

DEEPA ANAPPARA

DJINN PATROL



ON THE PURPLE LINE

Book Club Kit

A CONVERSATION WITH DEEPA ANAPPARA

RANDOM HOUSE: You worked as a journalist in India for over a decade. How did you make the move from journalism to creative writing?

DEEPA ANAPPARA: Growing up in India, I always wanted to be a writer, but when the time came for me to make a decision about what my career should be, I knew it would be difficult to make a living from writing fiction. I became a journalist in part because it allowed me to engage with the world through writing, and in part because it offered me a platform to point to the iniquities and injustices in the society to which I belonged.

When I was working as a journalist, I didn't feel the need to write fiction, but this changed with a move to the UK. Living in a different country, adapting to different circumstances, I turned to fiction, perhaps so I could keep writing in one form or the other. I found I had a reservoir of stories in my head from each of the encounters that I had as a reporter, moments and emotions that had to be edited out so that I maintained my impartiality as a journalist or so the text wouldn't exceed a certain word count. Writing fiction freed me from those constraints.

At the same time, without any formal grounding in either literature or writing, I struggled to write anything publishable. I took evening courses in writing, I did a master's degree, I wrote two failed novels and many short stories, and I possibly read



more books on writing than should be legally permissible. When *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* finally went on submission to editors, it had been exactly ten years since I first started writing fiction, but I do believe that without the experiences of that decade, I wouldn't have written this book.

RH: How did the idea for this book originate?

DA: As many as 180 children are said to go missing in India each day. The statistics vary wildly, and this figure could be higher or lower. It is impossible not to be aware of the stories of children who disappear if you have lived in an Indian city, as I have. Each time a shocking case of disappearance, or a cluster of disappearances, came to light, as it did when I was living in Delhi, what inevitably followed was armchair sleuthing and speculation about the motives of the perpetrators. That the police had spectacularly failed to stop these crimes, and were guilty of negligence, further fueled these conversations.

It seemed to me that the focus in the media quickly moved from the children who had disappeared, and their families who had been let down by the police, to the perpetrators, and the lurid details surrounding the crimes. As a bystander, reading or seeing snippets of these stories on the news, I was horrified that the parents and the children had been reduced to footnotes, without agency of their own.

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The idea for this novel came to me because of my anger at a system that had failed the very people it was supposed to protect. My novel returns their agency to the children who are caught up in a horrific, chaotic situation. They are determined to speak for themselves, and hold onto a narrative that is spinning away from them.

RH: Was it a difficult story to figure out how to tell?

DA: I first thought of writing this novel in 2009, but, even though I was aiming for a fictional representation, and not a true crime novel, I had to interrogate my own impulse, not the least because I was writing about one of the most vulnerable sections of Indian society. In 2016, I finally wrote the first page of this novel. By then I was much older, I had a keen sense of my own mortality and those of others, I knew what it was like to lose those I loved, and this was what gave me the permission to write this novel, and what erased, on the page, the many years between me and my nine-year-old narrator.

RH: Did you always know Jai would be your narrator? Did you do anything special to find his voice?

DA: Before I started writing the novel, I thought Jai would be my main narrator, but I saw his role as similar to that of Watson's in a Sherlock Holmes novel, with Pari, his friend, playing Sherlock. But once I started writing Jai, I found that he had to be the center of the attention; he wasn't interested in merely recording another person's actions or achievements. I was guided by his voice, and while he is a sensitive and observant child, he's also self-obsessed in many ways, and ultimately that determined the shape of the narrative.

Prior to writing Jai, I had written several short stories from a child's point of view; some of these were workshopped, and

I received useful feedback on what worked and what didn't. As I was writing this novel, I read a number of books with child narrators, and also watched films with child protagonists. Ultimately, however, Jai is a composite of many of the children I had met as a reporter, in bastis like the one I have written about in the novel. They were witty and cheeky and worldly-wise and innocent all at the same time. I drew from the memories of those encounters to write Jai and the other characters in the book.

RH: What were you like as a nine-year-old?

DA: I was bookish and quiet, unlike Jai and more like Pari, and I couldn't wait to grow up and take my own decisions. Writing Jai was such a joy because he revels in being a child. He enjoys his lack of responsibility, he knows exactly what he can get away with, and he is always figuring out loopholes that he can use to his advantage. I imagine I could have done with some of his insouciance when I was his age!

