



*The Night Diary*

Written by Veera Hiranandani

Kokila, 2018, 272 pp.

ISBN: 978-0735228511

2019 Jane Addams Children's Book Award

Honor Book, Books for Older Children

*The Night Diary* intimately reveals the impact of India's partition into two countries in 1947 as the political events and increasing religious sectarianism in one country become personal. Twelve-year-old Nisha finds solace and a place to express her innermost thoughts -- the ones she seems unable to put into spoken words--in the diary that Kazi, the family cook, has given her on her birthday. Although she has no memory of her mother, who died when she and her twin brother, Amil, were born, Nisha writes lovingly to her. The twins' mother was Muslim, but their father, a doctor in Mirpur Khas, is Hindu, and their mixed marriage contravened social and cultural mores at the

time. Now, living in the region that has become Pakistan, religious tensions have escalated into violence. No longer safe, the family has little choice but to move to Jodhpur, India.

Escaping on foot, they face unremitting danger on their journey, including threats from other travelers and extreme heat and dehydration. Understandably, Nisha and Amil occasionally misstep and their small errors almost end in calamity. After Amil accidentally spills the precious water he is carrying, the family almost dies in the desert. While the family is in hiding at an uncle's house, the desperately lonely Nisha pursues a proscribed friendship with Hafa, a Muslim girl who lives in a neighboring house. When the girls are caught, Nisha's family is forced to continue their inexorable journey.

The young siblings, who both have some personal challenges, share a powerful emotional bond. Nisha is a selective mute who communicates deftly through writing, while Amil is a talker who struggles with the written word, owing to a learning disability. Nisha notes, "I felt the things he couldn't feel and he said the things I couldn't say, except to him. That's how it worked" (108-109). Nisha gains strength and wisdom from her writing. In her diary, she shrewdly critiques the "insane" (p. 28) partition and the impending turmoil.

"So as of today, the ground I'm standing on is not India anymore. And Kazi is supposed to live in one place and we're supposed to leave and find a new home. Is there a Muslim girl sitting in her house right now who has to leave her home and go to a new country that's not even called India? Does she feel confused and scared, too?" (p. 90)

She asks philosophical questions, "Is it the brain that makes people love and hate? Or is it the heart?" (p. 88) and astutely reflects on the humanity of those caught up in the cruel chaos; she observes the fear in their eyes and she is awakened to the fact that they have much

in common. In fits and starts, Nisha finds her voice, tentatively stepping toward a future in a world that is nothing like her beloved homeland.

Veera Hiranandani's exquisite writing brims with vivid imagery: "The sun sank into the horizon and exploded in hot oranges and blues" (p. 154). The author's references to cooking give the novel a rich, cultural texture and a sense of mood. Nisha never forgets Kazi's maxim, "Making food always brings people together" (p. 95), and takes her cooking seriously. She frequently uses food metaphors to express emotion: "I needed all the feelings to stop boiling like a pot of dal and be cool enough for me to taste them" (p.36). Food becomes especially symbolic on the family's interminable trek:

"The dirt felt hard underfoot and the sun beamed hotly on our bodies drying them out even more. I thought of Kazi and the dried apricots, mangoes, and tomatoes he used to make by hanging thin slices in the sun. I loved the chewiness of the dried fruit, their taste pure and sun-filled, no water to interrupt the flavor. Amil never liked to eat dried fruit. He said it reminded him of the skin of very old people. I thought of us shriveling up like pieces of sliced mangoes." (p.136)

The author chronicles what is likely to be (at least for young readers in the United States) a lesser-known chapter in world history, and she offers the perspectives of being caught in the middle of violence and pushed and pulled by conflicting forces. By drawing on experiences from her paternal family's exodus from Pakistan and relaying events in diary-form, the author adds authenticity and a personal dimension to her interpretation of partition era events. As readers pore over confidences shared in Nisha's letters, we are made aware of the suffering caused by forced migrations, and find it impossible not to make connections to the plight of refugees today.

In 2018, *The Night Diary* received the Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature and was named as "Best Book of the Year" by a variety of entities, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *School Library Journal*, and *NPR*. In 2019, the novel was not only selected as an Addams Award Honor book, but also received Honors from the Newbery Award and Walter Dean Myers Award selection committees.

Although readers may know what a refuge is, it is unlikely that they will know what it feels like to be one. Although Hiranandani focuses on the partition era in India, her story is easily relatable to the many populations today that are forced to leave happy homes for reasons of safety. The theme of forced migrations can be extended by pairing this novel with *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi (2018) and *Escape from Aleppo* by N.H. Senzai (2018). Like *The Night Diary*, the 2017 novel by Supriya Kelkar, *Ahimsa*, prompts readers to consider how all people can live and work together harmoniously. Unfolding in the years that lead up to India's partition, the novel chronicles increasing tensions and divisions under colonial rule and the practice of "ahimsa," non-violent resistance to the British government.

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[Editor's Note: This book has been previously reviewed in WOW Review Volume XI Issue 3. (<https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/xi-3/8/>)]



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