

## Reviews of *Climbing the Stairs* by Padma Venkatraman

### Excerpts of reviews from Institutional Review Journals

...Venkatraman makes a memorable debut with this lushly evoked novel set in India during World War II...More than a feisty Cinderella story ...this novel vivifies a unique era and culture as it movingly expresses how love and hope can blossom even under the most dismal of circumstances...

- *Starred review, Publishers Weekly*

...In her first novel, Venkatraman paints an intricate and convincing backdrop of a conservative Brahmin home in a time of change...

- *Starred review, Carolyn Phelan, Booklist*

...*Climbing the Stairs* is the coming-of-age story of a young feminist who witnesses both violence and peaceful resistance in India during the WWII era... Venkatraman achieved her goal of interweaving threads of Indian culture, diverse religious beliefs, feminism, war and peace into a compelling story...

- *Lynda Brill Comerford, Publishers Weekly, "Flying Start"*

...In an author's note, Venkatraman comments on several elements of the novel, including Gandhi's nonviolent revolution, Indian volunteers in the British Army during World War II, and her family history...

- *Booklinks, Best New Books for the Classroom*

...Opening with the festival of Krishna Jayanthi, Venkatraman so skillfully weaves Hindu words, traditions, and religious festivals into her story that readers understand the vocabulary and appreciate the beliefs... Vidya achieves the psychological distance to ponder cultural and religious similarities and differences by way of her philosophically minded appa and her Jewish best friend... With a delightfully strong female protagonist who struggles between tradition and the values she holds dear, this novel will capture the imaginations of many readers...

- *Cynthia Winfield, VOYA, 5 Q 4P S*

British-occupied India during World War II is the setting for this impressive debut novel.... Thought-provoking and deeply moving.

- *Booksense, Notable*

...A welcome addition to the small but growing body of historical fiction about growing up female in India... This novel excels in its detailed depiction of a Brahmin girlhood and family life during a time of intense social and political change...

- *Kirkus*

...a poignant look at a young woman's vigilance to break from expectations and create her own destiny amid a country's struggle for independence...

- *Rita Soltan, School Library Journal*

## Excerpts of reviews from Newspapers and Magazines

*Climbing the Stairs*...is a passionate story...In the novel, books serve as a saving grace... The central theme of the novel, violence and nonviolence, will appeal to an international audience...

- Michelle Reale, *India Currents*

After reading this fine, often heart-breaking novel, I noticed that it's for "young adults." Well, I'm a 'youngish adult,' and I loved it.

- Sam Coale, *The Providence Journal*

Sam Coale is a Wheaton professor, a frequent reviewer and constant reader - but a 'youngish adult'? Well, in spirit, certainly.

- Editor, Arts Section, *The Providence Sunday Journal*

...Padma Venkatraman's debut novel works on many levels. Marketed for young adults, it's a story complex and rich enough to hold an adult's attention. Its setting in colonial India during the early days of World War II brings to mind our current occupation of Iraq. And the heroine's struggles for freedom can be taken at face value, as a young girl's coming of age, or as a deeper exploration of oppression... The story becomes one of emancipation - a young girl's growing self awareness, her struggle to be treated as an individual with dignity, her yearning for education. This parallels the Indians' determination to shake off the yoke of colonialism, and the wider struggle to stop Hitler from exterminating the Jews. The thread connecting these themes is the Hindu religion's commitment to nonviolence, and the inevitable conflicts that result. All of this is woven simply but artfully together. The beauty of Venkatraman's prose is that it can be read on all these levels. A young adult can understand the story and the issues it raises, while adults will appreciate the subtle intersecting of plot and theme.... This novel is an important story about the human struggle for freedom and dignity that can be enjoyed by readers of all ages...

- *Grace magazine*

...A bestseller may be born in Westerly on Thursday...

- Marshall Williams, *The Westerly Sun*, Page 1

...*Climbing the Stairs* is already climbing the charts and its official publishing date isn't until May... In a letter that accompanied a special galley mailing of the novel, Douglas Whiteman, executive vice president of Penguin, called the book "a beautifully written story of love, loss and the power of one's beliefs" and a "truly special book" which is "fascinating and heart-breaking, but redeeming at the same time."