RH: Was it important to you for Jai to have two loving and responsible parents?

DA: Jai is confident to the point of being arrogant, and while part of that self-assurance comes from being a boy in a patriarchal society, some of it also stems from knowing that he is safe and loved in his home. Jai's parents are not perfect; they often say the wrong things and do the wrong things, and both Jai and Runu are quick to point out their flaws. But we see them at a time when they are under tremendous pressure, and I think it's natural that they find themselves slipping up even though they want the best for their children. And Jai, though he complains about them often, knows he can rely on them, unlike some of his classmates.

RH: Why did you decide that the disappeared children also needed a voice?

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DA: I started writing the novel because children had not just disappeared from their homes, but also from discussions, and from the position they should have occupied at the heart of public discourse. So it was important to me that they be present on the page, narrating their own story, without it being refracted through another lens. In their chapters, they represent themselves, and reveal themselves as they truly are. Without their voices being present, I feared they would not be fully realized, and remain a statistic.

Often in media reports about crimes, as also in true crime podcasts and documentaries, the picture of the disappeared or the dead is pieced together from photos and videos, journal entries, and conversations with friends and family. I feel this doesn't do them justice. In my novel, when we hear the children speak for themselves, we realize that even those closest to them don't know everything about them.

RH: There's such levity and fun in this book despite its dark themes—why was humor important to you in this novel?

DA: I didn't take a conscious decision to write the novel this way. I wrote the first paragraph of the novel, which at the time was Jai's first chapter, and it was his voice that suggested to me how the story should be told. Jai has his own unique view of the world, he is full of good cheer and mischief, and I would have done his ebullience a great injustice if I had adopted a more mannered or muted tone.

There was a time in my life when I thought that only serious, melancholic literature was "worthy" writing, but as I have grown older, I find that I am more appreciative of writers who are able to capture the absurdities of life, or to find the undercurrent of humor in each moment, no matter

how difficult the circumstances the characters find themselves in. I would have found it impossible to write a relentlessly dark novel about Jai and his friends; doing so would have been equivalent to denying them their humanity. I wanted the characters to be much more than the sum of their problems.

RH: Did any books or other art forms influence you?

DA: To write *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*, I drew from the detective novel series that I had read as a child: The Famous Five, The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and The Three Investigators, among others. I was also inspired by the books with child narrators that I had loved as a child. These included R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, books in my mother tongue Malayalam, such as the writer Nandanar's *Unnikuttante Lokam* ("*Unnikuttan's World*"), and children's books from the erstwhile USSR that many Indians like me grew up reading, such as Victor Dragunsky's *Adventures of Dennis*. What connected these seemingly disparate books was that at the center of each one of them were children who were funny and real and often irreverent.

I also took inspiration from popular culture in India, from the Hindi films that my characters would have watched. Reality cop TV shows like the ones that Jai, my main narrator, loves, proved useful in showing me the route Jai would follow to solve a crime.

RH: The three mythical stories are such a wonderful aspect of this book—why was it important for you to include them?

DA: In each of the cities I lived in India, I encountered stories of ghosts and other supernatural beings who lived in tombs or trees, or in the ruins of forts and deserted areas, and often made their appearances late at night. I felt that such stories would be particularly important to children like the street children

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who narrate Mental's story. Their lives are uncertain, filled with danger and close encounters with death; it seemed natural that they would be more aware of ghosts than those children who had the safety and comfort of families and brick-and-mortar homes to return to each day. The novel also has a mythical story about a fort where djinns are believed to live, which is inspired by a real place. (While ghosts are the dead who appear to humans, djinns, though variously interpreted across different regions, are typically meant to be spirits made from smokeless fire that may be good or bad, can possess humans, and appear in human or animal form.)

In my novel, the characters are going through a difficult, painful, and chaotic time. Institutions of the state have abdicated their responsibility towards them. They turn to the supernatural for answers, to fake gurus for help, because those meant to support them have failed them. The mythical stories, about ghosts and djinns that will protect them or take revenge on their behalf, offer both the storyteller and the listener a degree of comfort, and a sense of control that is absent in their own lives.

RH: The novel is studded with many Hindi and Urdu words. Can you tell us a little bit about your approach to language in this book?

DA: Most of the characters in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* speak and think in Hindi. Each language has its own rhythm, and I wanted to communicate that rhythm—particularly in dialogue—with Hindi and Urdu words.

