

karma

cathy ostlere



book summary

15 year-old Maya, the Canadian-born daughter of a Sikh father and a Hindu mother, experiences a monumental shift in her life after her mother commits suicide. She will travel from Elsinore, Manitoba to India alongside her father in order to disperse her mother's ashes. They arrive the day of Indira Gandhi's murder at the hands of her Sikh guards and experience the subsequent furor and violent chaos of religious fundamentalism in the wake of the assassination. Her traumatic and solo journey away from the madness in Delhi will take her to the northwestern city of Jaisalmer where she begins to heal by befriending, and later falling in love with, 17 year-old Sandeep.

topics

- Novel in Verse
- Historical Fiction
- Indo-Canadian Immigrant Experience
- Loss/Grieving
- Interpersonal Relationships/Friendships/First Love
- Coming-of-age
- Religions and Customs of India

author profile



Cathy Ostlere (CAN) is a Calgary-based author and playwright of *Lost: A Memoir*, which was shortlisted for the 2009 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction and was presented by Theatre Calgary in 2010. *Karma* is her first novel for young adults. It is the story of how a young woman, straddling two cultures and enduring personal loss, learns forgiveness, acceptance and love.

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bookrapport

The First Calgary Financial Book Rapport is a challenging and exciting education program. It features a variety of authors in unique and engaging environments, bringing them together with their appropriate audiences, from elementary through the post-secondary level.

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connect

Visit the author's website: <http://cathy-ostlere.com/>

A YouTube video of an interview with Cathy Ostlere:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/PenguinCanada?blend=2&ob=5#p/u/0/ajY1Bu6Nh5k>

A review of Karma from the Globe and Mail (July 16, 2011) :
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/karma-by-cathy-ostlere/article2098652/>

National Geographic 14 Travel and Cultures Video (« There is no one India »):
<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/player/places/countries-places/india/india-overview-dest.html>

Into India: Spinning a Nation (a 2007 Australian teacher resource manual with useful maps including one of India according to language regions):
http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/_resources/intoindia_spinninganation.pdf

A brief overview of the main aspects of Hinduism:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ataglance/glance.shtml>

PBS Video: The founding of Sikhism and its continuing traditions:
<http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/14.html#sikhism>

For a BBC article on the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/31/newsid_2464000/2464423.stm

TIME magazine article on the assassination of Indira Gandhi:
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,926929-1,00.html>

YouTube Video of the Assassination of Indira Gandhi:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vw15MYS9Lhg>

PBS's The Story of India with teacher resources designed for high school social studies:
<http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/>

This website has a map of a virtual Indian village that you can roam:
<http://virtualvillage.wesleyan.edu/>

Definition of a verse novel:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verse_novel

From First Novels Club Blog, "Demystifying novels in verse", an interview with Cathy Ostlere:
<http://www.firstnovelsclub.com/2011/04/demystifying-novels-in-verse-guest-post.html>

More on writing a novel in verse:
<http://ingridsnotes.wordpress.com/2011/06/05/exploring-the-verse-novel/>

discuss

1. Have you ever felt that words you put on paper came from another source, another being, or another spirit like Mata's voice through Maya's writing? How important was it that the reader could hear Mata's voice throughout the novel?
2. What do you think Maya means when she says on page 11 that Bapu's hair equaled "his measured self"? What do you know about the role of hair in the Sikh religion?

3. Did you enjoy reading this novel in verse? Were you able to follow the shifts in voice from the techniques of using italics, brackets, margins and page breaks? Which voice was the most challenging for you to follow? Why do you think that was the case?

4. How did you react upon learning that Bapu blamed Maya for her mother's death? How did you react when he stated, "Canada killed her", on page 93?

5. What did you learn about Indian culture that you didn't know before reading Karma? What did you learn about Sikhism and Hinduism from the novel?

6. When Maya tells Bapu that she is writing "a family history" in her journal, what does Maya mean and what does Bapu understand by the term? Are they the same?

7. How did the utterance by Bapu on page 33, "Leela, there is only one God!" change the relationship between Mata and Bapu?

8. How do Bapu and Maya differ in their reactions to the crushing hunger and poverty? In your opinion, why are their reactions so different?

9. What was life like for Maya and her family living in Elsinore? Were they a part of the community? Explain.

10. Give examples from the book of cultural prejudice from both Maya's parents and from the members of the town of Elsinore.

11. What did the violence that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi mean for Bapu and Maya?

12. How would you feel upon learning that your father arranged for your marriage at the age of fifteen? What complicates Maya's emotions around her feelings of betrayal by her father?

13. Would you have made the same choice as Maya to embark on a train voyage to Jodhpur without her father? What might you have done differently during the chaos and the violence?

