

HOW TO START YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB

Think it would be hard to start your own book club? Think again!

All you need is a little bit of organization and some friends who are as excited about the books they read as you are.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

The best way to find people to be in your reading group is to ask your friends.

Think of all the people you know who like to read, and ask them to join. If you still don't feel like you have enough people, ask each of your friends to bring someone else. You can usually get a good discussion going with six to eight people, but any number that is comfortable for you will work. If you're having trouble finding enough cool people to form your reading group, check with your school, local library, or bookstore to see if there's a group that you can join.

Figure out when and where you want to meet.

Some groups meet once a month, some meet every other month. You could get together at someone's house, in a park, on the beach, or in your school's library. If it sounds too official and overwhelming to decide all the "wheres" and "whens" right now, don't worry! It's your group and so you get to make all the decisions. All you have to do is get together once, and you can work out the rest of the details later.

Decide how you will choose books and how the discussions will be run.

Maybe you have a favorite author that you and your friends would like to focus on. Or maybe you want to take turns picking your favorite book. Maybe one person likes to talk and would like to lead the discussion, or maybe you would rather just all get together and talk about the books you are reading. If you get stuck, you can often find discussion questions online (try the publisher's website) or at your local library or bookstore.

The most important thing to remember is that there's no right or wrong way to have a reading group. Do what you're comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!

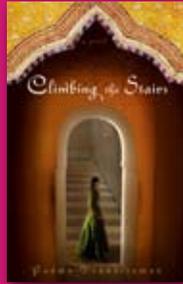
For more discussion guides to get your group going, visit www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians.



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What if your only dream was forbidden?



978-0-399-2474-6 (HC) • \$16.99



978-0-14-241490-3 (PB) • \$9.99

Climbing the Stairs
by Padma Venkatraman
Ages 12 up • Grades 7 up

In this brilliant, critically acclaimed novel about defying tradition to realize your dreams, fifteen-year-old Vidya hopes to go to college, an unusual aspiration for a girl living in British-occupied India during World War II. But when tragedy strikes and Vidya and her family are forced to live with their relatives in a traditional household, where women are meant to be married, not educated.

Breaking the rules, she finds solace in her grandfather's forbidden library. Here she meets Raman, who treats Vidya like an equal and encourages her education. Then Vidya's brother leaves to join the Indian volunteer army, and Vidya's life gets caught up in political and personal turmoil. In the middle of all this chaos, will Vidya be able to hold on to her dreams and make them a reality?

★ "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." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ "In her first novel, Venkatraman paints an intricate and convincing backdrop of a conservative Brahmin home in a time of change." —*Booklist*, starred review

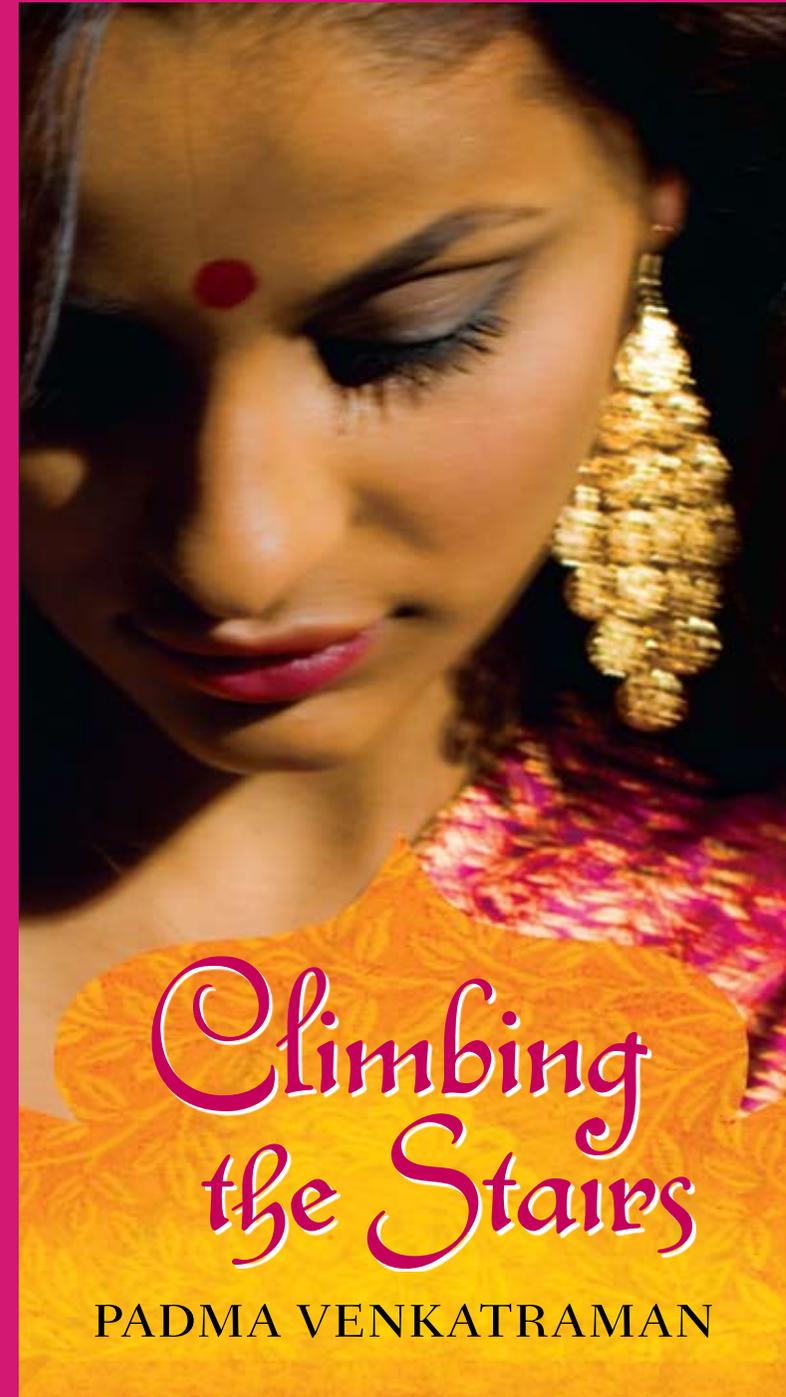
★ "With a delightfully strong female protagonist . . . this novel will capture the imaginations of many readers." —*VOYA*, starred review