Like many Indians, I grew up learning more than one language. As a child, I spoke in my mother tongue Malayalam, studied English and Hindi at school, and read and wrote in both Malayalam and English. Though I could read and write in English

as a child, I only started speaking in English when I was twenty, and moved to Bangalore to study journalism. When I lived in India, the English I spoke was sprinkled with words and phrases in Hindi, Malayalam, and other Indian languages. Many words from Indian languages are now accepted as part of the English language. I wanted the language in *Djinn Patrol* to reflect that fluidity and constant evolution, and to root the novel in a specific geographical and cultural milieu.

RH: What are the things you most hope readers will take away from your book?

DA: It is ultimately up to the reader what they make of a book. Having said that, I hope people will recognize themselves in the way in which Jai and his friends try to make sense of the world through the stories they tell themselves, and in their determination to be more than their problems. This is a book about living with heartbreaking loss, but I hope there are words in its pages that also offer comfort.

Finally, I hope it will make people think about how easily we are persuaded, particularly by those with power, to demonize a community or a group as the “other,” and to see their difficulties or concerns as not worthy of our time and consideration. I hope readers come away from the book reflecting on all the ways in which we are linked to each other rather than what separates us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were you familiar with bastis like Jai's before reading *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*? If you were, what aspects rang truest to you? If you weren't, what aspects surprised you? What scenes will stay with you?
2. There are Hindi and Urdu words and phrases scattered throughout the novel. What was your experience of reading these like? Have you ever read another book that employed bits of language you might not understand? Were you compelled to look the words up, or did you rely on context clues?
3. Which character did you identify most with, and why?
4. Jai is inspired to search for his missing classmates by a TV program called *Police Patrol*. Do you feel like this show had a positive or negative influence on him? Why?
5. When the police ignored the children's disappearances, why do you think the parents in the basti didn't do anything (at the least in the eyes of the other children)?
6. Discuss Jai's home life, as compared to the home lives of the other kids in his basti. How do you think this influenced him? Did it shelter him from any of the realities of life in the basti?
7. What do the "hi-fi" buildings nearby mean for the children—and the adults—in the basti? How does it affect them to see so much wealth but have so little themselves?
8. What does the Purple Line symbolize for Jai, Pari, and Faiz? What do the other kids at the train station teach them? Why is it important for kids to protect each other in this world?
9. *Djinn Patrol* is a coming-of-age novel for its young characters. Can you pinpoint a moment when each character lost his or her innocence and saw the world for what it was? How do you imagine these experiences will affect their lives moving forward?
10. The novel's plot was based on real incidents of child disappearances in metropolitan India. Did you know this when you started reading? How did that affect the experience for you? If you didn't know, how does this information influence your reflections on the book now?

GULAB-JAMUNS RECIPE

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE DOUGH

- 1 cup finely grated khoya [dried milk], 135 grams
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour [maida], 33 grams
- Pinch of cardamom powder
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- 1 ½ tbsp. melted ghee
- 1 to 2 tbsp. warm milk, as needed, to knead the dough
- Sliced pistachios, to garnish

FOR THE SUGAR SYRUP

- 1 ½ cups granulated white sugar
- 2 cups water
- 1 ½ tsp. rose water
- ¼ tsp cardamom powder
- Kewra essence (optional)
- 2 tsp. lemon juice



Recipe source: cookwithmanali.com/gulab-jamun/ Photo: Shutterstock

1. In a large bowl, mix together grated khoya (milk solids, available in the freezer section of Indian grocery stores), maida (all -purpose flour), cardamom powder, and baking powder. Mix until well-combined.
2. Add melted ghee to the bowl. Use your fingers to mix ghee with the khoya and maida.
3. Start adding warm milk, little by little, until it all comes together as a dough. Don't knead too much, just bring it all together to a smooth dough. Cover and let it rest for 20 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, add sugar, water, cardamom powder, rose water, and kewra essence (if using) to a wide pan.
5. Bring it to a boil. Add lemon juice. Lower the heat and let the syrup simmer for 5 to 6 minutes. Once it's a little sticky, remove pan from heat and set aside. Keep it warm.
6. Now give a quick knead to the dough. Make a small ball out of it. Work with soft hands and squeeze the ball between your palm to shape it. Form a smooth round ball with no cracks.
7. Repeat with the remaining dough. (I got 14 balls of 15 grams each.)
8. Heat oil in wide kadai pan on medium heat. Heat oil for 5 minutes on medium heat and then lower the heat to low-medium. Add the jamuns to the warm (not hot) oil. Fry until golden-brown. This will take a few minutes—keep rotating the jamuns regularly with a spatula so that they get cooked evenly. Once they are dark brown in color, remove them from the oil.
9. Drop the gulab jamuns in warm (not hot, not cold) sugar syrup. Let it soak the syrup for at least 30 minutes.
10. Garnish with pistachios and serve warm or cold. You may also decorate them with edible silver leaf (chandi ka vark).

