

Story Monsters Ink

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HIGHER AND DREAM BIGGER

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OF KID-LED PROTESTS IN AMERICA

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ONE TO READ: RAJANI LARocca

by Melissa Fales

When Dr. Rajani LaRocca was in high school, she told her creative writing teacher that although she loved to write, it was not going to be her career because she was going to be a doctor. His response? “Who says you have to choose?” LaRocca recalls. “And he brought in books written by doctors to prove it. He put the seed in my mind that writing was something I could do someday.” And that day is here. Her latest, *Red, White, and Whole*, was published in February.

LaRocca’s family immigrated from India when she was a year old, settling in Louisville, Kentucky. Later, LaRocca relocated to the Boston area to attend Harvard University and later Harvard Medical School. “I came for college and I never left,” she says. Since 2001, she’s been an internal medicine primary care physician at Mass General Hospital.

Medical school was all-consuming and LaRocca didn’t have time to write. Then she had children, which kept her a different kind of busy. But then, about 10 years ago, LaRocca looked up to realize she finally had some time to try something new. “My kids were in school,” she says. “I had an established medical practice that I loved, but I wanted to try to get back into being creative. Outside of planning my kids’ birthday parties, I hadn’t used that part of my brain in a while.”

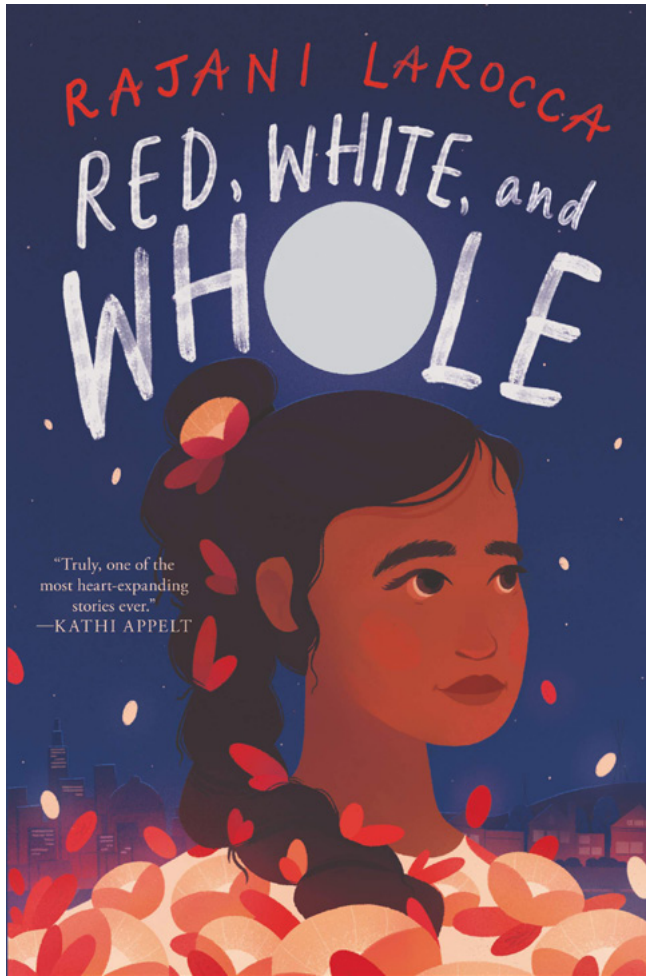
LaRocca started by taking online writing classes. When she began attending critique groups and connecting with other authors, Rajani felt the same rush of camaraderie she experienced when she first joined the medical community and found herself surrounded by others who possessed the

same penchant for science. “I knew they were my people,” she says. “I never thought I’d find a community like that again. I truly feel doubly blessed to have had that experience twice in my lifetime.”

At first, says LaRocca, she was writing purely for her own enjoyment. Experimenting with different types of writing classes, LaRocca realized she gravitated towards writing for kids. “I never intended to write picture books, but then I took a survey of children’s literature course and was reminded of how magical they were,” she says. “I thought I’d have to try writing some of those, too.”

When she did start submitting her work for publication, LaRocca was stung by the number of rejections she received. What helped, says LaRocca, was reframing the situation in her mind. “I told myself, ‘If you get a no, it’s a no,’” she says. “That’s ok. Not every book is for every person. There are plenty of people out there and there’s going to be a person who loves what I wrote. I repeat that to myself often.”

In 2019, LaRocca released her multi-award winning first novel, *Midsummer’s Mayhem*. “It’s got a bit of *A Midsummer*

