

DETECTIVE FICTION

Five reasons why Satyajit Ray's detective Feluda is eternal

Pradosh C Mitter, aka Feluda, the detective created by Satyajit Ray, is a favourite not just in the original Bengali versions but also in translation.

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This is the fiftieth year since my childhood crush made his first appearance. Dapper, six-foot-two, armed with a dry wit and a profound interest in trivia, Feluda was 27 when I first met him. I was all of eight. For the next decade, he reigned supreme over all my other affections.

Surprisingly, there are as many Feluda fans today as there were in my childhood, many of whom have read him only in English. In his 50 years of existence, Feluda has appeared in graphic novel adaptations, in radio plays, in theatre and on television. His film outings are box office gold, even though the world of the 1960s and '70s, Feluda's heydays, is long gone.

What makes Feluda endure in what should logically be his seventy-seventh year?

Trivia, not lessons

Of all book beginnings, *Sonar Kella (The Golden Fortress)* has the best one by a long chalk:

Feluda stopped reading and shut his book with a bang. Then he snapped his fingers twice, yawned and said, “geometry.”

I asked, “Were you reading a book on geometry all this while?”

And then begins one of the most fascinating pieces written on Geometry for a young audience. It doesn't teach, it makes you want to know more – about elliptical curves, spiders' webs, the minds of madmen. The geometrical motif appears repeatedly in the book, which talks about telepathy, the remembrance of past lives, extra sensory perception, the history of fingerprinting, nesting habits of peacocks, the local customs of Rajasthan - while Feluda and Topshe track down the criminals.

I have read my fair share of children's mysteries via Enid Blyton, who still seems to hold an iron grip over the must read list of Indian parents. This is leagues ahead of her work, or indeed that of Carolyn Keene or The Hardy Boys, the other staples of my childhood.

This is the enduring beauty of the Feluda books – they talk about anything from Indian classical music (the fact that 'da' is *komal* for 'dha' and therefore a different note altogether – *Samaddarer Chabi*, or *The Key*) as part of a code, to riddles in colloquial Bengali which transform into a numeric password to ancient Egyptian religious practices and the idiosyncrasies of nawabs. When you picked up a Feluda to read, you knew that along with the mystery you would stumble across something quirky and interesting, a factoid that you could store away to savour for later or use as a springboard to know more. No other children's writer has taught so much so effortlessly, without ever consciously attempting to.

The story, the people

And they were cracking good stories, too. They were fast paced adventures involving false identities, codes and puzzles, thefts and robberies, hidden treasure, murder. The clues would be mythological, theological, musical, bits of folk poetry, references to European art.

Come what may, you knew Feluda would note them down in Greek letters in his notebook and work through the knots one cigarette smoke ring after the other.

If Feluda is Holmes, the role of Watson is equally apportioned between his goody two shoes cousin Topshe and the very Bengali, bumbling pulp writer, Lalmohan-babu aka Jatayu, who was probably introduced as much needed comic relief to counter the potentially boring hero worship that seemed to be Topshe's chief characteristic. Lalmohan-babu's wide eyed wonder and often unintended humour keeps Feluda from sounding too pedantic.

Apart from a plethora of colourful villians, most notably Maganlal Meghraj, who is both threatening and comical, my personal favourite is an avuncular Mycroft-like character, Sidhu Jyatha (uncle Sidhu) – a man of copious newspaper cuttings meticulously stuck in catalogued scrapbooks and the only one to quiz Feluda. The Sidhu Jyathas of the '60s and '70 really did exist in Calcutta; they were retired academics or bureaucrats who now reigned over damp, book lined rooms, and oily mattresses with bolsters. In the age of Google, Sidhu Jyatha's continuing relevance may be questioned, but I knew at least a couple in my childhood.

The illustrations

Feluda first appeared in 1965 in a short story called *Feludar Goendagiri* (Danger in Darjeeling) with his thirteen-year-old cousin Topshe, who is the narrator for the series, where he solved a mystery in a still very colonial, misty Darjeeling. His creator was all of 44 at the time. The story was serialised in Ray's family magazine, *Sandesh*, which he edited along with poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay. Not that I knew all this when I came across the story in in 1980. It was just the picture that drew me in.