- Jan Wenzel, *Quad Angles*

...Young Adult novels are difficult to review for several reasons...the genre "Young Adult literature" is in itself a tricky label because it assumes that the book will be predominant read by just one particular narrow cultural subset... Thankfully, Padma Venkatraman has put a few of these issues to rest, or at least rendered them temporarily irrelevant... one of the most successful aspects of the novel is...open-ended...allows her thematic questions to resonate more fully and widely... Venkatraman should encounter success, I suspect, since her first foray into fiction is an enjoyable addition to the genre - whichever genre you choose to put it into, that is.

- Evan P. Schneider, *Newport Mercury*

The book explores many themes - a young girl's coming of age; feminism, colonialism; and the Hindu tenets of nonviolence. Venkatraman did not intentionally write an allegory of the war in Iraq, but she recognized that the book can be read that way... Marketed by G. P. Putnam's Sons as a young adult novel...[in] its language and subtlety, it reads like an adult novel...Readers who ignore such labels will find a rich, complex story...

- *Betty Cotter, The South County Independent*

It is not everyday that someone who's made a professional career out of field science becomes a book author... But...despite pursuing a career in decidedly left-brain oriented disciplines, Venkatraman says fiction writing has always been her passion... *Climbing the Stairs* has already received several positive reviews, snagging a Book Sense "notable pick" ...as well as ...starred reviews from Booklist magazine and Publishers Weekly. It has also been nominated for Reading Across Rhode Island, a state-sponsored project that promotes reading...

- *India New England, 2008 Woman of the Year Finalist Supplement*

## Reviews by other writers

...An outstanding debut novel...

- *Susan Stan, Editor "The World Through Children's Books"*

Padma Venkatraman artfully weaves the large issues of freedom (and the vigilance it requires), monotheism, gender, self-possession, pacifism, and the deep well of literacy into a charged narrative of a young woman's coming to terms with her changing world and her distinct inner laws. The novel takes place in the early years of WWII when Japan was pressing India. A terrific book for anyone ...

- *Scott Hightower, Author of "Natural Trouble" and other award-winning poetry collections*

...could not put it down until I finished every page! I was very taken with Vidya--she was very three-dimensionally drawn--and really hated to see the story end... It is even more remarkable when someone like Vidya bucks the system because she knows it is not just, and through discovering the genesis of her religion, she realizes that such prejudice was never the intention of its founders... an impressive work!

- *Nancy Lee Cecil, Author, Raising Peaceful Children in a Violent World*

...remarkable in terms of the layout, themes and the main character Vidya...cleverly woven the story through several South Indian festivals...The style only looks simple, but it is deceptively simple - it is a lot of hard work..."

- *Anatharangan Sundaresan, Translator and Tamil Literary Critic*

*Climbing the Stairs* is a wonderful, well written, and thought provoking book that navigates the historical and political context of India during WWII, commenting and using it as a backdrop without letting it overwhelm the story. There are so many threads beautifully woven together."

- *Kelly Easton, Award-winning author of Hiroshima Dreams and other novels*

## Reader reviews

... With the war going on in Iraq, I know that many families will find it easy to relate to the character of Kitta...

- Jane, Educator

.. a wonderful and fresh voice...appeals to both young adults and adults alike. For both the groups, the story's backdrop can offer interesting insights into India's political and social fabric during World War II and the independence struggle... Kitta makes some important decisions for himself in line with his own ideals... A fascinating plot...fascinating characters...a pleasure to read...I would be missing the point if I didn't recognize the fact [Kitta and Vidya are] both equally strong-willed and important characters...

- a reader on [www.saffrontree.org](http://www.saffrontree.org)

*Climbing the Stairs* by Padma Venkatraman is a novel about a teenage girl, Vidya, growing up in India during World War II... I enjoyed how this book has a lot of very interesting historical and cultural information... This book illustrates the struggles of India as a country and how war can tear families apart... While many families fought nonviolently against the British occupation...others chose to fight along side the British in the quest to defeat Hitler...This is one of the best historical fiction novels I have read. The balance between plot and history makes it so enjoyable. I would most definitely recommend this book to any reader, especially one who loves historical fiction.

