

“One of the best books I’ve read this year.”

—Jacqueline Woodson, author of the
Newbery Honor Book *AFTER TUPAC & D FOSTER*



Boys without Names

KASHMIRA SHETH

Discussion Guide

About the Book

Crushing debt forces Gopal and his family to move from their rural Indian village to the big city of Mumbai. Gopal’s baba has no job and his aai must care for his two siblings. The family’s hopes rest on Gopal’s education, but before he can get to school, Gopal is tricked into a firsthand lesson on street life, captivity, and child labor. Gopal, however, has the heart of a storyteller, and it is through his stories—*kahanis*—that he and the other boys in the sweatshop find hope.

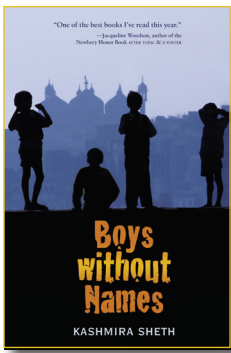
A Conversation with Kashmiri Sheth

What inspired you to tell Gopal’s story in *Boys without Names*?

Growing up I saw many poor children denied education because they worked and helped their parents earn money, thus trapping themselves in the poverty cycle. As a child I felt there was something wrong with this. Then in recent years, stories came out about prestigious multinational companies selling goods all over the world made by child labor. It was shocking. My agent suggested I write a book about this topic and I was ready to do it.

How did you research the novel?

In my many trips to India I talked to domestic servants, mostly girls, about their backgrounds and family lives, so I learned about their struggles. For additional research I went to India in early 2008. I talked to poor children I met on trains, I interviewed young couples who were struggling to make a life for themselves and had high hopes for their children, and I talked to social workers. I was also able to do additional research online, reading articles and exploring various websites about child labor.



Discussion Guide

A Conversation with Kashmiri Sheth (continued)

How does the setting in *Boys without Names* act as a character of its own?

I think, if the setting is unfamiliar to readers, it must be strong enough to pull them in and captivate them, just as a character would.

Writing a story set in an unfamiliar land is just like writing historical fiction or fantasy. The world I create (as real as it is) is so foreign to most of my readers that I have to infuse it with sensory details and bring it to life. I must say that it was very difficult to do so in *Boys without Names* because the boys are trapped in a tiny attic room without much going on except their work. I wrote the bones of the story first and later revised and re-revised to bring the place into focus.

As a female writer and mother of two daughters, how did you so effectively capture the perspective of a boy narrator?

Even though I have two daughters, I have a brother who is younger than I am, so I remember his childhood very well. Furthermore, I have male cousins and nephews to whom I am very close, so writing from a male perspective didn't seem too hard. Before I started, I did wonder if I could do a male voice in first person, but fortunately it felt natural.

Why do you think *kahanis* have such power?

Kahanis give us experiences we may never have otherwise. They give us breadth and depth and by doing so enrich our lives. They create a continuum from one culture to another, from present to past and future, from real to imagined. In India, storytelling is an important part of life. To quote Mark Twain, "[India is the] cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition." Gopal didn't have many books, but he belonged to the

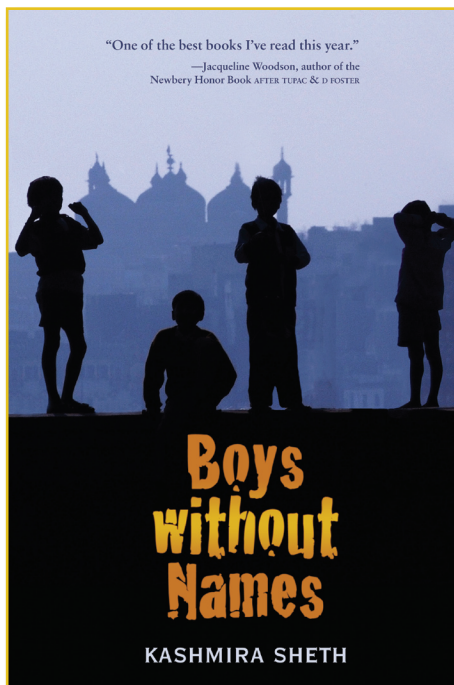
culture and tradition where storytelling was a big part of life. It gave him courage, sensitivity, cunning: everything he needed to survive, create a bond, and get out of the horrible situation in which he found himself.

Why are stories about different cultures—different worlds, really—important for Americans to read?

In modern times the world is one place—the globe is not just shrinking, it has already shrunk. Children need and want to read about how people in other parts of the world live because we are all connected. When we buy something that seems like a great deal, it might have been made by exploiting children halfway around the world. We must stop and think about that. Every day we hear stories about environmental degradation, human rights violations, war, and water shortage, which seem far away but will eventually catch up with us because we share the same planet and the same resources. More than anything else, we must read, understand, and empathize with other cultures, even other species, because we share the same journey, not only as fellow human beings but as fellow earth-dwellers.

What do you most hope readers will take away from the novel?

