

## Wings to words

Sowmya Rajendran on decoding gender issues for children and her latest book *Big Hero Size Zero* that will be launched today

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*Mayil Will Not be Quiet* was a breath of fresh air in the world of Indian children's books. The authors, Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam, gave readers a peek into the mind of a 12-year-old, taking gender issues to children. Sowmya deals with her pet topic, gender, once again, in *Big Hero Size Zero* (Tulika) with Anusha Hariharan.

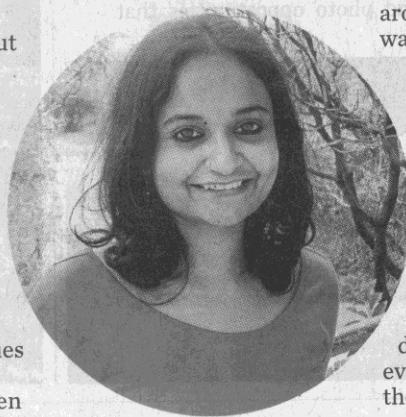
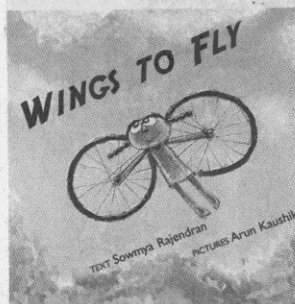
In an email interview, the author talks about her just-released picture book *Wings to Fly* (Tulika), which tells the story of a differently-abled athlete Malathi Holla and writing for children.

**Please tell us about the book.**

The book addresses gender-based issues for adolescents. Much of gender education is about unlearning rather than learning and young people, in general, are far more open to understanding these issues than older people. Though gender is a vast subject, we've tailored the content to suit the interests of young people, touching on issues that are immediately relevant to them and then moving on to the larger picture.

**Did the success of the *Mayil* series inspire you to write more on gender for children?**

I did my Masters in Gender Studies, so much of my writing centres around it, whether it is fiction or non-fiction. When Niveditha Subramaniam and I wrote the first book in the *Mayil* series, there were hardly any Indian children's books that touched on these issues. The success of the series



Sowmya Rajendran

showed us that our audience was opening up to new ideas, new ways of thinking. Almost every publisher we showed the book to rejected it, though the scene is much more receptive to such writing now.

**Tell us how *Wings to Fly* came about.**

Tulika approached me to write the book and I agreed because I've worked with

them for a number of years now, but I've never done a book like this on a real person. I was intrigued by Malathi's biography, *A Different Spirit*, and chose an episode from her life that I felt would be of interest to a young child. I did not interact with Malathi when doing the book; it was based entirely on her biography.

**How do you manage to deal with serious themes such as gender and disability in a way that children can relate to?**

I enjoy making people, stories, and issues accessible to everyone. While I read academic literature on gender, I also worry that only the converted are reading material like this. I find it rewarding to share my ideas and thoughts with people around me in the simplest way possible.

**Where do you draw inspiration from? Do you spend a lot of time with children to understand their world?**

I draw inspiration from my childhood. I also observe the world around me as much as I can, an art that's rapidly dying out thanks to everyone staying hooked to their phones all the time.

I talk to children whenever I have an opportunity but I don't patronise them.

**What are you working on at present?**

I'm working on a picture book with Tulika and my second book for adults.

Sowmya and Anusha Hariharan, authors of *Big Hero Size Zero* and human rights lawyer Gulika Reddy participate in a discussion on gender issues at 5 p.m. at Ashvita Bistro today. This will be followed by the book launch.