

# The long road home

**Chatura Rao's novel is a portrait of lost love and new-found identity caught in the sweep of a nation's history**

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**A** *Blueprint for Love* traverses present to past, happy childhood to anguished adolescence and serene village to chaotic city, with the ease of memory. After all, Chatura Rao's second novel for adults is semi-autobiographical, its opening pages and beautiful prose drawn from the years she grew up in a large house in Madras, where her cousins filled her days, and rowing flooded her hours.

In the early 1990s, Rao trained with an all-women's crew that went on to represent India at the Asiad. Schooled at Church Park, Stella Maris and Sophia College, Rao worked as a features journalist in her adopted city, Mumbai, and switched to writing fiction while expecting her first child. *The Case of Disappearing Colour* was followed by books *Nabiya* and *Growing Up In Pandupur*, co-authored with her sister, Adithi.

Her first novel for adults, *Meanwhile, Up-river*, is the story of two disparate people who inhabit the spirituality-soaked streets of Benares. *A Blueprint for Love* travels across India — Pune to the Himalayan foothills, Mumbai to Gandhinagar and Baroda to Delhi, and demands of its reader attention to its lyrical lines and riveting plot. The novel moves fluidly to settle in a place, the core of which symbolises an India waiting to implode from the personal and political tragedies of our time.

"It has its beginnings in *Childhood Dust*, an unpublished short story of mine. My editors at Bloomsbury, who found the style quiet and intimate, were keen that I ex-



TENDER TALE OF BELONGING  
Chatura Rao's *A Blueprint for Love* PHOTO: ASHUTOSH PATHAK

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pand it," says Rao, speaking over telephone from Mumbai.

"I was reluctant, because the story was too personal for me, based on the loss of a dear cousin. But, as I wrote, it was the other track in the story that became more immersive. I had recently conducted workshops near Corbett National Park and the place is so beautiful, I decided that the hero, Suveer, should belong here."

*A Blueprint for Love* celebrates a brave and sympathetic couple, Suveer and Reva, held together by the memory of Aboli, a girl they both loved. Suveer and Aboli's romance

plays out in a badminton court in the innocence of the 1990s, with Reva playing a willing Cupid. Aboli is determined to wed Suveer despite familial opposition, but dies soon after in a road accident.

The house where the cousins grew up, with its cosy corners and shadows cast by the dusty, lancet-shaped leaves of the mango tree, is sold, and the family scattered across India. Aboli, the love affair and the good times close like a heavy door on Reva's life, although it seeps in like dust through the open window of her memory, casting a pall on her marriage to

Tarun. Every year, Suveer, now a journalist, and Reva meet platonically on Aboli's birthday to remember her, until Suveer travels to Gandhinagar to do an election special on the 'dishousing' of a Muslim businessman in a Hindu-dominated neighbourhood.

Suveer's bid to save Mahnoor, a young Muslim woman, earns him broken bones and the love of Reva, who thinks nothing of leaving her husband and rushing to be at his side. There on, the lives of Suveer and Reva, Mahnoor and her husband Zahyan spiral downward, caught in narratives of hatred unleashed by zealots from both sides. All through this runs the thread of finding 'home', no longer just a physical space, but a metaphor for where one can be true to oneself despite the odds.

"Even those of us who have homes are looking to be rooted somewhere," says Rao. "Zahyan and Mahnoor want the security of a home, while Reva has one but can't settle down because of her own demons. This paradox was important to me."

The book moves from Aboli and Suveer's summer-filled romance to the bloodlust of sectarian violence, with alarming speed. "Aboli was warm and loved, Reva is confused and brooding. But, Aboli's story was explored less because she dies young. It was a conscious choice to leave her behind."

The novel also examines how hard it can be simply to survive. A fact that asserts itself in the book's cover of a blue window filled with fractured glass.

Rao, who curated the Chandigarh Children's Literature Festival last year, says, "Writing for children and adults occupies completely different spaces." Her recent *Gone Grandmother* (Tulika) for children is introspective, without the layers adult literature demands.

*A Blueprint for Love* more than paints a tableaux of young people caught in a time of chaos. It portrays the slow death of the idea of a nation and is a love song to a lost Indian childhood.

(Published by Bloomsbury, the book, priced at Rs. 199, is available online and at stores.)