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Sahana Ahmed: "As an army kid, I grew up around people who could move mountains"

By Suhit Bombaywala

Jul 02, 2025 05:41 PM IST



The co-founder of Bare Bones Publishing on being an independent publisher, their upcoming titles, and plans to bring out books for children and young adults



Sahana Ahmed of Bare Bones Publishing (Courtesy the subject)

What are the founding principles of Bare Bones Publishing?

Refinement, both in content and design, is a top priority. I try and ensure that everyone associated with our titles feels valued. In some of our books, the author appears as a character in the artwork. We've even designed learning resources that reflect their personalities. Contributors get

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CRICKET

handmade portraits, including our artists. Their names are woven into illustrations and covers. Our books are full of such Easter eggs.

I come from a background of hospitality management. I like creating these moments of delight.

What broad themes or genres interest you?

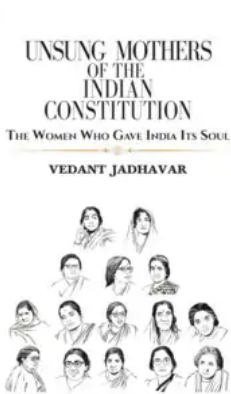
Our current focus is on books for children and young adults. By the end of the year, we will expand our list to include literary fiction. By early 2026, we plan to launch VTRN, an imprint dedicated to inspirational military-themed literature authored by veterans.

What aesthetic and social values would VTRN's titles reflect?

VTRN will publish practical guides and handbooks by military leaders, designed for young and new adults. Think of them as affordable Emily Post-style books, adapted for the Indian youth.

What are some of your upcoming titles?

We have two short story anthologies in development: *The Bare Bones Book of Humour* and *The Bare Bones Book of Speculative Fiction*. *The Song of Time* explores the festivals of India. We are also working on titles focused on responsible tourism and geopolitics for children. In addition, we have five books on managing emotions, each tailored to a specific age group and offering a unique perspective.



₹299; Barebones Publishing

What values do you bring to your book designs?

The more I learn about book design, the more I realise I was always meant to do this. I love collaborating with artists and

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illustrators. It's fascinating how simply allowing the text to breathe can elevate the reading experience, especially in fiction.

You are a writer with multiple books published, and you also mentioned working in hospitality management. Do these experiences blend in the way you approach publishing? To expand the scope of the question, how does your family and cultural background also play a part in this enterprise?

As a writer, I've always paid close attention to the editorial and marketing aspects of publishing. To further understand production and distribution, I also attended a publishing course. Ideas come to me constantly, but the ability to execute them — that I owe to my time as a hotel management student. As an army kid, I grew up around people who could move mountains, sometimes quite literally. *Nischay Kar Apni Jeet Karon* — the motto of the Sikh Regiment — that's my personal mantra as well.

What are your future aspirations for Bare Bones Publishing?

Our immediate goal is to achieve operational sustainability. We are already creating books we believe will stand the test of time. The next step is to ensure they reach as many readers as possible. Also, I would love to publish graphic novels.

What circumstances led to your opening a publishing house?

I'm a naturally curious person. Having worked across multiple sectors and having built several communities from the ground up, I realised I had a strong network of subject matter experts, good organisational skills, and the discipline and resources to build a brand. I had the means to invest, I'm not afraid of hard work, and I learn quickly.

With apologies to Toni Morrison: If there's a book you want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must make it happen.

What are your sources of inspiration in the context of BBP?

Personally, I am inspired by architecture, music, cinema, and good food. I am especially drawn to works that push the boundaries of skill, originality, and scale.

