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Feminist tales of yore



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Storytellers from across the country are gathering for the Chennai Storytelling Festival

Who tells stories these days, you ask? Teachers do, as do corporate trainers. Psychological counsellors use it for therapy, and HR professionals use it to boost morale. Advertisers, theatre performers and filmmakers tell tales for a living, as do journalists, “though we’re hoping they stick to non-fiction”, laughs Eric Miller, director of the Chennai-based World Storytelling Institute.

Miller has seen the storytelling circuit grow by leaps and bounds in the city over the past few years, though he believes that in India, the movement is yet to fully catch on. “In the US, the revival in storytelling began decades ago, as a reaction against television. Back in the 1960s, every middle class household had a colour TV. In fact, every child would have one in his room. A need was felt to revive human communication,” says Miller, who has been organising storytelling festivals in the city for six years now.

Miller believes the Indian movement was pioneered by Bengaluru-based Geetha Ramanujam. It is Ramanujam that he partnered with, to organise the first Chennai Storytelling Festival back in 2013. “We had about 10 to 11 storytellers back then,” says Miller.

In comparison, the 2018 edition of the festival has 34 storytellers from Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Chennai and a host of other cities. Spanning 10 days, events range from storytelling sessions, to seminars, and workshops for students and professionals.

The stories in the pipeline are as varied as the tellers, but there is a definite emphasis on girl power, inspired in part by the global #MeToo movement. “I wouldn’t say we are making that the theme, nor will we be telling stories of sexual harassment, because children will be in attendance as well,” clarifies Miller. But while harassment itself might be a subject too complicated to address through simple short stories, feminism in general is not.

“Not all folk tales and fairy tales have passive heroines waiting to save them,” says Miller, adding that folk tales revolving around strong women and girls will rule the roost at the festival. On the last three days in particular, storytellers will come together to tell stories in regional languages.

The intention is to “activate the listener”, drawing them into the story

emotionally, inspiring them to be proactive and do something. The opening session is by California-based storyteller Cathryn Fairlee. A travelling storyteller who draws in tales from multiple nations including China and Ireland, Fairlee will be telling women-centric stories that she has collected from a myriad cultures.

The events are spread across multiple venues, including Andhra Mahila Sabha in Mylapore, Stella Maris College in Teynampet, Story Corner at Bookmine on Harrington Road and Loyola College in Nungambakam. Certain workshops are designed for parents, or parents with children, or professionals.

Chennai Storytelling Festival will be held from February 2 to February 11. For the schedule and registrations, log on to www.storytellinginstitute.org/2018a.html.

Folk tales revolving around strong women and girls will rule the roost at the festival

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