- Haley DiBlase, NK Library Teen Review

Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to have your marriage arranged for you by your family? Have you ever imagined how it would feel to permanently live under the same roof as your extended family? Have you ever known the pain of living without any rights or a voice of your own? If so, Venkatraman's *Climbing the Stairs* is the book for you. This book gives readers a glimpse into what it means to live in a traditional Indian joint family and of the restrictions imposed on people due to social and cultural norms. It speaks to the searing pain of oppression and the struggle for independence, both national and personal. Vidya, the protagonist of this story, is a curious girl who tries to make sense of the changing world in which she finds herself. India is in the midst of its freedom struggle against British rule and there are strong opinions on how this is to be attained. Vidya grapples with the question of "means and ends" and "love and loyalty," while remaining true to her still forming beliefs.

Despite circumstances that inalterably change the course of Vidya's life, this courageous spitfire of a girl navigates her circumstances to uncompromisingly achieve her goals. Venkatraman's *Climbing the Stairs* is a fast paced book full of memorable characters, a strong story line, and a satisfying conclusion. I highly recommend readers accompany Vidya on her journey; they will be changed just as she is.

- Sunita Bhargava

This is my pick for next year's Newbery Awards. A beautifully written coming-of-age story about a girl growing up in India during World War II. Vidya loves to read and looks forward to going to college someday. When her father is injured, Vidya and her family must move into Grandfather's traditional Hindu household, where Vidya is forbidden even to climb the stairs to Grandfather's library...

- Joanne Fritz, Virtual Bookshelf

Lovely book! I think that our readers who've enjoyed Shabanu will like this, too--it's another affecting look at a culture and time unfamiliar to most of them seen through the eyes of a strong young woman.

- *Kathleen Fernandes, Virtual Bookshelf*

Learned a lot about Hinduism, traditional Indian culture, and British colonization all while sympathizing with a unique protagonist. A touching story that doesn't end in the usual way.

- *Diandra Pendelton-Thompson, Virtual Bookshelf*

An eloquent glimpse into an oft-forgotten piece of British and Indian history, addressing the issues facing young Indian women during the second World War. Vidya has been raised in a liberal Brahmin household, but when her father sustains irreversible brain damage during a protest march, her entire family goes to live with her traditional extended family.

Independent Vidya wants to go to college, rather than get married, but will her grandfather allow it, especially after her brother goes against Brahmin principles to enlist in the army.

- *Stephanie Wyman, Virtual Bookshelf*

Loved it!!!

- *Kandace Hummel, Virtual Bookshelf*

This book is amazing! I was shelving in the YA section and I came across it. I'm really into Bollywood movies so it caught my eye. Once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. It was an easy read, but it taught me a lot about the Indian culture and was very interesting. The characters are very likeable and easy to empathize with. The story is complex and the ending is more than satisfying. I highly recommend this book.

- *Karah Russell, Virtual Bookshelf*

Not quite what I was expecting, but really good anyway. However, this book takes commitment to see it through. Not because of its length, but because the story starts out really sad and filled with injustice that aggravates you to the point of wanting to strangle some of the characters and just quit. (or maybe that was just me) However, the story does get better, and it turns into a very enjoyable and interesting read. To top it all off, it is absolutely clean except for a short scene of shocking violence in the beginning.

- *Laurel Plemmons, Virtual Bookshelf*

I honestly couldn't put it down once. The story line is complex and truly makes you think. It was written beautifully and really made me feel, see, and understand the Indian culture.

- *Katie Hesketh, Virtual Bookshelf*

In this multi-layered novel, Padma Venkatraman weaves together the themes of colonialism, feminism and pacifism without sacrificing story or character. Young adults will read it and understand it; adults will find the story line entertaining as well as thought-provoking. This would be a great book club selection and is sure to inspire spirited discussion.

- *Iggy from Amazon.com*

Venkatraman writes vividly and with great authenticity about the mood of the times...The account of young Vidya's time spent in isolation from the rest of the family in the 'outhouse' set aside for menstruating women is worth the price of the book.

- *Travis Forsyth Sheman, amazon.com customer reviews*

## Anonymous reader reviews

"...I couldn't put the book down once I started reading it..."

"...I thoroughly enjoyed the book...an exciting read...an exceptional job..."

"... I read *Climbing the Stairs* with fascination...a valuable novel..."

"...Your book is an outstanding one. Congratulations!..."

"...a fascinating and appealing story..."

The background of the slide is a book cover for 'Climbing the Stairs'. The cover features a woman in a patterned dress climbing a white staircase that leads up to a bright, arched doorway. The title 'Climbing the Stairs' is written in a large, elegant, white serif font across the middle of the cover. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of yellow, orange, and red.

Climbing the Stairs