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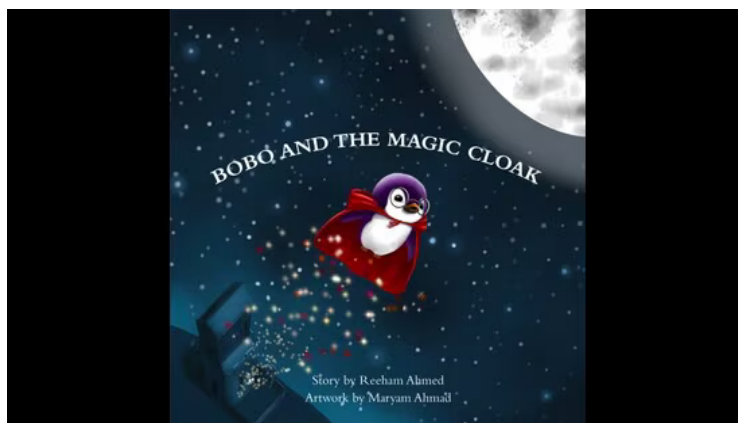
In the context of Bare Bones, I wish to follow in the footsteps of Satyajit Ray, PG Wodehouse, Goscinnny and Uderzo, RK Narayan, RK Laxman, Ajit Ninan, Pran, Vishnu Sharma, Mark Twain... People who shaped my imagination as a child.

The role models mentioned by you are similar in some ways. They address a large audience and also adopt a broadly humanistic view. What drew you to them?

At least once a day, I remind myself why I make books. As a home-schooled child in remote Manipur, with few friends my age, books were my only companions. I was simply happy to read, anything and everything. If nothing else was around, I would read the labels on toiletries. In many ways, I do what I do for that inner child. My role models are the people who shaped my imagination in those early years.

As an independent publisher, what does your day look like?

I wish I could ration my time more prudently, but apart from editorial duties, I also manage art direction, accounting, production, packaging, shipping, and publicity. Often, these tasks overlap. Thankfully, I am good at multitasking, and I don't mind the mundane. I enjoy every step of the process. No two days are the same, but I have not taken any breaks this year. There are no weekends for me.



₹499; Bare Bones Publishing

Does publishing have an impact on your own writing work? In your experience, does the role of the writer help or hinder the publisher's part?

Being a writer is what led me to publishing. It also gave me a deep appreciation for the publisher's role in a book's success. I'm uncompromising when it comes to ensuring our authors have the best possible experience. As for my own writing, it still needs more attention from me. I haven't yet written the

book my mentors would wholeheartedly endorse, but all in good time. Books can't be rushed. I should know.

Suhit Bombaywala's factual and fictive writing appears in India and abroad. He tweets @suhitbombaywala.

Children's B

Next Story

Ten lessons I learned from Kaziranga

By Arefa Tehsin

Jul 02, 2025 05:02 AM IST



An unforgettable safari in the magnificent national park in Assam offers up some insights and a few helpful lessons to live by



A magnificent rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park (Shutterstock)

The origin of the word 'safari' lies in Kiswahili, which built upon 'safar', the Arabic word for travel. For a late riser like me, who hasn't seen sunrises for many years, it can equate to 'suffer' too. Still, Aditya, armed with his cameras, and me with my SPF50, decided to do all the five ranges of Kaziranga National Park. We had three days to spot elephant herds, hornbills with their magnificent beak-dos and of course, rhinos — bouncers ready with their horns to topple your jeep. It's no wonder that they'd like to do that. Unbridled poaching for the rhino's horn is what resulted in Kaziranga being declared a sanctuary in the mid-1900s.

From the very first morning, as we rode on an elephant's back, it turned out to be a 'safar' of lessons. Nothing quite puts human superiority in perspective like having to cling onto an elephant's back while it nonchalantly swats away

branches that could easily knock you into next week.



Through Kaziranga on elephant back. (Shutterstock)

The first lesson learnt - Animals are not #soulssearching in the forest like you are, they are searching for food.

Here are the other life lessons:

Be Thick Skinned

A rhino and her baby, not caring about the herds of hog and swamp deer, the two wild boars grazing nearby or our jeep inching closer, kept munching on grass, cuddling, and playing. The baby took a power nap. The mama didn't even give those of us in the jeep, who had stopped breathing, a cursory glance, let alone ask our 'good name'.

Lesson: Let watchers watch and talkers talk. Being thick skinned is not just important for your survival, but for your sanity too.

Family is not about who you look like, but who you look out for:

As an elephant family emerged from the grass, we saw how the ladies were not only protecting the little ones, but also a pregnant member. Who would dare take panga with them? Not even the burning bright tigers.



