

Quill thrill

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“Will they like it? What if they hate it? What if they hate it so much they tie it to a stake and burn it?” Sixteen-year-old Francesca Fowler wonders how her work will be received by the world in her blog post at

www.catapult14.com . The young girl is one of the 21 authors whose story has made it to the anthology of short stories called CATAPULT, published by quillclubwriters.com in collaboration with Coimbatore Art and Theatrical Society.

The book is an outcome of 11 months of rigorous brainstorming sessions and editing. It is a collection of stories on autism, boys who dream of becoming chefs, Badaga culture and children who despise their step-dads. According to Francesca, the last few months have been both gruelling and exciting. “Many of our ideas were rejected. But, it helped us hone our craft.” From pruning the cliff hangers to brainstorming plot lines...it was a great learning experience, says Asha Anand, another young author. “We helped each other out. There was good team spirit.”

According to Chanda Khaturia of CATS, “The children amazed us when we interviewed them. They are such voracious readers and so smart even at this age!” Their favourite authors include JK Rowling, Jeffrey Archer and William Shakespeare. Francesca’s Facebook page is filled with the memes and quotes of authors such as Neil Gaiman and Issaac Assimov. She is a fan of William Shakespeare and loves to read his originals rather than the abridged version.

CATS came up with this idea as an initiative to offer a fair ground for young talented writers in the city, says Chanda. “We helped the quillclubwriters’ team to reach out to as many schools as possible. Our intention was to offer opportunities for those kids who cannot otherwise afford to get their books published.”

Some of the schools are CS Academy, Chandrakanthi public school, PSBB Millenium School and Stanes ICSE School.

The editing sessions were carried out at CATS’ studio. “The kids toiled over pizzas and burgers. So it was also a fun and interactive session.” However, they were given strict instructions to lay off the internet and telephone, says Ruchira Mittal of Quill Club Writers. “We did not want any plagiarism to happen. In fact, they wrote the first draft of their on sheets of paper.”

The Quill Club Writers’ team came out with a similar book called *Homegrown Tales* featuring 28 students from Isha Home School, a month ago.

“Coimbatore has proved to be one of the main hubs of young authors. Children here believe in family values and are extremely intelligent. I think they have far more depth than we give them the credit for,” says Hemant Kumar, the founder of quillclubwriters.

The idea to start quillclubwriters.com emerged after Hemant's own novel was rejected by a couple of publishing houses. "The road to publishing is very hard in India. These publishers sit behind a desk and break your heart. That's when I realised we need to offer our young writers a platform to express themselves. This is a great opportunity for them to come out now."

The children were asked to edit their own drafts first and then send them to the mentors to edit. They were bowled over by the maturity of some of them, says Hemant. "Some of them have engaged with very serious themes like loss of their loved ones, spiritual happiness, temptation and revenge. Our children are exposed to all aspects of life. They notice and observe things better than us. "

Many of the children were obsessed with fantasy fiction, aliens and zombies, recalls Ruchira.

"We had to tell them that real life can be equally interesting. And we urged them to write about their feelings and emotions."

At the book launch, the children read out excerpts from their books. Once the launch was over, they were back to clicking selfies, with the CATAPULT copies held close to their hearts.

Shobha Viswanath of Karadi Tales signed on the copies and handed them to the children.

Shobha reminded the young writers, "Do not be in a hurry to get published. Writing is like cooking *dal makhani*. The longer it takes, the better it gets."