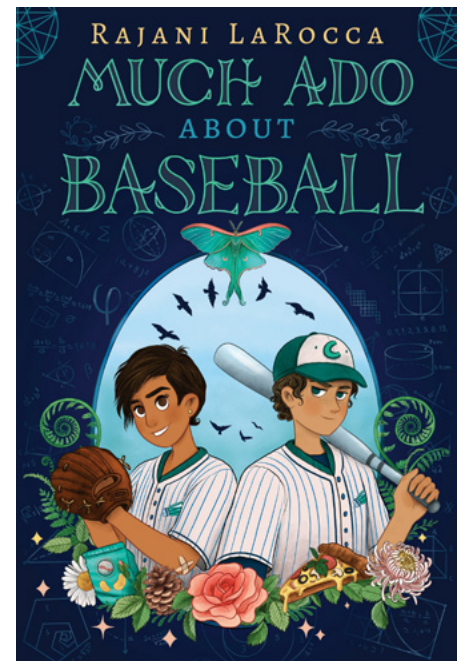


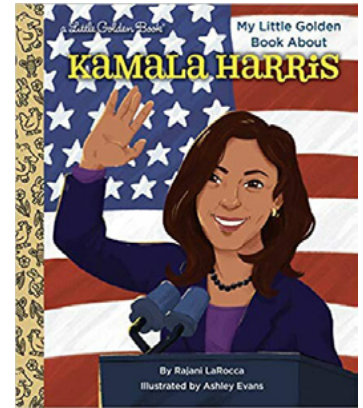
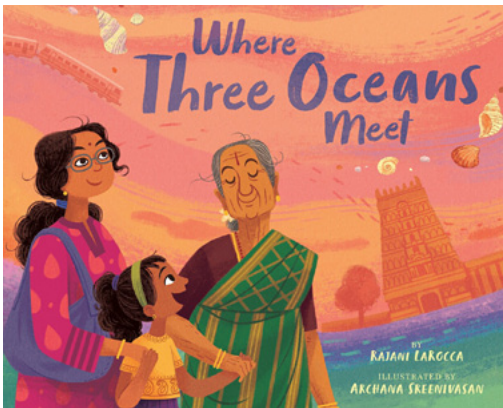
American girl who feels torn between two worlds: school where she's the only Indian-American student, and home where she's part of a larger Indian community. "Reha's story is different from mine, but we share a lot of emotions," says LaRocca. "I also remember feeling as though I was living in two worlds. At school, I would act one way around my non-Indian friends and then on the weekends I would act a different way around my family. As much as I loved both sides, I was always questioning which I really was."

"IN INDIA, I WOULD READ INDIAN COMICS AND STORIES ABOUT MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY AND LITERATURE. BUT THOSE BOOKS WERE ABOUT INDIAN PEOPLE LIVING IN INDIA. NOWHERE COULD I FIND ANY BOOKS ABOUT ANYONE LIKE ME. IT WASN'T UNTIL I WAS AN ADULT THAT I FOUND BOOKS ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES AS AN IMMIGRANT."

Night's Dream in there," she says. "It's about an Indian-American girl who loves to bake." Last year, she released her first picture book, *Seven Golden Rings: A Tale of Music and Math*, about an Indian boy who aspires to be a singer. The book received a unique accolade when it was selected as the inspiration for one of the festive Christmas trees at the Concord Museum's Family Trees: A Celebration of Children's Literature exhibit. "The decorations were crafted by a local mother and her daughter," says LaRocca. "It was lovely. It was such an honor."

Red, White, and Whole, written in verse, is about Reha, an Indian-





In April, LaRocca's picture book, *Bracelets for Bina's Brothers* will be released. Readers will meet a little girl named Bina who makes bracelets for her brothers to celebrate the Hindu holiday of Raksha Bandhan. "She uses their favorite colors to make different patterns," says LaRocca. "It was a little harder than I thought it was going to be, but it's supposed to help children identify patterns and practice some basic math."

June will see the release of *Much Ado About Baseball*, the companion novel to *Midsummer's Mayhem*. "It's set in the same fictional Massachusetts town, but with different characters," she says. "It's about two 12-year-old math competition rivals who can't stand each other but have to find a way to get along with each other for the team's sake."

LaRocca's Little Golden Book about Vice President Kamala Harris will be available August 31. "The Little Golden Books are so classic," she says. "I'm excited to be a part of that tradition." LaRocca's *The Secret Code Inside You* will be published in September. "It's a child's introduction to DNA," she says. "I did it because I'm a doctor and I love all kinds of science. I think learning about the limits of genes and how our choices ultimately make us who we are is so fascinating. I wrote it in rhyme, which is something I'm not sure I'll ever do with nonfiction again."

This fall, look for LaRocca's *Where Three Oceans Meet*. "It's about a girl who travels with her mother and grandmother to Kanyakumari, on the tip of India," she says. "It's kind of like a road trip and along the way, she learns about the bond that a mother and daughter share across time and distance."

Clearly, LaRocca draws inspiration for her books both from her Indian-American heritage and her passion for science.

She says she's delighted to be offering books about Indian-American characters. "As a kid, I read almost any book I could get my hands on, but I never saw myself in any of them," she says. "I loved the characters and I empathized with them, but I never identified with them." When her family traveled to India, Rajani would read just as voraciously while there. "In India, I would read Indian comics and stories about mythology and history and literature," she says. "But those books were about Indian people living in India. Nowhere could I find any books about anyone like me. It wasn't until I was an adult that I found books about my experiences as an immigrant."

When LaRocca isn't practicing medicine or writing for kids, she co-hosts the *STEM Women in KidLit* podcast with her friend Artemis Roehrig. "So many women from STEM backgrounds end up writing for kids," says LaRocca. "I think there's this huge overlap between the curiosity of a scientist and the discipline of the work we do in the world that translates into writing for kids."

As it turns out, LaRocca's high school creative writing teacher was right, she didn't have to choose. "I think my two careers complement each other very well," she says. "Both require lots of observations and a lot of teamwork ... but what both fields have the most in common is people. Both careers are, at heart, about people and appreciating them, not despite their flaws, but because of them. I feel like being a writer makes me a better doctor and being a doctor makes me a better writer."

For more about Rajani LaRocca and her books, visit rajanilarocca.com. ●