

# Meet the Author

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## Esther David

*Esther David's writing is a formidable work of literary art.*  
–Nissim Ezekiel

Esther David, often referred to as an Indian Jewish author, is one of the pioneers in creating the genre Indian Jewish literature in Indian literature in English. A multitasking personality Esther is a novelist, artist, sculptor, journalist, critic and illustrator, all in one.

Born into a Bene Israel Jewish family, her father, Reuben David was a champion of wild life and founder of the Kamala Nehru Zoological Garden and Balvatika near Kankaria Lake in Ahmedabad.

After her schooling, she went to art school at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and learned sculpture under the guidance of famed sculptor Sankho Choudhury. She also began writing. Growing up in the family house in the Walled City of Ahmedabad, where there was a beautiful library, she spent most of her time reading.

Esther began her career as a Professor of Art History, Sculpture and Art Appreciation. Later, she taught at various art and design schools of Ahmedabad like CEPT University and National Institute of Fashion Technology. Many exhibitions of her sculptures and drawings were held from 1968 to 1979 at Jehangir Art Gallery, Taj Art Gallery, Mumbai and later at Gallery Bonvin, Paris in 1992. Collections of her sculptures are in India and abroad, including Ahmedabad City Museum. She was Chairperson of Gujarat State Lalit Kala Akademy and was also coordinator for the West Zone Cultural Center, Udaipur. Even now, she continues to participate in art shows and is passionate about Untutored Art as practiced in the underprivileged areas of Ahmedabad.

Yet, Esther is a full-time author and has penned over 12 books both fiction and non-fiction.

She wrote *The Walled City*, her first novel when she was 46. It is a story of three generations of women in an extended Jewish family in the Walled City of Ahmedabad. It is a “brutally honest” story of Indian Jews under siege in a society unlike others where Jews have made a home. Written in a style which is purely individualistic, it has been widely translated into French, Gujarati and Marathi and was shortlisted for the Premier Liste de Prix Femina in France.

Her novel *Book of Rachel* which received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010, is a touching story about the old who have been left behind in India by their families who migrated to Israel. Described as “a raw mango of a book” as sweet and tart as the memories of an Indian childhood, Rachel, the protagonist, is the last surviving member of the small Bene Israel Jewish community that used to live in the hamlet of Danda near Alibaug on the western coast; near Mumbai. Food as a weapon of social change is detectably brought out in this novel. Rachel’s ability to win over a brooding Judah, a young lawyer, to her cause of saving the crumbling synagogue of which she is the guardian is dependent on her ability to briskly stir up recipes like crispy fried bombil and fresh fish alberas.

Her book *May Father Zoo* is a tribute to her father, who could walk into the cages of lions and tigers. Khushwant Singh says about him and the book:

“When Steve Irwin, the famous crocodile hunter was killed by a sting ray in September, last year, I had concluded that only Australia produced daredevils who could capture dangerous animals like crocodiles, alligators and venomous snakes with their bare hands. I was wrong. Many Indians have been doing so down the generations and do so to this day. Among the most famous was Reuben David of Ahmedabad. He not only captured crocodiles and snakes but also tigers, lions, langoors, bears and a variety of birds in his home and the zoo he set up. He formulated his own herbal medicines to keep his friends in good shape. His life story has been written by his daughter Esther David. Her line drawings illustrate how close he was to birds and beasts: he had been living with them.”

Her novel *Book of Esther* is a historical novel spanning five generations of Bene Israeli Jewish family in India and is actually a chronicle of the unique Jewish community of India. Loosely based on her own family history, she was surprised

while researching on the book that the past could reveal such a treasure trove of stories.

She is also the author of *Shalom India Housing Society* and has co-authored *India's Jewish Heritage - Ritual, Art and Life Cycle* which captures the dilemma of Bene Israel Jews of India.

*By the Sabarmati* is a collection of the 22 most extraordinary stories based on the lives of women, their dreams, aspirations, defeats and victories.

