

**What's So Good About...?** is a series of 15-minute programmes focusing on the popular children's writers: Jamila Gavin, Roald Dahl, Malorie Blackman, Jacqueline Wilson and J K Rowling.

**What's So Good About ... Jamila Gavin?** comprises two episodes which explore Jamila's success as a children's writer. These lively programmes are a useful resource for Key Stage 2 classes studying her work and prove a stimulating model for encouraging children's own writing.

Each programme starts with scenes from the India of Jamila's childhood, which she remembers as a warm and exciting place, in stark contrast to the cold English climate that she encountered on her first trips to Britain. As the child of an Indian father and a British mother, Jamila feels that her life was enriched by the cultures and traditions of both East and West. These two programmes seek to reflect this as they explore the influences on several of her most popular books.

## Programme 1: **Myths and Legends**

In this programme we are introduced to Jamila and learn about her childhood and the impact that her dual nationality had on her life and work.

### **Childhood**

Jamila was born in the Himalayas. She enjoyed a happy childhood, which offered her freedom to play amongst the sugar canes and around the canals. Her mother frequently brought her on visits to London and she went to school in Ealing. She remembers life in Britain as cold and wet and she was the only Asian child in her school. But Britain did have its compensations, not least the public libraries that she and her school friend Doreen adored. Their friendship and exploration of each other's cultures were the basis for her book *Kamla and Kate*.

Jamila inherited her love of stories from her mother and she enjoyed reading and telling stories from an early age. At school she often got told off for daydreaming!

### **Eastern religions**

Although she was brought up as a Christian, Jamila felt that she learned much about other religions from the festivals and stories that she experienced in India. As a result, her books often intertwine Asian and Western culture. In order to give her characters authenticity and for her to know and understand their actions, she feels it is important that she understands something of their religions and traditions. We see Jamila reading *Monkey in the Stars*, which is based on the stories of Rama and Sita. In this book Jamila uses the central character, Monkey-god Hanuman, as a way of introducing a young girl preparing for Diwali, to the hero and heroine Rama and Sita.

### **Creative writing**

Jamila explains how much she enjoys working with children in school and we see her running a creative writing session with some Key Stage 2 pupils. They ask her about her work and reflect on her stories and characters. As she tells them about her books we learn more about the sources of her stories such as the ominous 'Coram man' from *Coram Boy* and the mourning doll which inspired the ghostly tale, *Someone's Watching, Someone's Waiting*.

### **A perfect story**

Whilst chatting to a group of children, Jamila explores the notion of what makes a perfect story, using *Cinderella* as an example. *Cinderella* contains universal story elements such as grief, jealousy and ambition, which have no cultural bounds and have been central to human existence before the story was first told in China some 2,000 years ago, and ever since.

### **What's next?**

Jamila was spurred to write because she felt that Asian and black children's lives were not sufficiently reflected in books and she wanted to tell stories that redressed this balance. She feels that as her life has developed over the last twenty years, she has been able to incorporate a lot of her experiences into her storytelling.

### **Activities**

- In the programme, Jamila gives the children an opening sentence and then asks them to write the next part of the story, but she only gives them 30 seconds! Give the children the same sentence. How much original material can they write in 30 seconds? Ask them to read it aloud and in response the class act as critical friends.
- Read *Monkey in the Stars* and then use the internet and library to research stories about Hanuman, Rama and Sita. Children can write their own story incorporating some of their adventures.
- Research the origins of other well known traditional tales and rhymes. (See 4Learning's series **Animated Tales of the World**.)

## Programme 2: The Wheel of Life

In this programme Jamila tries to explain the significance that events in her life have had on the content and quality of her writing. She touches on the notion of the 'Wheel of Life' – an integral part of Indian philosophy.

### Dreams

The morning is Jamila's 'golden hour' where she is desperate to catch the precious time between sleeping and waking. She feels that dreams reflect how you see the world and she keeps a notebook by her bed to write down all her dreams before she forgets them.

### Music and *Coram Boy*

Jamila's love of stories is surpassed only by her passion for music. She is a brilliant pianist and we see her playing whilst reflecting on the significance of music in her stories – especially *Coram Boy*. She tells us how *Coram Boy* was stimulated by a remark made by a friend who told her that the highways and byways of England are littered with the bones of little children. This shocked her and her research led her to the Coram man, resulting in the shocking adventure/thriller of *Coram Boy*.

We see her in an ancient cathedral listening to the choristers and walking along the cloisters, where she meets the ghostly image of Meshak. It is through Meshak's tragic eyes that much of the story of the *Coram Boy* is told. She explains that most often in her writing, she finds herself caught up as a character in the story, experiencing the passion and excitement for herself, and that this experience may shift the way the story goes.

### Her Grandfather and Grandpa Chatterji

The programme contains dramatised extracts from *Grandpa Chatterji*, a story based on Jamila's much-loved grandfather. She tells us about him as she wanders around an Asian supermarket and explains how he, like Grandpa Chatterji, could make a wonderful Indian feast out of nothing.

### Hard work

Although Jamila demonstrates the effects of the 'Wheel of Life' on her writing, she explains to children that only 10% of her stories are inspiration and the other 90% is hard work, research and perspiration. This hard work paid off when she was awarded the Whitbread Prize for *Coram Boy*, which she feels is her best work to date.

### Activities

- Use shared writing to brainstorm children's initial responses to new situations such as starting a new school, going to a friends' house for the first time, moving into a new home or going to a different country. Ask them to use all of the senses to describe how they felt – sounds, smells and tastes etc.
- In the programme we learn how music is a central theme to *Coram Boy*. As they read the book, encourage children to use reading journals to record any other recurring themes they notice. Do these occur in any other Jamila Gavin stories?

### Support material for Book Box: Popular Writers

Resource Book: 206849 £6.95

Bookbox website: [www.channel4.com/bookbox](http://www.channel4.com/bookbox)

For information and orders, consult 4Learning's annual brochure or visit [www.channel4.com/learningshop](http://www.channel4.com/learningshop) Email: [sales@4learning.co.uk](mailto:sales@4learning.co.uk)  
4Learning, PO Box 444, London SW1P 2WD

English for 7–11 year olds



## Book Box: Popular Writers What's So Good About ... Jamila Gavin?



Book Box: What's So Good About ... Jamila Gavin?  
was produced for Channel 4 by Granada Television

© 2002 Channel 4 Television Corporation.  
All rights reserved.

Leaflet written by Liz George  
Edited by Adrienne Jones  
Designed by John Burke  
Printed by Graphic Litho