

SUCH BIG DREAMS

Reema Patel

READING GROUP GUIDE



Dear Reader,

I am thrilled to be able to share *Such Big Dreams* with you and your book club!

So much of Mumbai has been captured in literature, by global and local storytellers alike. In spite of its layered history and vibrant, cosmopolitan spirit, the city is a place of stark contrasts. Gritty yet glamorous, it famously houses both Asia's largest slum as well as some of the most expensive residential properties in the world. Contrasts like these are abundant; they also make for a setting that is ripe for the kind of conflict that makes a good story.

Such Big Dreams is the story of Rakhi, a 23-year-old office assistant and former street child who wants so much more than her current life of working menial, thankless tasks at the cash-strapped Justice For All, a human rights law organization. Firmly stationed at the bottom rung of the office hierarchy, Rakhi is closely tethered to her boss, renowned human rights lawyer Gauri Verma, who monitors her every move under the guise of concern.

Rakhi's desire for a different future and Gauri's desperation to keep Justice For All from collapsing make them vulnerable to two characters: Alex, a Harvard-bound Canadian intern with a saviour complex, and Rubina Mansoor, a fading Bollywood starlet who promises to lure big donors in exchange for becoming the public face of Justice For All. All four characters and the people around them become tangled in a dangerous web of chaos and deception as they all strive for what they want.

I wrote this book after working in Mumbai's non-profit sector because I wanted to explore the conflicts that arise when people compete for scarce resources. How do these conflicts take shape when power, vanity, saviourism, and corruption are thrown into the mix? How far are we willing to go to do what we think is right? Who get to be heroes and who become villains?

I hope I'm able to transport you into this story world, to a crowded metropolis in which scrappy slum dwellers, big shot lawyers, vainglorious entertainers, and naïve foreigners alike are forced to make difficult choices to keep going. In your discussions, I hope you're able to examine own assumptions about how these characters should behave. You may even find yourselves asking what you would be willing to do to survive if you were in their place.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might *Such Big Dreams* cast light on or add complexity to themes that have traditionally been overlooked in the American canon, such as race, misogyny, and class?
2. Did reading this book challenge any aspects of your view of the ways in which certain social and political issues have, in the past, been represented or painted over in mainstream literature and other art forms?
3. Describe Rakhi and Gauri Verma's relationship. What was it like in the beginning, and how did it change over the course of the book? In what ways did it change, and why?
4. Why do you think Rakhi and Alex are drawn to each other and agree on this deal? If you were in either of their positions, would you have agreed to it? Why or why not?
5. In what ways are Rakhi and Alex different? In what ways are they similar? With whom do you sympathize and identify more? Did you find yourself taking sides as their stories unfolded?
6. The setting of Mumbai is intrinsic to the story. Discuss the ways in which it functions as a character in the novel and how each of the human characters relates to it.
7. Do you think it was important that Rakhi reunited with Babloo even though it didn't end well for their friendship? Did Rakhi need to learn the truth about Babloo? If you were Rakhi, would you have wanted to learn the truth?
8. In what ways does the past influence the present in *Such Big Dreams*? How do the characters try to repress or escape the pain of their histories? What does the novel tell us about the relationship between past and present? How does this affect their relationships and help them heal?
9. Loyalty comes up often and in various ways in *Such Big Dreams*: Rakhi's loyalty to Gauri Verma, Gauri's loyalty to her work, Alex's supposed loyalty to Rakhi. Which do you feel has been tested the most and what surprised you?
10. In the epilogue, we see that Rakhi is now choosing to go by her given name, Bansari. Why is this significant? And, what do you think led to her decision?
11. Discuss the title, "Such Big Dreams." How do you think it relates to the overall story? How does it apply to each of the characters in the book?



THE RUBINA MANSOOR (SERVES 1)

Rubina would have chosen a light, flowery, and fizzy signature drink for the Justice For All fundraiser. Raise a glass to the cult of celebrity with a champagne cocktail!

Ingredients

- 1 ½ oz. St. Germain Elderflower Liqueur
- ⅛ teaspoon of rosewater
- 2 oz chilled dry sparkling wine
- Dried crushed rose petals to garnish

Steps

1. Shake St. Germain and rosewater over ice and strain into champagne flute.
2. Top with sparkling wine and garnish with rose petals.

