



Girls Burn Brighter

Shobha Rao



Author Background

Shobha Rao moved to the United States from India at the age of seven. She is the author of the short story collection, *An Unrestored Woman*, and the novel, *Girls Burn Brighter*. She won the 2014 Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Fiction, and her story *Kavitha and Mustafa* was chosen by T.C. Boyle for inclusion in the *Best American Short Stories 2015*. She is currently the Grace Paley Teaching Fellow at The New School in New York City.

Rao's debut novel, *Girls Burn Brighter*, has been praised for its "sustained and elegant prose", though USA Today said that the "empowering message gets lost in the overheated language and imagery"; the review concluded that once "Rao learns to dial down the melodrama, she'll be a formidable writer". Another reviewer calls Rao "a natural storyteller". Rao's other work, *An Unrestored Woman*, is a short story collection that was called "a breathless and fascinating read".

Book Summary

Poornima and Savitha have three strikes against them. They are poor, they are driven, and they are girls. When Poornima was just a toddler, she was about to fall into a river. Her mother, beside herself, screamed at her father to grab her. But he hesitated: "I was standing there, and I was thinking...She's just a girl. Let her go...That's the thing with girls, isn't it...You think, Push. That's all it would take. Just one little push."

After her mother's death, Poornima has very little kindness in her life. She is left to take care of her siblings until her father can find her a suitable husband. So, when Savitha enters their household, Poornima is intrigued by the joyful, independent-minded girl. Suddenly their Indian village doesn't feel quite so claustrophobic, and Poornima begins to imagine a life beyond the arranged marriage her father is desperate to secure for her. But when a devastating act of cruelty drives Savitha away, Poornima leaves behind everything she has ever known to find her friend.

Her journey takes her into the darkest corners of India's underworld, on a harrowing cross-continental journey, and eventually to an apartment complex in Seattle. Alternating between the girls' perspectives as they face ruthless obstacles, *Girls Burn Brighter* introduces two heroines who never lose the hope that burns within them.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Why do you think the author chose to begin with the story about the old woman and the temple doors? What tone does that set for the rest of the novel?
- ❖ How is friendship depicted in these pages? Why do you think Poornima and Savitha are so drawn to each other? What qualities do they share, and what qualities distinguish each of them? Do they change over the course of the novel?
- ❖ Poornima and Savitha have very different relationships with their fathers. How do those relationships shape their childhoods and their worldviews? Do you feel any sympathy or understanding toward Poornima's father?
- ❖ Savitha tells Poornima "I'm the one with wings." What do you think she means by that? How are bird and flight imagery used throughout the novel?
- ❖ Poornima remembers a story from childhood, when she stole a candy and her mother told her to never take what isn't hers. She reflects, "Don't you see, Amma, if only I had taken the things I wasn't meant to take. If only I'd had the courage." Are there examples after this moment in her story when she does take what she isn't supposed to? How does she exercise control over her own life?
- ❖ Savitha tells Poornima a story about a crow and an elephant, which Poornima thinks about often as she is searching for her friend. Savitha says, "Here's what matters. Understand this, Poornima: that it's better to be swallowed whole than in pieces. Only then can you win. No elephant can be too big. Only then no elephant can do you harm." What do you think she means? Do you think Poornima and Savitha are swallowed whole by their experiences? Why or why not?
- ❖ *Girls Burn Brighter* addresses some of the most difficult issues facing women and girls today: rape, domestic violence, prostitution, sex trafficking, and abuse. Did Poornima's and Savitha's stories change the way you think about these issues? Did you find the novel's ultimate message to be at all optimistic or hopeful? Why or why not?
- ❖ The novel's final scene is left ambiguous. How did you feel about the ending? What do you imagine happening to Poornima and Savitha next? Do you think there is the possibility of a new life for them in America?

References and further reading

- ❖ Author website: <http://shobharaowrites.com/>
- ❖ Publisher website: <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250074256>
- ❖ Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shobha_Rao