

Fine art and a fable

The Fox and the Crow's latest journey is as a Karadi Tales' picture book for adults



Crow's pride sets his hunger ablaze. Fox smirks.

OLD TALE, NEW TWIST **Writer Manasi Subramaniam and an illustration by German-Thai artist Culpeo S. Fox**

ESTHER ELIAS

It's a tale almost as old as time. A stealthy crow flicks food from a housewife's window, and flies to a treetop to savour her treasure. A clever fox saunters along, flatters the crow into a competition of song between them, and just as the crow flaunts her voice, the food slips from her hold, the fox makes away with her meal and she's left with hunger in reward for her immodesty.

In France, it's a sliver of cheese that the crow steals; in Goa, a slice of fish and in Chennai, a *vadai*. "It's the nature of folktales to travel!" says Shobha Viswanath, publishing director Karadi Tales, and *The Fox and the Crow's* latest journey has been into Karadi Tales' gutsy retelling of it as a picture book for adults.

Written by Manasi Subramaniam, and illustrated by German-Thai artist Culpeo S. Fox, the book spins a dark, sinister aura on the fable, and lay-

ers it with feminist undertones as well. Manasi's crow is male, subverting the "female as victim" stereotype, and her feisty fox, who sings first, is female. "A song is an invitation. Crow must sing back," reads the panel, just before the crow takes off into song; "There's no more 'she asks for it' reasoning in this version of the tale," notes Manasi. "Neither is this retelling ever about flattery and falling for it," adds Shobha. "In fact, the word 'flattery' is never even mentioned; here, it's

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about the very adult world of invitation into challenge, and competition."

In terse, finely-wrought words, just a handful each page, Manasi tells this folktale of "adult sensibilities" richly aided by Culpeo's art. Swirls of thick black, deep orange, burnt red and earthy brown draw you to dwell long on the tale illustrated in under 15 panels. Set in a thick forest and lit by a brilliant full moon, the story unfolds, lifelike, almost entirely in close-ups of the drama, save for the title and closing panels. It's, in fact, the edgy tenor of her art that lends the book its chief suspense.

The Fox and the Crow was originally conceived by Shobha and Manasi as a wordless picture book. Inspired by minimalist works retelling fables such as Margaret Wild's *Fox* and Jerry Pinkney's *The Lion and the Mouse*, the two set out to recreate *The Fox and the Crow* in similar fashion. "We picked this fable because it

had much room for reinterpretation and reinvention," says Manasi. Having settled on Culpeo's artistic style to illustrate the tale, Manasi storyboarded it merely to guide her and it was this wordless version of the book that Manasi took to Bologna's Children's Book Fair. Almost every reviewer there advised Karadi Tales to add words to the picture to flesh the story out clearer. While scouting for a suitable writer, Manasi happened to draft the tale herself one day, in a deliberately poetic style and Shobha felt that, in Manasi's words, they'd found the exact tone they were looking for. "There's a certain pride of place for picture books for adults abroad, which is yet to set in India," says Shobha, "So this book isn't for the regular market, but we hope it will find a discerning audience here too!"

The Fox and the Crow was launched at the Jaipur Lit Fest, and is available with online retailers at Rs. 595.