It establishes the two main characters, a handsome young man and his cousin, who is just a boy, their eyes watchful, looking for what? A suspect? I finished the story in a breathless rush and was hooked.

In 1966, *Badshahi Angti* (*The Emperor's Ring*) was serialised in *Sandesh* again and eventually published as a novel, Feluda's first. A firm believer in pictures for children's books, Ray turned his prodigious artistic talent to illustrating his own stories.

This time, the cover showed a city with a Tonga, a Citroen and a medieval gate, and the title flashed at one through what could only be a brilliant gemstone ring. The moment I saw it I knew the story was set outside Calcutta, in a city with an Islamic heritage, but also a contemporary one. The same watchful eyes on the cover. They promised yet another mystery.

I read *Badshahi Angti* immediately after my first Feluda short story, running upstairs to my favourite broad and shuttered window sill to devour it one silent, scorching summer afternoon when the rest of the family took their siesta. There were seven pictures, not counting the cover, each one building the suspense further and worth much mulling over.

There is no explaining the magic of a Feluda story without Ray's illustrations. Ray trained under Nandalal Bose, Binod Behari Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij in Shantiniketan; he was a keen photographer who counted Henri Cartier Bresson among his influences.

Imagine a world opening up for a child, where there is no hectoring about art, no talking down, just pictures that tell a story in such a rich array of styles that she is prompted to find out more. The illustrations in the early books display an exuberance where Ray experimented freely with his style. I am no expert, but there were some line drawings that reminded me of Picasso.

I am filled with a sense of disappointment when I leaf through the English translations, not because they aren't ably translated, but because without Ray's illustrations these books are not a fraction of what they should have been. What monumental lack of imagination prompted this decision, I sometimes wonder. Someone will probably cite commercial reasons, but I firmly believe the books would have sold better with the pictures in them.

The films

There have been so very many. But there is only one celluloid Feluda for the die-hards and he is Soumitra Chatterjee. I sometimes wonder if Ray modelled Feluda's appearance on Soumitra. The actor was his favourite for lead roles by the time the detective was created.

If I had to pick one Feluda film, I would choose *Shonar Kella*, which is one of the best children's movies ever made. See it if you love Rajasthan; if you want to catch a bit of the 1970s Calcutta streetscape, long gone from our lives; if you like a thriller or a bellyful of laughs; see it for the template that Ray would set for his series for the three characters.

Twice, Ray has been bested by his own actors.

Lalmohan-babu looked entirely different in Ray's earlier illustrations, but the actor Santosh Dutta's masterful portrayal of the writer in *Shonar Kella* forced Ray to change Lalmohan Babu's appearance in subsequent books to fit the celluloid one.

In *Joy Baba Felunath (The Elephant God)*, Utpal Dutt brought Maganlal Meghraj to life so successfully that he catapulted the villain to a Moriarty like status. Maganlal would return in two other Feluda stories subsequently.

The comfort of continuity

This year, I turn 43. Feluda is still 35, his creator, Satyajit Ray, having decided at some point, like Herge, that characters for children should stay young to endure. For a ten-year-old, 40 is positively ancient, so 35 it is.

As Feluda stepped out from the 1970s into the 1980s and then the 1990s, the world changed dramatically around him. Citroens turned into Ambassadors and then Marutis; his brand of cigarette, the Charminar, disappeared; the characters found themselves taking flights instead of the train and social milieus altered to include more articulate women. Ray, who had never deigned to let women intrude Feluda's rather prudish all male world, found himself including female characters towards the end.

Still, Feluda remained comfortingly constant, always curious about the world around him, always thirty-five, always sure in the knowledge that his cousin Topshe and his friend Lalmohan-babu were there for him and that his corner of Calcutta on Rajani Sen Road would forever endure, precisely because the exact house, No. 21, never really existed. Just like him.

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