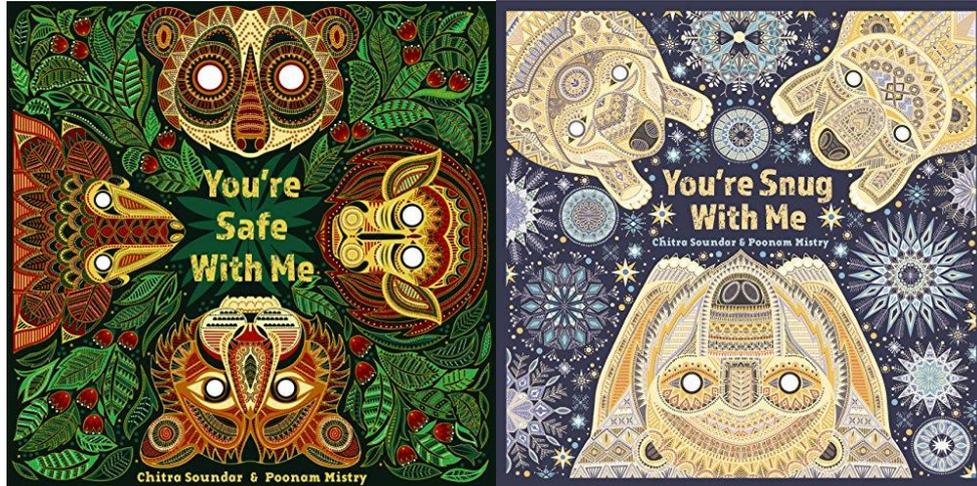


You're Safe With Me / You're Snug With Me by Chitra Soundar & Poonam Mistry

[Young Readers]



Two profound picture books of maternal warmth, wisdom and reassurance illuminated with such eye-popping opulence that they are swept up by adults *for* adults as well as read to dear children at night.

“When the moon rose high and the stars twinkled, it was bedtime for baby animals. But that night, when the skies turned dark and the night grew stormy, the little ones couldn’t sleep.”

They can’t sometimes, with gales howling or torrential rain hammering on the roof or tree tops...

“Mama Elephant was passing by. “Hush,” she whispered, gently rocking the baby animals in her trunk. “You’re safe with me.””

Mama Elephant reassures her young charges not with a placatory cure-all balm, but with answers focussing firmly on the future, the wider balance of nature, and the overwhelmingly positive compensation to any temporary tremors of the head or heart. And it works wonders!

“SWISH-SWISH! The trees moved. OOH-OOH! The wind moaned. The little animals woke up and whimpered. “Don’t worry about the wind,” whispered Mama Elephant. “He’s an old friend of the forest. He brings us seeds from faraway lands.””

YOU'RE SAFE WITH ME is wrapped in a warm, rich, earthy palette perfect for Indian climes, with patterns like those on painted clay, stone or elephants adorned for religious festivals. Tiny dots in white, cream and red are arranged in organic circles, joined by their radial counterparts to fashion whole floral blooms which you’ll find forming the youngsters’ hips. Painstakingly hand-drawn and coloured on a flat surface, the illustrations come with all the qualities of intricately embroidered cloth.

Wide-eyed whiskered fish with copper scales float in the river below, its midnight blue surface punctured by monsoon-large raindrops whose ripples echo not out in concentric circles but in spirals instead to denote outward movement, emphasised by triangular teeth in between.

Foliage abounds! There the spots are configured to demark the margins and midribs of leaves, then thrown out in tubular veins for extra support. Like indigenous masks or painted faces, the youngsters gaze out of their protective, comparatively cool-coloured undergrowth in awe and wonder and fear.

“CRACK-TRACK! The sky lit up. FLASH-SNAP! The night flickered. The little animals gasped.”

The next double-page spread of the sky splinters in a jagged cacophony of lightning strikes, scattering Mama Elephant's explanation into a staccato of barely heard words. Rarely have I seen such clever interaction in a Picture Book of sight, sound, cause and empathic effect!

YOU'RE SNUG WITH ME boasts the same striking emphasis on patterns, but with a more radiant colour scheme full of bright purples and cream as befits the snow-bound Arctic. Like the most magnificent woolly jumper, there are distinct rhythms of lines, dots and triangles arranged with an intuitive understanding of the forms they delineate. There are shapes within shapes like those whole animals you'd so satisfyingly slot in between smaller, interlocking pieces in a wooden Early Learning jigsaw puzzle. Over and again, the geometric is rendered organic while the colours keep it all cosy.



The mother bear's den is a perfect example, the opening image of the cubs nestled snugly head-to-toe inside her womb. She hugs herself calmly, contentedly, assuredly, while outside we see nature taking its inevitable, uninterrupted seasonal course. All is as it should be, and all will be well. So long as we maintain the balance.

Just as the colours inside Mama Bear are overwhelmingly clay-warm and cream-bright but balanced by cooler purples and white, so without the descending, sharp icy blues are complemented, being cushioned by softer masses and sweeping contours below, while the bulrush shapes glimpsed outside offer the hope of something less shivery to come. Then, when those cubs are born, there's a warm welcome tongue too, as the cubs laze, forelegs first, over their rotund mum's tum.

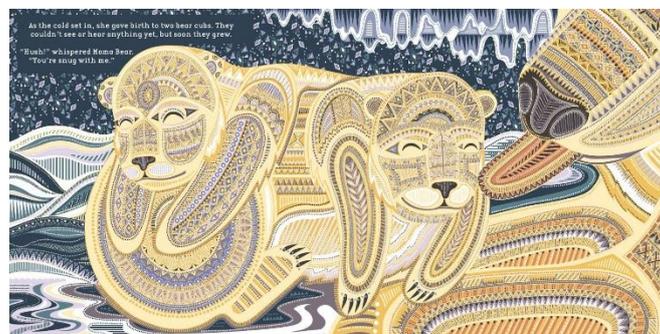
"As winter turned colder, the cubs explored their frozen den. "Mama, what lies beyond here?" they asked.

"Above us is a land of ice and snow," said Mama Bear. The cubs shivered.

"Don't be afraid," said Mama Bear. "The drifts bring us hard snow, so we can safely walk this land."

"Can we wander where we please?" asked the cubs.

"Only where the land will let us walk," Mama Bear replied. "But hush now, you're snug with me."



Like Tove Jansson's THE MOOMINS AND THE GREAT FLOOD and Francesca Sanna's THE JOURNEY, this pays tribute to the sometimes self-sacrificial role of the mother in reassuring her children when perhaps not sure herself. SNUG comes with a similar lullaby refrain to SAFE's and the structure of inquisitive youngsters' fearful questions about their wider surroundings being reassured. But here a new note of caution is introduced by way of the qualifiers: "Only Where..." "As Long As..."

"Don't be afraid, said Mama Bear. "As long as the ice stays frozen, we will never go hungry."

"Will the ice melt?" asked the cubs.

"Only if we don't take care of it," Mama Bear replied. "But hush now, you're snug with me."

Narrative context aside, these caveats are aimed not at the cubs, obviously, but at ourselves. I don't think we can in all good conscience accuse the Polar Bear community of compromising their Arctic environment, nor rely on them to fix that which we have so royally... endangered.

This poignant picture book is so desperately timely. We're never alone, but it's not all ours; and we should only take what we need.