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DISCUSSION GUIDE



Climbing the Stairs

PADMA VENKATRAMAN

ABOUT THE BOOK



Fifteen-year-old Vidya dreams of going to college, an unusual aspiration for a girl living in British-occupied India during World War II. But then tragedy strikes, and Vidya and her family are forced to live with their relatives in a traditional household, where women are meant to be married, not educated.

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A 2009 ALA Best Books for Young Adults

A Book Sense Notable Pick

A *Publishers Weekly* starred review

A *VOYA* starred review

A *Booklist* Editor's Choice

A Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

A 2009 CCBC Choice

A 2009 Capitol Choice

A 2009 Boston Authors Club Annual Award

A 2009 Amelia Bloomer Project selection

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



PADMA VENKATRAMAN has published over a hundred popular science articles and 20 nonfiction books on a variety of subjects. She was born in Chennai, India, but she is a United States citizen. She has studied in the United States for most of her life, attaining a PhD in oceanography from The College of William and Mary. She now lives in Rhode Island with her husband and daughter.

This novel is loosely based on family stories about Padma's mother and father, who were both living in India during World War II. As an adolescent, Padma's mother spent her evenings in a library reading to her baby sister, much like Vidya does.

Visit the author's website at www.climbingthestairsbook.com and her blog at padmasbooks.blogspot.com.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As Vidya's story begins, how is her home life described? How do the descriptions of her home life, her relationships with family, and her own personal objectives inform what happens in the story?
- As the novel begins, in what small ways does Vidya follow Indian traditions, and in what ways does she resist them?
- In a few words, how would you describe the personality of periappa, especially during his visit to Vidya's house?
- What are some of the ways Vidya describes the protest march? (e.g. how does she use the five senses?) What is the significance of her descriptions?
- Above all else, what is it that Vidya internalizes about her experience during the protest march? What keeps her from expressing herself to her mother, brother and best friend?
- Have you ever stood up for something you believed? What do you think of the way Appa stood up for his beliefs during the protest march? Name a few leaders who were inspired by Gandhi to use nonviolence for social change. Can you think of peaceful ways to resolve difficult situations in your life?
- Moving into thatha's house is an adjustment for everyone in Vidya's family. Vidya and Kitta seem outraged; how does Amma react? What does this signify about traditional Indian gender roles, especially in relation to marriages?
- What purpose does appa's silent presence have in the story after the move to Madras? How would the novel be different if he had died? Why do you think periappa and periamma treat appa the way they do? Do you know anyone who is differently abled?
- How does Vidya's new school and home differ from what she was accustomed to in her old life? In what ways has this move affected Vidya's personal life and space?
- At school and in the women's rooms how does Vidya assert herself? Find examples where others do and don't notice Vidya's actions. Does it make a difference if others know how Vidya is acting? Why might it be important even if they don't know what she's doing?
- What specific principles of Hinduism does Vidya learn from amma, appa, and the books she reads in thatha's library? How do the Indian traditions observed in thatha's house differ from these Hindu ideals? Explain what a caste system is and give examples of how it is shown in the story. Can you give examples of actions Vidya takes that reflect her faith?

- How are Malati and Vidya different? What similarities do they have?
- Kitta's decision shakes the family dynamic inside the extended household. What does Vidya think of what Kitta has decided to do? How does Kitta disagree?
- Vidya and Kitta disagree about war and nonviolence. Which character's views do you agree with? When you disagree with your friends or family, do you react the way Vidya does to Kitta's choice? Why does Kitta volunteer to fight in World War II?
- What books does Vidya read that help her see the similarities between Indian and Western cultures? Why are Vidya's meetings with kind British officers important? What are some ways to overcome stereotypes and prejudices? Do you treat everyone the same way?
- What attracts Vidya to Raman? What are the differences and similarities between Raman and other boys? How does Vidya stand up to Raman?
- How does Raman disappoint Vidya upon her return from visiting Kitta? What realization about her relationship with Raman does Vidya come to? How is it affected by the things that are going on in each of their lives? What is different about their plan for the future?
- What are some of the themes in the novel? Explain how the title "Climbing the Stairs" exemplifies these themes.

RESEARCH AND ACTIVITIES

- Appa is deeply influenced by the Hindu ideals of ahimsa and by Mahatma Gandhi. What are some ways in which Gandhi's ideas crossed cultural and religious boundaries and affected United States history?
- Books on World War II usually mention the role of Britain, but rarely include the contributions of former British colonies. How has Kitta's perspective on the war broadened your understanding of that period of world history? Research the contributions of the forgotten heroes and theaters of World War II and include these in your response.
- Reading and writing are simple tools we use every day in our lives, but they are looked down upon by Vidya's aunt and cousin. Imagine a world where women weren't expected, or even allowed, to read and write. Would there be any benefits? What would be the disadvantages? Has any book you read altered your behavior or opinions?