The girl from Dolpo
A classic fairy tale of triumph over social obstacles, mysterious creativity and the intervention of royalty

This illustrated book is the charming tale of Namel, a young girl from Dolpo who exhibits exceptional artistic talent and succeeds in realising her dreams. Entirely suitable for adults but targeted at children aged seven and upwards. Clear Sky, Red Earth has all the makings of a classic fairy tale rooted in historical events such as the triumph over social obstacles, mysterious creativity and the intervention of royalty.

Born to a modest family in Dolpo, the young Namel Wangtwo is a village girl who loves horses. After a death in the family, she moves in with her Aunt Dechen and Uncle Thondrup to help out in their house. Uncle Thondrup is an accomplished painter, as well as the village lama, and lets Namel watch him as he works on his thangka paintings. Namel eventually becomes his apprentice and hones her skills as she travels with him to the court of neighbouring Mustang. Clear Sky, Red Earth may also be read as an allegory of a different nature. As compelling as the story itself is, the book is also an example of the strength of collaboration between two individuals from vastly different cultures: an American woman and a Dolpo man. The writer is Sienna Craig, who has been travelling to Nepal and Tibet since 1993, and has spent several years living in remote villages of Dolpo and Mustang. She has worked a freelance writer, translator, development consultant and educator, and is currently completing her PhD in medical and cultural anthropology at Cornell University. The illustrations are by Tenzin Norbu, an artist whose work is featured in museums and private collections around the world as well as in international publications including Carnavals of the Himalaya, National Geographic, and the feature films Himalaya, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1999.

The text is engaging and joyful, full of gentle humour and cultural insight, not to mention a small dose of feminine victory; after all, the protagonist is a young woman. The illustrations are splendid, combining fiery reds with muted and natural earthy browns. Tenzin Norbu’s precision to detail, be it the saddle-bags on the horses or snow leopard’s spots, makes the experience all the more immersive. His paintings are at once cartoon-like and photographic, blending impressionist pointillism with a powerful sense of perspective.

The book is rounded off with a helpful, if slightly quirky, cultural pronunciation guide, not a standard feature of children’s books but one which will satisfy the appetites of culturally-interested readers. It is pleasing to note that a portion of the profits from the sale of Clear Sky, Red Earth will help support projects in Dolpo and Mustang, funded by DROPA, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to partner with pastoral communities in the Himalaya and Tibet to implement grassroots development and catalyse social entrepreneurship. This socially-responsible children’s tale suffers from only one drawback: its price. At Rs 950, averaging around Rs 20 a page, most Nepali families with similarly-aged children and Nepal’s English medium primary schools won’t be able to afford it. We can only hope for a more economical edition of this delightful tale in the years to come.

Thalara’s black and white world
The visual history of a village in western Nepal that is frozen in time

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hey are stark and beautiful, almost unreal. The fine details like a hole in the skirt or patchwork clothes and heart-warming smiles make Devendra SJB Rana’s exhibition of black and white photographs “Thalara Framed” at Siddhartha Art Gallery, remarkable.

Devendra was brought up and educated in England. He wanted to know his country better, to understand life beyond the Valley. On a visit to a village, he saw the people drink water, wash clothes and defecate in the same river. Shocked by the poverty, he decided to do something to change that attitude,” says Devendra.

Today, the area is a conflict zone, even the few development projects have stopped, says Devendra. Thalara remains a part of Nepal which is most neglected, most deprived and most marginalised. The disparity between the upper and lower caste dominates social interactions, and the status of women in the community and even within the family is medieval. The women do all the household work–fetching water, fodder, firewood and they are still treated like dirt. Poverty was an even more in-depth phenomenon. When Tenzin Norbu’s photographs are shorn of any digital enhancements, people see the product of life that they have been living. The photography is an intersubjective process, says Devendra. Thalara in farwestern Nepal.

Fulani was rife in Thalara and Devendra discovered that there more than anywhere else, many felt fate is written on their foreheads. People were content to sit back and let things take their course. “It is often easier to overcome poverty than change that attitude,” says Devendra. Devendra documented his stay in Thalara with black and white photography, a discovery he did not expect at the age of eight. Now he is ready to exhibit some of this material. He found that his pictures are appreciated even in the villages and the desolation even before the Maoists,” he says. Devendra hasn’t returned to Thalara since 1996, the year that the Maoist ‘people’s war’ began in nearby Rolpa.

He then decided to so something in a rural development. He chose agriculture development, Devendra started a project for rural development. He chose Thalara in farwestern Nepal.

Far removed from the bubble reality of Kathmandu, Thalara is in that part of Nepal which is most neglected, most deprived and most marginalised. The disparity between the upper and lower caste dominates social interactions, and the status of women in the community and even within the family is medieval. The women do all the household work–fetching water, fodder, firewood and they are still treated like dirt. Poverty was intense and all-pervasive.


MARK TURIN

The exhibition is supported by the Bank of Kathmandu and Devendra plans to take it to the Netherlands also.


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