitcase on the floor before flopping onto the bed. Whilst the rest of her body was tired, Mila’s mind was abuzz with a never-ending stream of questions. What was truly happening in this funny little bookstore? How on earth could she hear the books talk? Why was her aunt being so frustratingly cryptic? What did ‘only for those who listen’ even mean? Why was all this happening to her right now? Drowning in her thoughts, Mila rubbed her head roughly and groaned. She had just taken a six hour flight from home as her parents had spontaneously decided to take a month long trip to Italy, and was now stuck in her old aunt’s house who was a bit eccentric and owned talking books...it seemed utterly bizarre. She delved into her



duvet, deciding to go to sleep. She would wake up in the morning, and be able to think a bit more clearly. Hopefully, the events of this day were just her tired mind playing tricks on her.

A few hours later, groaning groggily, Mila woke up. Her head throbbed as she scrambled for her watch to check the time. 2:00 a.m. It was her fault for sleeping so early. Yawning softly, Mila carefully treaded down the stairs to get some water.

After quietly pouring herself a glass of water, Mila couldn't resist peeking into the bookstore. It was connected to the kitchen, so she quickly slipped in. She gasped as she looked around the store. The books were illuminated, their pages glowing soft golden yellow, the words bobbing around as if they were dancing, their covers shining even brighter at this hour. Mila was burning to know what was

truly happening with these seemingly special books, how they could talk, why they were glowing, how they all had feelings and thoughts and contrasting personalities. It didn't seem like she was going to get the answers from her aunt anytime soon, so Mila steadied her rapidly pulsing heart, inhaled deeply, and walked over to the books. But...who should she ask? Some books were incredibly arrogant, others terribly frightened. It was the hardest to pick out the friendly ones. Maybe *Anne of Green Gables*! Mila scampered towards the book, and timidly greeted her, 'Hi! Good morning...or good night? I'm not really sure; anyway so, uh...how come...you can... glow?'

Anne, who was seemingly in a trance, started, surprised, before shuffling towards Mila. She stared softly into Mila's eyes, whispering, 'It's because of all the love, my dear. The love that flows through the

air, travels down our spines, and imbues through our souls, it's the love that this bookstore is overflowing with. You see, our souls are like pools of water, mirroring the actions of those around us. Cherish us, and our pages will shine just a little brighter, our covers will be a bit more vibrant, our text appears a bit bolder, and our spines stand a bit sturdier. Smear us in dirt and food and tears, and the water clouds over, our glory fades. Do that for too long, the pool freezes over, stagnant, and our souls wither away. There's nearly no hope beyond that point.' Anne trailed off sadly, as she glanced at the corner of the shelf. Mila followed Anne's gaze, gasping softly as she saw a flimsy, tattered book. Not even the faintest glow permeated from it.

Mila shuffled over to the bedraggled book, lightly trailing her fingertips across its spine. A thick blanket

of dust mingled with soot embraced it, cloaking its title in an opaque, stormy sheath. It flinched away from Mila, stumbling further into the darkness of its tiny alcove. Hesitantly, Mila drew her hand away, turning back to Anne. Anne shook her head hopelessly. ‘She arrived just a week ago, and... Trust me, she looks rather misshapen right now, but she was WAY worse earlier. We still don’t know if she’ll ever completely recover ...’ she trailed off. Mila felt a flurry of emotions brewing within her: anger, pity, empathy, and grief. All of a sudden, she felt determined to help that book in whatever way she could. She felt a strange connection drawing her towards the book, and too see the book in that condition plucked painfully at her heartstrings. ‘Uh... hi!’ Mila offered, weakly. ‘What’s your name? I can’t see it clearly.’ The book looked away, embedding itself tightly in its

tiny corner. A bit dejected but still determined, Mila asked, 'Would you like it if I dusted you a little bit? It might help you feel better!' Hesitantly, the book inched out of the corner, shuffling towards Mila. 'Please,' she croaked weakly.

Mila gently lifted her up, wrapping the book in a scarf that was draped over the shelf, before bringing her over to the table and carefully brushing all the grime that encased the poor book. She felt happiness zip through her as she realised that the book's title was finally visible. '*Of Stars and Skies*' was painted across its cover in winding silver lettering.