MASALA CHAI RECIPE

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE DOUGH

- 10 green cardamom pods, cracked, seeds removed, and pods discarded, or ½ tsp. cardamom seeds or ground cardamom
- 1 piece of cinnamon stick, about 1 ½-inch
- 4 peppercorns (preferably white)
- ¼ tsp. fennel seeds
- 2 cups whole milk
- 3 ½ tbsp. packed light brown sugar, or to taste
- ½ tsp. ground ginger
- 2 cups water
- 5 tsp. loose orange pekoe tea or other black tea

EQUIPMENT

- A mortar and pestle or an electric coffee/spice grinder

1. Grind together cardamom, cinnamon stick, peppercorns, and fennel seeds with mortar and pestle or coffee/spice grinder.
2. Bring milk just to a simmer in a 2-quart heavy saucepan. Stir or whisk in brown sugar, ground spice mixture, ginger, and ⅛ teaspoon salt, or to taste. Reduce heat to low and simmer gently, stirring occasionally, 3 minutes to infuse flavors.
3. Meanwhile, bring water to a boil in a 1-quart saucepan, add tea, and boil 1 minute.
4. Pour tea through a fine-mesh sieve into hot milk mixture (discard tea leaves) and cook over low heat 1 minute. Stir before serving.



Recipe source: epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/spiced-milk-tea-masala-chai-355421

Photo: Shutterstock

GLOSSARY

<i>abbu</i>	father, dad	<i>hafta</i>	slang; protection money collected periodically by gangsters and corrupt policemen
<i>basti</i>	settlement	<i>ice-lollies</i>	popsicles
<i>bak-bak</i>	to prate, talk long and idly	<i>kotha</i>	brothel
<i>bhindi bhaji</i>	an okra-based dish	<i>mynahs</i>	a type of bird in the starling family
<i>chacha</i>	uncle	<i>nankhatai</i>	Indian shortbread cookies
<i>charpai</i>	bunk, cot	<i>paan</i>	betel leaves, chewed and spat out
<i>desi daru</i>	a type of alcohol	<i>pakka</i>	slang; for real, sure
<i>dhaba</i>	a roadside restaurant, generally located on highways	<i>pradhan</i>	a chief or leader
<i>dhakkan</i>	slang; means approximately “idiot”	<i>press-wallah</i>	a press-wallah irons shirts; the suffix—wallah indicates where someone comes from or what they do (a chaiwallah serves tea, a rickshawallah drives a rickshaw)
<i>didi</i>	older sister	<i>puja</i>	worship consisting primarily of prayers and offerings to a god
<i>djinn</i>	a type of spirit; can be good or bad	<i>salwar-kameez</i>	a typical dress for women, comprised of loose trousers and a long shirt
<i>dupatta</i>	a shawl-like scarf, part of shalwar-kameez dress	<i>theka</i>	a liquor shop
<i>gulab-jamuns</i>	a milk-based, fried sweet soaked in a light, fragrant, sugary syrup		

FURTHER READING

For readers who would like to learn more about communities like Jai's, Deepa Anappara recommends these books:

1. *The Walls of Delhi: Three Stories* by Uday Prakash, translated from Hindi by Jason Grunebaum (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2014)
2. *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* by Robert Neuwirth (Routledge, New York, London, 2005)
3. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* by Katherine Boo (Random House, New York, 2012)
4. *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India* by Harsh Mander (Speaking Tiger, New Delhi, 2015)
5. *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry (Knopf, New York, 1996)
6. *Gully Boy*, a Hindi film released in February 2019, directed by Zoya Akhtar. *Gully Boy* was inspired by real-life rappers Divine and Naezy from Dharavi, which is in Mumbai and is typically referred to as one of the world's largest slums. The rappers' videos can be seen on YouTube, and the song "Mere Gully Mein" is a good place to start.