

Sibling scribblings

Does being an only child impact a writer? What is it like to have brothers and sisters who wield the pen too?

Meher Marfatia meets a few writer families to find out

In his memoirs *Gone Away*, Dom Moraes who smote the literary world with uncommon poetry and prose, reveals, "I was never conscious of being lonely. Because my father was wise enough to allow me complete freedom, I spent hours in a corner of the sitting-room listening to the talk of revolutionaries, communists and anarchists, young writers and painters. All this while I had a secret... I could write."

A shy boy with a poetic imagination, writing became a means of connecting with the outside world at a comfortable remove. Would it have been different if the young Domski, as he was known, had been part of a noisy brood of kids, say the bullied younger brother or the bossy older one? Would his writing have been as vulnerable, his poetry less sensitive?

If being an only child has an inevitable effect on the sensibility of a writer, so does the birth order of a child in a family where other siblings are writers too. Some may discount the birth-order theory but there is no denying that belonging to a family of writers has both a positive and negative charge—whether in the form of encouragement at a young age or the odium of comparison that follows in one's wake.

In the Chandra family, three is company and the dynamics enriched by a writer-mother. "I suspect it's mother's fault," laughs writer Vikram Chandra, whose *Sacred Games* is due in August. "My oldest memories are of her writing at the kitchen table." Kaamna Chandra, who wrote the dialogue for blockbusters *Prem Rog*, *Chandni* and *1942: A Love Story*, passed on the writing gene to all three children—Vikram is fine-tuned to fiction, Tanuja is a director and scriptwriter (*Sur*, *Hope and a Little Sugar*) and Anupama Chopra has won awards for her books on *Sholay* and *Dilwaale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*.

"I missed the middle-child syndrome," says Tanuja, musing whether being sandwiched between two siblings typically leaves the "between" with less parental attention. "Not only was I very loved, maybe because I was a punier kid than Anu, my writing was staunchly supported right from the 'Autobiography of a Shoe' type of content essay!"

She remains uppermost in her brother's mind. "Recently, reading *Will in the World*, about how Shakespeare became Shakespeare, I instantly thought Tanu must read it. My family is my primary audience," admits Vikram, recalling both sisters living with him in Houston while writing *Red Earth And Pouring Rain*. "A book in hand, shirt collar in mouth" is how Anupama re-



SISTER ACT: Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte's novels had a shared theme where the orphan protagonist is born into straitened circumstances and is sent to live with affluent relatives, a reflection of their childhood hardship and shared upbringing

members him. "Vikram's the first reader of my books, Tanu and I read chapters of his. Tanu discusses her scripts with him, not as much with me, a first day-first show type not that good at reading scripts," she says.

A middle child acclaimed for his accomplished prose, the reclusive Rohinton Mistry grew up the "watchful" one. Younger brother Cyrus, a playwright, confirmed in an internet interview, "None of us had much clue as to him becoming a writer. I find his books as fictional as any writer's. He's using creative imagination—yet there are things I recognise." It was tough dodging the predictable comparisons though, with critics voting Cyrus's *Doon-gaji House* script closely inter-textual with *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton's feted first novel.

Comparisons bedevil the lives of siblings and can provoke an unhealthy rivalry. But veteran adman Sylvester da Cunha, the younger brother of Gerson da Cunha, thinks the comparing game gets underplayed if one sticks with unconsciously chosen but clear-cut areas of writing. "I've stayed inclined towards professional ad copy and play scripts; Gerson's published

poetry and fine articles on civic affairs. In an osmotic way, Gerson's influence led and kept me close to writing," he says. Roped in by Gerson in their St Mary's schooldays, they started a magazine titled *Readers Indigestion*. Sylvester, who pioneered comedy revue in the city with *I Love Bombay*, describes his older brother's pen as "precocious".

"He's being kind, I was downright pompous!" Gerson reacts. He sees few striking features affecting writing as a result of birth order. "Not beyond the reality that, being the senior of the two, our father initially addressed me when recommending what to read. From Father Browne to Wodehouse, Sylvie would then pick these up."

Counsellor Gouri Dange has gleaned interesting observations on the subject from her practice. According to her, a younger child is lucky to be relatively unfettered, by escaping being the repository of parental expectation the elder is often burdened with. "Fortunately, with a minor age gap we experienced none of this," says Sylvester. Adds Gerson, "Our facility with words was equally appreciated by a mother who became an enormous sustaining force,

single-parenting us exceptionally well on losing our father before we reached our teen years."

Altered family circumstances immeasurably singe the survivors. Writer Shiva Naipaul's untimely end at 40 in a 1985 car crash tailed sister Sati's passing away the year before. The loss, especially that of Shiva, who followed illustrious elder brother Vidiadhar to Oxford, left an abiding impression on the latter. Reviewers noticed that Vidia, labelled political and pessimistic, entered an 'autumnal' career phase, with his *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*. The highly personalised narrative of *A Way...* is a quest to understand inheritance, Sir Vidia interpreting it "a settling of accounts with myself".

For Anglo-Irish naturalist Gerald Durrell the call to write came from elder brother Lawrence, best known for his monumentally experimental *The Alexandria Quartet*. The Jamshedpur-born Gerry was home-schooled in Corfu by private tutors and Lawrence who gifted him Jean-Henri Fabre's classic *Insect Life*. Goading Ger-

ald to trail his dream of mapping the wild, Lawrence suggested he begin scribbling sagas of their idyllic, if oddball, childhood on the Greek island to fund study expeditions and establish the Jersey Zoo. Gerald's engaging *My Family and other Animals*, *Marrying off Mother and Birds*, *Beasts and Relatives*, still regale a cult readership. "He loves writing, I don't," Gerald matter-of-factly distinguished. "To me it's simply a way to make money that enables my animal work."

What, finally, of the writer like Moraes landed with the predicament of finding a voice sans siblings? Penning novels *Anubhav* and *Seemant* when almost 60, Hemangi Ranade confesses she was a late bloomer reluctantly steered to write. "Possibly because an only child's mind fills with fanciful thoughts, I nurtured a great urge pulling at me to eventually express these," she says. "Solitary children tend to populate their imagination with teeming situations, which might lead to fantastic fiction!"

Dange delves deeper, stressing on the "fairly neurotic world" that is sometimes created by a single child's psyche. "Surrounded by adults, he's used to whatever he produces constantly held up to the light. Much more poured into him alone, he could strut around like some small potentate, eggshelly about any negative assessment," she says. "In a home where siblings rib each other about many things, including literary lapses, children may not prove as prickly and hypersensitive to criticism. Where you stand in family birth order serves as a fertiliser for the observational and chronicling skills of non-writers too."