'Huh... I've never heard of this book,' Mila muttered to herself. Curiously flipping it open, the book let out a tiny squeak and Mila felt a stinging zap pass through her finger. 'Ach!' Mila hissed, withdrawing her finger quickly. She playfully glared

at the book. ‘Not okay!’ She exclaimed. ‘Sorry!’ The book rasped. ‘I didn’t mean to.’ Mila giggled, before asking the book, ‘So, what are you about? What’s your story, new friend?’ The book offered her a tiny smile before answering ‘Hmm... I’m about everything, you could say. I’m also about nothing at all. It really depends on how you look at it, I guess.’

Mila’s grin slightly faltered as her eye twitched frustratingly. Why was every single person and book in this place so weirdly cryptic? ‘How come all of you can talk?’ She asked half-heartedly, not really expecting a satisfactory answer. The book laughed softly. ‘I think a better question would be why wouldn’t we talk? After all, we hold more words than your eyes have ever seen, than your lips have ever formed. We’re imbibed with more thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences that your mind could

ever comprehend. Thousands upon thousands of fingers have traced these covers, sobbed over this ink, creased our pages and bent our spines. Like sponges, we've absorbed all the knowledge, kept it all within our souls, not locked, but willing to share with any kind soul.'

Suddenly determined, Mila stared at the book, eyes resolute. 'Tell me then. Share all your knowledge with me. It's only 3 a.m. We've got at least four more hours, I'm ready to listen.'

And Mila listened; for hours, which seemed like centuries, creaking past at a glacial pace whilst simultaneously seeming like mere seconds, slipping like quicksilver through her fingers. She desperately grasped onto every single word that emerged from the book's pages. As the book spoke, its voice metamorphosed from a quiet rasp to a confident

timbre, its pages shone from a murky white to auburn silver.

After finishing, the book seemed rather exhilarated yet embarrassed at the same time, ending with a ‘so...um, yeah...that’s b-b-basically it.’ It shyly pulled down its cover to obscure previously excited, fluttering pages, and hobbled away from Mila. Her mind was swarming with questions; this wasn’t the first time this had happened since she arrived at the bookstore. But this time, instead of frustratingly pondering upon the strange happenings of the store, Mila was curious to learn more, to know more, about these strange yet wonderfully erudite books. She had a feeling that *Of Stars and Skies* had crawled back into her lonely shelf for the time being, so Mila decided to leave her alone.

At approximately 8 a.m. Mila's aunt trotted into the bookstore, finding Mila snoring softly amidst a haphazard pile of loose pages and books. 'Late night, hmm?' smiled Mila's aunt, knowingly. Mila's eyes rapidly snapped open as she panicked and groggily sputtered out half-hearted excuses. Chuckling lightly, Mila's aunt lightly tapped her on her head with a closed book, before commanding gently, 'Freshen up, dear. We have a long day today!' And what a long day it was! Mila laboured over cleaning the entire bookstore from its cobweb spattered corners to its highest peaks and lowest valleys. She cleared out the dust that stuck stubbornly like dull sparkle to the books and painstakingly scrubbed the rough wooden floors of the store. After making a quick lunch and handling an onslaught of customers, Mila staggered to her tiny room, utterly drained yet satisfied, as



though she were a weary general returning back from a successful battle.

She looked at the book that she had lopsidedly flung on her side table. *Emma* seemed to be one of the oldest books at the store, yet her weathered pages were firmly bound, not displaying even the slightest trace of falling apart, and her beautiful cover, laced with gold trim and deep pink leather, despite bearing a few scratches and nicks on her corners, still appeared not a day over two. There were some ‘permanent residents’ at the bookstore, *Emma* being one of them. While it wasn’t explicitly mentioned that these books weren’t for sale, the withering glares from Aunt Mabel that customers got upon lugging the books to the counter somehow provoked them to hastily place the books back on their shelves. That was another strange thing about this bookstore – or rather about

Aunt Mabel. She didn't seem to care about money or profits at all, despite the store being her only source of income.