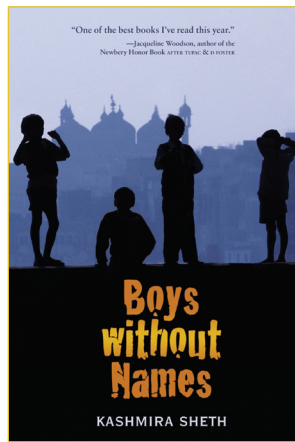
I hope readers become aware of how poverty pushes people out of their homes, breaks up families, and creates the vast urban slums in poor countries. I've seen it in Argentina, Nepal, and India, and I know it happens around the globe. I hope people become aware that what we do here, far away from these lands, does affect them. Our action or inaction has far-reaching influences and we, as individuals, as a community, and as a nation, have the responsibility and the power to shape our collective destiny.



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Discussion Questions

1. Why does Baba move his family out of the village? Do you think Baba is right or wrong to uproot his family? What would you have done if you were in his situation?
2. Compare Gopal's home in the village to Jama's home in Mumbai. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each location?
3. What is foreshadowing? Find a passage in the novel that uses foreshadowing. What were your thoughts when initially reading this passage? How did its significance change after you read more of the story?
4. In chapter nine, Aai says, "Seems like there are so many people, there isn't enough trust and kindness to go around." Do you agree with Aai's statement? To support your opinion, think about the interactions that Gopal has with strangers on his journey to Mumbai and in the city itself.
5. How does Scar keep the boys from revolting against him? Find passages from the novel that demonstrate Scar's strategy.
6. Why do you think GC interrupts and makes fun of the boys' stories?
7. How does Gopal's relationship with the other boys in the sweatshop change throughout the novel?
8. In chapter twenty, Gopal thinks, "If we can comfort one another, we can be a family." Find examples in the novel when Gopal gives comfort to the imprisoned boys, his parents, or his brothers. In addition to offering comfort, what other things do you think are necessary to become a family?
9. How does Gopal use stories throughout the novel? In chapter twenty-four, Gopal thinks, "I thought *kahanis* were my friends, but they are my enemies." In what ways do stories act as Gopal's friends? How are they his enemies?
10. Why does Gopal not escape on the bus when Scar sends him out with money for medicine? What would you have done in Gopal's situation?
11. What does Gopal mean when he thinks in chapter twenty-seven, "If I want to live, I must act like a twig"? How does acting like a twig serve Gopal throughout the novel?
12. In what ways does Gopal use his education to his advantage? What does *Boys without Names* suggest about the value of education?
13. How does Gopal use the resources of the *nimba* tree throughout the novel?
14. Kashmiri Sheth incorporates words and phrases from various Indian dialects into the story. Select five of these expressions and then infer their meanings based on contextual clues. Compare your inferences with the meanings provided in the glossary at the back of the book.
15. What significance does the novel's title, *Boys without Names*, have? How can this title be interpreted in multiple ways?



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Extension Activities

- 1. Similar Similes.** In *Boys without Names*, Kashmiri Sheth uses similes that employ images, terms, and expressions from Indian culture. For example, Gopal describes his siblings in chapter four as “always together like a pair of *gorus-chinch* seeds nestled in the same pod.” Locate three other similes in the novel and try rewriting them using images, terms, or expressions from your own culture and experiences.
- 2. Story Power.** While imprisoned by Scar, Gopal tells the boys a story about ants working together to resist a jackal. What does Gopal hope to achieve by telling this story? Think of a situation in your life when you tried to convince someone—a family member, a friend, or a teacher—either to take action or to share your opinion. Write an original short story with a moral that you could have shared with that person to win him or her over to your side.
- 3. Map It Out.** Draw a map of India. Find and label the locations mentioned in the story, including Dadar, Mumbai, Pune, and Thane. Research information about India’s climate, natural landscape, and regional geography. Work your findings into the features of your map and include a key that defines them.
- 4. What Is Your *Kahani*?** Each of the boys imprisoned by Scar tells a happy story from his childhood. These stories help give the boys hope and brighten their spirits. Think about a happy experience from your childhood and share the story of that experience with your peers. How does your story offer hope?
- 5. Child Labor.** Read Kashmiri Sheth’s author’s note at the end of the novel and consult the resources listed there. Using these websites as a starting point, research the worldwide epidemic of child labor. Focus your research on the working conditions of child laborers and on what can be done to improve their lives. Create an informational brochure or website to pass on what you have learned to others.



Larsen Photography

About the Author

Kashmiri Sheth spoke to many child workers in India as part of her research for *Boys without Names*. Kashmiri herself was born in Gujarat, India, grew up in Mumbai, and moved to the United States when she was seventeen. She is the author of the novels *Blue Jasmine*, an IRA Children’s Book Award Winner; *Koyal Dark*, *Mango Sweet*; *Keeping Corner*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults; and *Boys without Names*. The mother of two daughters, Kashmiri lives with her husband in Madison, Wisconsin. You can visit her online at www.kashmirasheth.typepad.com

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