Her latest book *Ahmedabad – City with a Past*, published in 2014, portrays the changing face of the city. She weaves a rich tapestry of a fascinating multicultural city like Ahmedabad with its myths, legends and stories. Her other publications include *The Man with Enormous Wings* dealing with the communal riots of Ahmedabad in 2002.

When *Shalom India Housing Society* was published by Women Unlimited and republished by Feminist Press, U.S.A., Esther was included in the calendar of Hadassah Brandeis University U.S.A. 2010-2011. She was acclaimed as one of twelve best known Jewish women authors of the world. Soon after, she received the Hadassah Brandeis research award, U.S.A. to document the Jews of Gujarat, which has resulted in a book *I am a Seed of the Tree*, to be published by Navjeevan Trust.

Her work has also been featured in anthologies including *City Stories* (Scholastic), *Growing up as a Woman Writer* (Sahitya Akademi), *India's Jewish Heritage* (The Marg Foundation).

Esther David has participated in numerous Seminars and Literary Festivals in India and abroad and currently lives in Ahmedabad.

## **A Chronology**

Born in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

1979: Art critic for Times of India, Ahmedabad edition

1997: First book *Walled City* published

1999: *By the Sabarmati* Published

1999–2000: Writer-in-Residence at Villa Mont Noir, France

2002 : Writer-in-Residence at Maison des Ecrivains et des Traducteurs, St. Nazaire, France.

2002 : Participated in Les Belles Etrangers, Paris, France : a literary conference of 20 Indian writers organized by the French ministry of culture and Salon de Livre, Paris.

2001: Participated in Shakti, a conference held by Ministry of HRD, national seminar, department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad.

2002: *Book of Esther* published

2006: *Book of Rachel* published

2007: *My Father's Zoo* published

2007: Participated in conference of South Asian Women Writers by Womens' World International, New Delhi.

2010: Received Sahitya Akademi award for *Book of Rachel*.

2011: Keynote speaker at International Symposium at Faculty of Humanities at Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar.

2011: Lit For Life – Participated in 20th anniversary of The Hindu Literary Review conference, New Delhi.

2012: Participated at Jaipur Literature Festival.

2012: Participated at Festival of India in Israel.

2012 French translation of *Book of Rachel* – *Le Livre de Rachel* was presented in *Salon du Livre de la Haute Vallee de Chevreuse*.

2014: Participated in an international conference on The Jews of India at Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, IGNCA, New Delhi

2016: *Ahmedabad – City with a Past* published by HarperCollins Publishers.

2015 : Participated at Jaipur Literature Festival.

2016 : Participated at Hyderabad Literature Festival.



## **A Selected Bibliography**

### **Novels**

*The Walled City*, Westland Books, 1997 and Syracuse University Press, 2002

*By The Sabarmati*, Penguin India, 1999

*Book of Esther*, Penguin Viking, 2002

*Book of Rachel*, Penguin Viking, 2006

*Shalom India Housing Society*, Women Unlimited and Feminist Press, USA, 2007

### **Non-fiction**

*The Man with Enormous Wings*, Penguin India, 2010

*Ahmedabad – City with a Past*, Harper Collins India Ltd, 2016

### **Stories**

*8-46 Ane Dhara Dhruji* – Earthquake Stories, Navbharat, 2001

*My Father's Zoo*, Rupa Publications, Pvt, Ltd, 2007

*Gattu Tales*, Orient Black Swan, 2009

### **Coffee Table Books**

*India's Jewish Heritage*, The Marg Foundation, 2003

*The Jewish Heritage of Gujarat*, Demystifying India, co-authored with Anil Mulchandani, 2012

### **Translations**

*La ville en ses Murs* (Translation from English to French)

*Bhint* (Translation from English to Gujarati)

*Tattabandhi* (Translation from English to Gujarati)

*Sabarmati ne kinare* (Translation from English to Gujarati)

*Mara Daddy nu Zoo* (Translation from English to Gujarati)

*Shalom India Résidence* (Translation from English to French)

*Le Livre de Rachel* (Translation from English to French)