Hornbills (Shutterstock)

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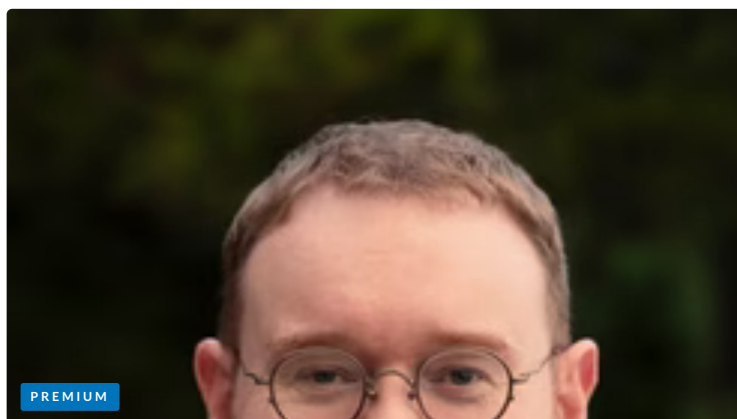
Jim Rion: "Fair-play mystery is still alive and well in Japan"

By [Arunima Mazumdar](#)

Jun 30, 2025 11:33 PM IST



On writing a book on the history of sake in Yamaguchi, translating Strange Pictures by Uketsu and the challenges of translating from Japanese to English



Jim Rion (Courtesy the subject)

How did you end up living in Yamaguchi?

It was all just an accident, really. I was living and studying in Germany before I came here. Just as I was coming to the end of my time there and wondering where to go next, a friend from university emailed out of the blue. She said she was working at an English school in Yamaguchi that was looking

for a teacher; was I interested? And I thought, "Why not give it a try?" I'm glad I did it, because here I am, 20 years later, and happy as can be.

What got you interested in sake and writing about the Yamaguchi breweries?

The first thing was just enjoying the drink. I came here in 2004, and Yamaguchi was right at the start of a big jump in sake quality and recognition. So, the people around me were all excited to share the local drink with this new guy. Over time, as I began to learn more about the brewing process, I was attracted to all the craft skill that goes into it. I've always been a fan of traditional craft and making things by hand, and sake is certainly a good example.

Then, when I started working as a translator, I saw my position as a way to both get closer to that craft and maybe also help share these wonderful local products with the world.



"I came here in 2004, and Yamaguchi was right at the start of a big jump in sake quality and recognition. So, the people around me were all excited to share the local drink with this new guy."

Having interacted with Uketsu's work closely as a translator, what stood out for you as a dominant theme in the book?

is an unusual book that you can just read for the chills and the mysteries but also rewards some deeper reading and exploration of themes. As a translator, of course I wanted to get as deep as possible to make sure I didn't miss anything when I was bringing it into English. I won't go into spoiler territory, but as I went through the book over and over, I came to feel that the essential theme of Strange Pictures is motherhood, and how it can be both a source of boundless love and also a terribly dangerous thing.

You've mentioned in your blog about the challenges of translating – the Kanji characters, the name of the blog in chapter one, etc. What are some of the most common challenges when it comes to translating Japanese into English?

I think there are two things about Japanese that make it particularly challenging to translate for me personally – other people surely have their own lists. One is purely linguistic, and one is stylistic.

The linguistic issue is that sentences often leave out the subject, ie who it is that is speaking or doing some action, which we can't do as much in English. In Japanese, the subject is usually understood from context, but sometimes it is intentionally left vague. In the mystery and horror genres in particular, not knowing is often essential to the impact of a story. The need for English to know the subject of a sentence introduces a danger of ruining the surprise.

The real challenge, then, is not necessarily that of deciding who did something, but how to write a meaningful English sentence without ruining some kind of plot point.

The stylistic issue is that Japanese writing uses repetition in ways that English writing simply doesn't. For example, it's very common in written dialogue for one person to make a statement, then for the narrative text to repeat the idea in other words. So, you might get an exchange that would be directly translated like, "This isn't just an accident. Someone killed him." He was saying this was deliberate? In other words, murder?

