

ARTICLE FEATURED IN BEST DUTCH BOOK DESIGNS 2001

Doing Things Our Own Way Three Books from Tara Publishing

At Tara, we enjoy playing with the form of the book. This disposition is combined of course with the need to be inventive, to make the best of what is available to us. We are a small independent publisher based in Chennai, India. Many of our books are created in-house, with a core group of writers, editors, and a designer. We began as children's book publishers, but the list now includes visual arts and fiction for adults. Tara's designs are very much a product - in equal measure - of our publishing philosophy, context and location.

We make our books with the Indian reader in mind. But there is no 'ideal' readership that we can identify, unlike the alternative markets in the West. Our books are in bookstores in the major cities. Yet we cannot survive with only Indian sales, although that is our ultimate goal. High input costs (paper and printing cost as much as in Europe, for a much poorer quality), unreliable infrastructure and distribution, as well as lack of government support make our survival a constant struggle. Our foreign sales keep us going financially.

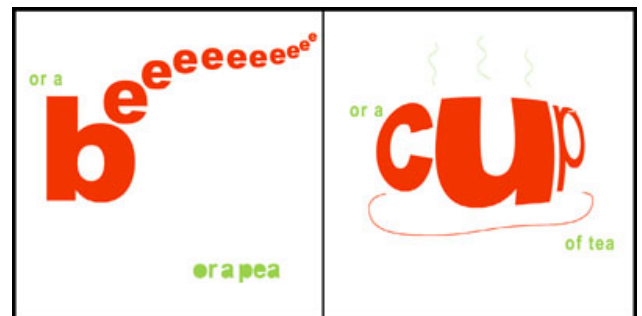
But there is a positive side to the unstructured Indian market: it allows us to put out what we like. Tara's books are very varied, as a result, unified only by the company's spirit. Since our list is small - between 5 and 8 titles a year - we can afford to design each book individually.

Rathna Ramanathan, our designer, is a strong editorial presence within the group, involved in conceptualising books from the start. This brings in an immediate sense of how form can contribute to content communication. We prefer to include the designer as author into the process of how a book evolves, rather than only give it the final form.

Editorially, we favour work that is fresh or radical, but we would still like a sound concept for even the most experimental work. In design, this brings in a tension is between pushing the boundaries of the known, while keeping in mind the need to communicate. In children's literature - where most of our titles belong - communication is one of the most important issues, and there are fairly rigid rules about what children enjoy and comprehend. Typography is a case in point: experiments with type, when they happen at all, are very cautious.

We would like to question existing rules in our book designs. But they must communicate to their intended audience. So whether a rule is real or imagined only reveals itself in the doing, and we come up against this each time we experiment with difference.^{1*}

^{1*} Anything But a Grabooberry, written by Anushka Ravishankar, illustrated and designed by Rathna Ramanathan, Tara Publishing, 1998



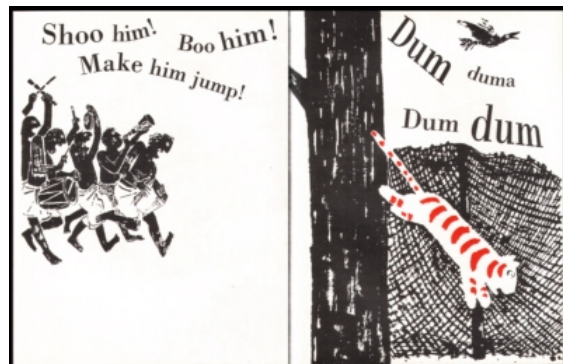
Anything But a Grabooberry This book of nonsense verse uses type both as the word and the image. The page is formed spatially, rather than in a linear fashion. The reader's eye has to be guided towards a combination of reading text (generally from left to right and top to bottom) and viewing a picture (from any angle). We found that children enjoy figuring out words like puzzles, since they have no pre-conceptions about this. Adults are not necessarily faster at comprehending it!

The second example of an established notion is that children only respond to colourful picture books. But this is just too expensive for us, in terms of input costs and given our small print runs of around 2000. So we bring out a lot of graphic-based illustrations, using one or two colours. This work tends to be design intensive in order to make its impact.^{2*}

^{2*} Tiger On a Tree, written by Anushka Ravishankar, art by Pulak Biswas, designed by Rathna Ramanathan, Tara Publishing, 1997



Original Illustrations



Designed book

Tiger On a Tree

The design is based on the main character, a traveling tiger, focusing on movement and space. The art was bold and graphic. To give more natural space to the tiger, the designer removed the borders around each illustration. She played around with sizes, and in a moment of inspiration, added orange stripes on the tiger.

Keeping costs down and making the most of what is locally available also gave rise to our experiments with handmade books. All of them are printed and bound at AMM screens, run by C. Arumugam, who is also the production manager at Tara. He has trained 11 young men in printing and binding, with the motto Nothing is Impossible. This is very useful, particularly in view of the demands on them by Tara. The team at AMM has so far produced a total of 50,000 handmade books.

Each page of every book is screen printed individually on handmade paper, making each sheet an original print. The design here pushes the book to the status of a cultural object. These are essentially artists' books, made accessible to the contemporary buyer through being produced in bulk. The greatest challenge is to maintain accuracy and a high production quality despite the number of times a book needs to be handled at various stages. Much of this expertise has been won only through experience, sometimes bitter ones. Like the time a shipment of handmade scrolls (*Wat zeg je me daar!*) arrived in Holland as a mound of fungus. The printing schedule had not taken into account the monsoon weather, and the dampness found an ideal source of nourishment in the organic material of handmade paper. The next lot of this book, produced in a dryer season and with additional airing of sheets, turned out to be perfect. ^{4*}



4* *Wat zeg je me daar!* (English: Hensparrow Turns Purple), written by Gita Wolf, art by Pulak Biswas, designed by Rathna Ramanathan, Tara Publishing and Novib, 1998

Wat zeg je me daar!

Designed as a contemporary version of the traditional story scroll, this is probably the most difficult and complex production we have ever done. Each step is done by hand: 1. Four strips of paper screen-printed with block colours and text 2. Offset printed colour pictures pasted individually 3. Strips joined to make one long story sheet 5. Screen printing the cover separately 6. Braids with beads pasted on 7. Finally, the story sheet pasted onto the cover.

With each title, we gain confidence in the designing and production of these books. They find great resonance abroad, and help us (and the people who produce them), survive. We enjoy the success they bring, but there is one danger they could pose to our sense of ourselves: Tara could become just an exotic niche. We would rather take

our place in the publishing world with self assurance and a range of serious design explorations, with the difference that we do things in a way that works for us.

Gita Wolf
Chennai, February 17 2002

AWARDS

Anything But a Grabooberry: Special Mention, White Raven's Catalogue of the World's Best Children's Books, 2001

Tiger On a Tree: Plaque at the Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava, 1999; French Union for Culture and Libraries - Star for Excellence in the Genre

Hensparrow Turns Purple: Plaque at the Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava, 1999

On Gita Wolf

Has an academic background in English and Comparative Literature, from universities in India and Germany, where she lived and taught for 11 years. After her return to India, the academic world seemed sterile, and she began to look for a way of incorporating my interest in literature, the visual arts and communication. In 1994 she started Tara Publishing, which has now grown to become one of the most dynamic and innovative children's publishing houses in India, and indeed, the world.

Rathna Ramanathan, who has steered the design philosophy of Tara from 1996, has a Masters' degree in Communication Design from the Central St. Martins' School of Design, London. She runs *minus9*, her own graphic design studio in Chennai, and is also visiting faculty in design schools in India, Malaysia and the US.