Mila groaned, frustrated and exhausted that Aunt Mabel kept her lips firmly zipped on any personal or bookstore related matter. After all, it was extremely tiring to live with someone who she barely knew, in a strange old bookstore housing various confusing characters. Mila felt a bit unnerved, letting her raging emotions cascade over her. She stomped grumpily to her aunt's room, before rapping noisily on the door. 'Come in!' She heard faintly. Sighing, she pushed open the door, collapsing on her Aunt's bed. 'I'm so tired!' she whined childishly. Raising her eyebrows, Aunt Mabel adjusted her glasses before asking her, 'Why, my child?' Glaring slightly at her aunt, Mila burst out. 'Because of everything!

Being forced to come here, working day and night in some weird bookstore filled with talking books, and my aunt who won't tell me anything!' She finished, breathing heavily. She felt a bit irked when her aunt lowly chuckled. 'Patience, my child! You'll unravel everything in good time. Meanwhile, why don't you dust the philosophy shelves? There'll be hot tea and scones waiting for you after...'

Grumbling, Mila begrudgingly thumped down the staircase, carelessly grabbing a duster and pan before dragging herself over to the philosophy books. They were a bit of an odd bunch really, always immersed in rapt conversation or fiercely arguing. Mila reluctantly began to dust off their covers, but was quickly interrupted. 'STOP. STOP. STOP! YOU'RE DOING IT ALL WRONG!' fumed a bright blue book. A compilation of poems by Rumi, lazing

besides the blue book sighed, shaking its head. ‘Patience, my child. You won’t get anywhere by yelling like that. We must all move forward with love in our hearts’. ‘Rumi, enough!’ *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir snapped. ‘Enough with all your love and patience blabber—’ ‘Would you all keep quiet!’ roared Aristotle. ‘I’m working on something here!’ *The Second Sex* glared. ‘Oh, you men! Always interrupting — when will you learn some manners, you imbeciles?’ A chorus of clashing voices engulfed the little corner; sighing, as Mila continued to pitifully clean their shelves, stubbornly ignoring their feedback and commands.

On a shelf, she saw a tiny book muttering quietly to itself, immersed in a trance as it desperately tried to ignore the increasing chaos around it. Mila smiled sympathetically at it, tapping it gently, asking.

‘Do you need me to move you a bit to the corner?’ The book squeaked, surprised, before bashfully complying. ‘What’s your name?’ questioned Mila. ‘Umm... it’s *Ramblings over the Morning Hills*,’ whispered the book. ‘Whoa! That’s a really pretty name! What are you about?’ Mila exclaimed. Gaining a bit of confidence with Mila’s responses, the book puffed up a little bit before replying ‘It’s about what truly leads someone to happiness.’ Inching closer, Mila pestered, ‘What’s the answer?’ The book gave her a tiny, knowing smile, before replying ‘There’s no definite answer, of course. After all, happiness could mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. For someone, it could mean heaps of money, for another it could be a warm meal. Someone else may prefer a loving family, and for me, well, it would be a good conversation. It’s the

path that's always more arduous than the actual goal. It's easy to slip away, fade into the lingering darkness that surrounds us, but, believe it or not, it's almost as easy to stay resolute, and focus on what brings joy to you. You just have to believe.' Mila felt warm tears welling up in her eyes. A bit surprised, she brushed them away quickly. What brought her happiness?

Hours after her short colloquy with *Ramblings over the Morning Hills*, Mila couldn't stop thinking about what he had said. Whilst picking at her lunch or taking a bath, going on a short walk outside or conversing with her aunt; the thought wouldn't stop nagging her. She hadn't thought about what made her truly happy in a long, long time; sucked away by the unrelentingness of school or her supposed 'friends' or her erratic and somewhat absent parents. There probably wasn't a right answer to that question

anyways. She sighed, and tightly wrapped herself up in her blankets, deciding to sleep on it. Her night was restless, however. She couldn't stop thinking about the bookshop; the mysterious, eccentric, rather eerie but wonderful little shop. Every day, it was as if an old, creaky door to a whole new world of thoughts and notions was unlocked by the books. From arrogant *Emma* to kindly *Anne*, shy *Stars* to thoughtful *Ramblings*, from the chattering fairy tales, arguing novels, boasting biographies and the eager science fiction, Mila had grown to take deep comfort in their company, and strived to learn more and more about every book with each fleeting day.