14. From what does Maya collapse upon arriving in Jodhpur? Consider physical and emotional reasons. Explore how those reasons led to Maya's complete loss of voice.

15. What role does fear play in Amma and Barindra's decision-making when considering Maya's future? What is at the root of their fears?

16. Why does Akbar accuse Sandeep of stealing his future?

17. How do the two words, *meri jaan* (my love), represent a turning point for Maya?

18. What did the postcard to Helen demonstrate about Maya's character?

19. How do you think Bapu can rationally forbid his daughter's love for a Hindu when he himself fell in love with a Hindu?

20. From page 26 and again from page 500, there is the following statement: "To love each other is to love the Divine". How are the two diary entries connected?

21. Why do you think Maya gives Sandeep her mother's orange sari? What does giving it to him represent for each of them?

22. Has your definition of karma changed after reading this book? How?

create

1. Write a one-act play that takes place at an Indian wedding using "At the Occasion of Bliss" from pages 26-27. A link for pictures from an Indian wedding: http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/indian-wedding-photos-traveler/#/indian-wedding-couple-boat_23180_600x450.jpg
2. Paint, draw or create a visual collage entitled "I swallow India" inspired from the imagery on pg. 47. Choose any medium again to depict Maya's other environment, the Prairies.
3. With a partner and using pages 77 and 78 as inspiration, prepare an oral dialogue where the two experiences of immigration to Canada are explored through Bapu's eyes and through Mata's experiences.
4. On page 108, Maya lists four questions that she has for her father. Answer them in diary format in the voice of Bapu (or how you would expect Bapu to answer them).
5. Explore, in an essay or through song writing, the themes of the five classical elements in Hinduism that are prominent throughout the novel: earth, water, fire, wind (many examples of wind in the novel) and void.
6. Describe each of the following characters using a maximum of six adjectives:
Maya, Mata, Helen, Sandeep, Bapu, Akbar and Parvati

extension

1. Choose a paragraph from your favourite novel. Re-write it in verse. Focus on metaphor (there are plenty of examples in Karma for inspiration), assonance, imagery and cadence. Use the most evocative words from the original paragraph.
2. Research on the Internet the Urdu mystic poet, Azad, cited at the beginning of Karma. Read some of his work.
3. Research the Wheel of Existences referred to by Maya's grandfather on page 23 and find a few different visual representations of the wheel on the Internet.
4. How important are extended family, friends and community to mental health? Have a classroom discussion/debate on the subject.
5. Read from the following blog to discover why Karma is Cathy Ostlere's "love story to India".
<http://hauntedorchid.blogspot.com/2011/04/guest-post-with-cathy-ostlere-author-of.html>
6. Write your own family history. Try it in verse.
<http://smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/seek2/family.html>
7. Watch how to wrap a sari (a 2 ½ minute YouTube video)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1XbPDqF0GQ>
8. India's best-known love story and Hindu epic is "The Ramayana". In 2008 Nina Paley created an 82-minute animated film, Sita Sings the Blues, which mingles the classic Indian myth, The Ramayana, with contemporary autobiographical events and it's all set to the 1920's jazz vocals of Annette Hanshaw.

The link for the trailer:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y5_zJ1xfQs

The link for the entire 82 minute film:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzTg7YXuy34>

encounter

Read Cathy Ostlere's other non-fiction book, Lost: A Memoir.

For the exploration of another style of poetry, check out At First, Lonely by Tanya Davis, one of this year's Wordfest poets in the Book Rapport series for Division IV.

curriculum connections

English Language Arts

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent:

- to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences.
- to comprehend literature and texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms, and respond personally, critically and creatively.
- to construct meaning from texts, compare the choices and behaviours of characters portrayed with those of self and others.
- to analyze how plot develops; the connection between plot and subplot; and the interrelationship of plot, setting and characters.
- to identify and explain conflict, and discuss how it develops and may be resolved.
- to analyze, respond to and create complex texts and identify and examine ways in which cultural and societal influences are reflected in a variety of Canadian and international texts.
- to develop a variety of reading, comprehension and writing strategies.
- to respond to texts at a variety of different levels of sophistication.

Social Studies

Students will explore the origins and complexities of ideologies and development of individual and collective responses to contemporary local, national and global issues.

Drama

Students will develop techniques that enhance vocal and physical communication and they will develop the ability to select appropriate physical and vocal expression for feelings, ideas and images.

Students will explore various approaches to analyzing a script for purposes of study and/or presentation.

Information and Communication Technology

Students will access, use and communicate information from a variety of technologies.

Students will seek alternative viewpoints, using information technologies.

Students will use electronic research techniques to construct personal knowledge and meaning.