Which is three ways of saying the exact same thing, and people reading in English, without that kind of style, might get tired of a novel that did that for every major exchange. So, I have to both stay true to the tone and the meaning of the original while still making the English text something people will enjoy reading.



"Strange Pictures is an unusual book that you can just read for the chills and the mysteries but also rewards some deeper reading and exploration of themes."

What do you make of Uketsu's enigmatic disposition?

With respect to the fact that he never shows his face, he has a somewhat unconventional profile of a YouTuber-turned-author, the narrative he chooses to engage in is quite different. I've heard Uketsu himself talk about this several times now, and I think that the way people are focused on his mask and body-stocking is an excellent example of organic identity building. He has said in several interviews that he was simply concerned about preserving anonymity as a guy making those "weird videos" at the start of his YouTube career, but now they've become essential to the Uketsu mystique. I don't think he ever dreamed he would become as famous as he is, so I doubt he had much of a plan.

So, the unconventional profile and narrative are probably just the result of him making it up as he goes along. Luckily, he seems to be quite good at that. It all really does work to build the mystery and fascination with everything he does, doesn't it?

As for the YouTuber-turned-author path, he has said that he hadn't originally intended to become an author, but someone in publishing saw his mystery videos and said if he wrote books, they'd be hits. Clearly, that person was right.

From a contemporary novel to the classics, tell us about your understanding of Seishi Yokomizo's novels and honkaku as a genre, something that was in vogue almost five decades ago.

Honkaku mystery has been a significant presence in Japan's publishing market for decades, even as a target of rebellion as some writers in the 1960s started to feel it was getting too

mired in orthodoxy and trope. Of course, Yokomizo was a foundational figure in the whole Japanese mystery genre, and his works are still popular in Japan today. One of the things that I find so interesting is just how dark his stories are, and how they seem to toy with supernatural elements, even while ending up being purely rooted in the natural world. I think in that, Yokomizo reflects the influence of Edogawa Ranpo, the "founding father" of Japanese mystery who, in turn, was deeply influenced by Edgar Allan Poe.

So, he includes an undercurrent of the grotesque, the corrupt, and the twisted that goes beyond the more mundane murders that populated the works of Agatha Christie or Ellery Queen. If you're looking for a Western writer for comparison, it's probably John Dickson Carr, who also tried to evoke horror fiction tropes like ghosts, vampires, and witches, while remaining purely natural and scientific in the end.

And today, "fair-play" mystery is still alive and well in Japan. This is the age of Shin-honkaku, the "New orthodox" mystery movement that started in the 1980s — or even the Shin-Shin-Honkaku, "The new new-orthodox." I think some might even call this a golden age, with young writers taking up the challenge of writing fair-play mysteries that bring fresh takes on the well-trodden ground of locked rooms and impossible murders. Which explains why Yokomizo's books are still in print, and the many film and television adaptations are still being watched.

Of and , which one was more fun to translate and why?

I have to say that in terms of "fun," has to be the winner. It was just so satisfying to follow as all the threads wove together in the end to reveal... Well, I'll stop there. No spoilers!

There was a lot that was rewarding about , of course. It gave me a way to learn about Japanese history, such as the fall of short-lived noble classes that were modelled on Europe. But then, when I think of what I gain from translation, I have to say connections to authors is one of the biggest rewards — and unfortunately, Yokomizo is no longer with us. Uketsu, though, is and I have been lucky enough to get to speak and work with him.



"There was a lot that was rewarding about The Devil's Flute Murders, of course. It gave me a way to learn about Japanese history, such as the fall of short-lived noble classes that were modelled on Europe."

What are you working on next?

The next book from Uketsu, *Strange Houses*, is coming out in the summer, and we're just finishing up edits on that. Then, I have another unannounced mystery translation coming from Pushkin sometime in 2025 or 2026, maybe, before the next Uketsu book, so my schedule is pretty full for the next year or so. But I'm also trying to find time to work on my own book, a non-fiction look at ceramic artists in Japan. I hope that by making this so public, I'll feel compelled to finish what I started!

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