She spent her mornings holed up in her tiny bedroom, spending hours simply researching and thinking about what she had spoken about to the books. She would spend her afternoons buried in the

bookstore, lightly chatting with the old magazines, deeply engaging within the history section, loudly arguing with the classics and having a laugh (or cry) with the fairy tales. Before she realised it, it felt natural to work at the bookstore. Despite barely interacting with any person apart from her aunt, she never felt the pangs of loneliness or boredom. The books were more than enough to keep her thoroughly engaged, to the point where her aunt practically had to drag her out of the shop when it was time for meals. It was as if she were desperately trying to make up for the time when she stifled her books under the weighty pile of thousands of other responsibilities. She was gulping every moment in time like precious drops of ambrosia, clinging on to every second she could get.

Mila went to bed, heart full and mind sprinting. She smiled to herself as she turned off the lights.

Her heart let out a tiny leap. She couldn't wait to wake up and rush to the bookstore again.

However, after quickly drifting off, Mila woke up a mere three hours later.

Wisps of smoke slithered inside her room, and clogged her nostrils with their overpowering stench. Mila rose, panting heavily, breathing out fast, harsh breaths. Her heart hammered painfully against her chest as she gasped for air, tearing up. Mila felt a bit dizzy before flinging her door open, hurrying towards the stairs. She felt a sharp twist in her chest and bile rise in her throat as she saw the source of the ruthless flames: the bookstore. It was as though she were possessed. Without sparing a second thought towards safety or rationality, Mila grabbed a bucket of the emergency sand before sprinting into the bookstore. Sobbing, she clutched her face in horror as she saw

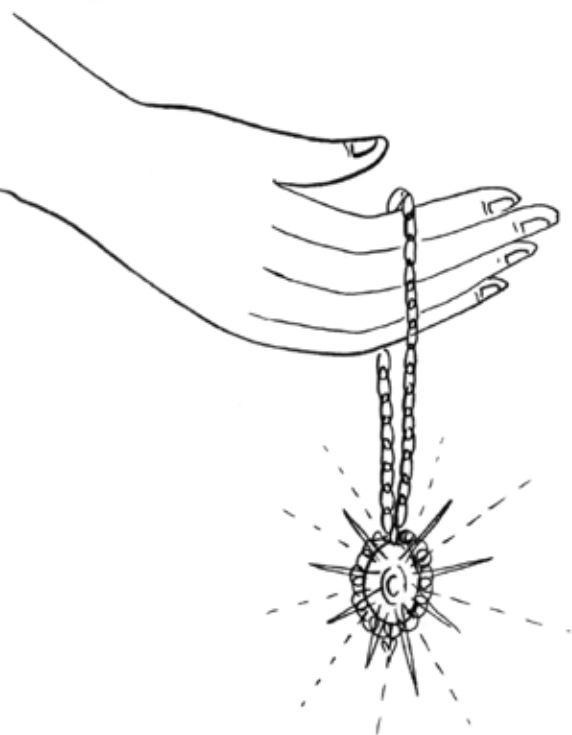
flames everywhere, curling up the shelves, bathing the walls, ceiling, and inching steadily towards their next victim—rich amber, glittering ruby, licks of gold; a beautifully terrible sight. Aunt Mabel, sputtering and coughing, quickly used a fire hydrant to quell whatever flames she could. As Mila hurled her sand at the place where the flames were the densest, she thudded onto the floor, seeing nothing, hearing nothing; an empty world.

Head pounding, Mila reluctantly opened her eyes as she sensed a bright light. Everything was a blur; the previous night, where she was, what had happened, her vision. Blinking furiously, Mila was finally able to view her surroundings; a stark white wall, a rather uncomfortable bed, and a throbbing pain in her arm. Mila looked to her side, where she noticed Aunt Mabel huddled in a tiny armchair, snoring softly,

a book in her arms. ‘Aunt?’ Mila whispered in a harsh rasp.

