



Rohit Bisht, (11): a book-guzzling schoolboy on sneakily reading under the covers, juggling school-time with reading-time and why he loves his local library

Everyone loves a good story. Perhaps none more so eleven year old Rohit Bisht. Rohit is not your average schoolboy: while others wish the school day away so that they can get back to kicking a football around, Rohit races out of the classroom only to go straight to the village library, to see what tale he might devour today. And no ‘dog’ ate his homework, nor was he too lazy to complete it on time: he just had his mind set on his reading books rather than his workbooks. I met up with this curious boy to find out just what it was that fuelled his passion for reading, and learn how such a pacific hobby has got him into more trouble than he expected!



Rohit comes from a charming though fairly un-extraordinary family who live in Chattola, a small village a little way out of Sitla. There are five in his household in total: he lives with his mother, father, his younger brother and his grandmother in a comfortable cottage just off the main road which runs through the village. His father has a government job in the Public Works Department (PWD) and sometimes works away from home, while his mother knits woollens and toys to sell in the KGU shop in Sitla. But what marks this family out from others that I met during my time at Chirag is the pure enjoyment they seem to take from reading. As I learnt during the interview, for Rohit and his brother – rapidly getting through Rohit’s library-book cast-offs – reading is not a means to becoming smarter or getting ahead at school. Indeed, Rohit’s reading habit exceeds the books he is set by his teacher and has very little to do with what is covered in the classroom. No, reading is a way of learning about ‘other kinds of people, and other places’, of letting the imagination run wild in tales of kings, animals and foreign lands. One of Rohit’s favourite books at the moment is *Amua bhaiya & Nimua Bhaiya*: a collection of stories inserted with beautiful poems and songs.

Though his new school, an English medium secondary school in Mukteshwar, has a well-stocked library, Rohit prefers to borrow from the local village library situated a few hundred yards up the road from his house. There, they have a much greater range of books to choose from that are in English as well as Hindi, and they are well stocked in books for both adults

and children. He's a regular visitor there: 'I go to the village library every day that it is open and get a new book out' ... so that's 25 books a month!

Rohit will find time to read whenever he can in the day. I asked his mother just how her son fits his love of books around the normal routine of the school day: 'Often he wakes up very early in the morning at 5am to switch on the light and pick up his book before school. And before, he would bury himself under the covers with a torch once the rest of the family had gone to bed, and try to carry on his reading in secret!' When she discovered what he had been doing she became concerned that he would damage his eyesight. The only way to stop her son from reading at all hours was to personally ask the village library to stop lending him books, but Rohit is not so easily deterred and is currently trying to bribe his younger brother to get books out for him.

Rohit's mother tells this story amusedly though. The family has always supported their son's love of reading, being keen library-users themselves. Before his mother married, she would walk miles to reach the nearest village library so that she could borrow books, and encouraged by his elder brother, her younger son has grown up with a love of reading too. Unlike many of the households in the area, the family owns a lot of books. Their collection significantly grew when Rohit won a prize at school for borrowing the most from the school library, and was rewarded with 26 new books of his own. His father is happy to encourage his sons further, and on returning from work visits to Nainital will often come back carrying some new stories for his family to devour. As soon as he was able to abandon his simple alphabet books at the age of four, Rohit has enjoyed exploring books on his own, being attracted to fantastical stories. And although he still likes to read independently, he will often encourage the other family members to enjoy the book as well before he returns it to the library.

I asked Rohit why he thinks that it is important for children to read a lot of books. He finds the stories he reads to be an excellent source of knowledge, where he can learn about other people's lives and different countries. However, as he has learnt recently, it is important that children learn to strike a balance between managing their schoolwork and the time they spend reading for fun. The move up from the Chirag School to the new school at Muketshwar has forced a change in his reading habit: with a longer journey to school and a heavier workload with more spot-tests, he cannot afford to spend as much time reading. Already he has been scolded for not putting his school-work first, and so reluctantly has cut back on his voracious reading habit during term time.

Rohit wishes that other children in his area would learn to love books in the way that he does. He believes that even if schools had to charge a little extra to their pupils, they should make sure that their libraries were well stocked so that children could choose what kind of books they most enjoy reading. This way, pupils would be encouraged to see reading as a pleasure, and not just as a chore connected with their school studies.

My time is almost up with Rohit, so I ask him what else he loves to do. Drawing? Playing games? But this remarkable eleven year old replies that 'he is happiest snuggled up in bed with a good book and a cup of tea'! Well aren't we all...

Anna Leggett

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