Flinching slightly, Mila’s aunt looked up, alert, before her face melted into relief. ‘You’re finally awake! You were out for two days, and we were all so worried...’ Shaking her head vigorously, Mila pleaded ‘I’m fine! But what about the books?’ Smiling a bit sadly, Aunt Mabel replied. ‘A bit battered, a few lost. But they’ll be alright.’

Mila looked down, before jolting back up. ‘I want to know everything; about the books, the store, you, everything.’ Mila’s aunt hesitated, before slowly nodding. ‘I guess you do deserve to know now, Mila.’ She fished out a tiny locket on a rusty chain from her pocket. Stained and fading, the locket didn’t look special. But Mila gasped as she saw a tiny, blue light emitting from it. ‘This is my locket, Mila.



It's what contains the magic that imbues each one of these books with life and energy. I stumbled upon it lying in a corner of the road, and soon found out what it was used for. I met Arthur, my husband, and the owner of the locket not long after. It had been passed down in his family for decades. The origin and true creator are still a mystery, but Arthur and I promised to protect it as best we could. We decided to open a bookstore together, one like no other, where the walls breathed and the books talked. It was amazing,' continued Mabel, smiling wistfully. 'However, after Arthur passed away, it became harder to keep the bookstore running the way it used to. It's a shabby, albeit loveable mess now, and unfortunately, I think this might be the end of the store. Maybe the fire was a sign telling me that. Maybe I'm just desperately, irrationally clinging on to it because of

the memories it holds for me. Maybe it's time to let this store go.'

Shaking her head furiously, Mila exclaimed, 'No! How could you even think of doing that? You can't give up now. I'll help! I'll do absolutely anything I can to keep this store running. After all, it's taught me so much. All of the books...they're like my best friends! One time, *Ramblings over the Morning Hills* asked me what brought me the most happiness, and I've realised that for me, working at the bookstore is what I value and treasure the most. It gives me a reason to look forward to everyday. I wouldn't give that up for anything.'

Mila's aunt looked up, tears in her eyes. 'It makes me so happy to hear you say that, Mila. I always hoped that this would happen someday.'

'We'll get through this together,' promised Mila.

Mila's aunt took Mila's hands in her own, squeezing them gently. 'Go, Mila. Finish school, university, whatever you want to do. Travel more. See the world. It's not time to limit you to this bookstore yet. Come back in a few years, and I promise, you'll have so many more ideas on what you want to do with the store.'

Breathing deeply, Mila replied, 'Okay. But I don't think that staying in the bookstore could ever limit me. After all, it contains enough wisdom to last eons.'

'I'm sure it does.' smiled Aunt Mabel, hugging Mila tightly.

7 years later.

'Welcome!' greeted a voice cheerily.

A young woman in a long dress with wavy, brown hair stood at the billing counter. A thin black thread was wound around her neck, and from it dangled

a tiny, golden locket. If you looked close enough, you would see a tiny blue light emitting from it. The bookstore was neither dusty nor haphazard, although it still maintained its old-time charm. *Love, Mabel and Arthur*, read the wooden sign outside the door, freshly painted with tiny daisies embroidered around. A short girl walked through the creaky doors, hesitantly looking around, before scurrying into the mountain of books, eyes wide in wonder. She gave a tiny squeak, dropping a book as she heard it softly cough. ‘The books... they talk???’ sputtered the girl in surprise. ‘Of course they do! But only for those who listen,’ smiled Mila, winking.

About the Author

Siya Bhagat is a 16 year old writer who lives in Mumbai with her dog, Skye, and her parents. Through her work, she hopes to provide books that are easy to digest, yet meaningful. Apart from writing, she loves to bake, travel, and read books of all kinds.

Mila isn't expecting much when she's forced to spend her summer with her aunt who runs a dusty old bookstore. However, not long after she gets there, she realises that the books at the store harbour an extraordinary secret. Join Mila on a rollercoaster of magic, mystery, tears and laughter with *A Symphony of Words*.

imprint!

