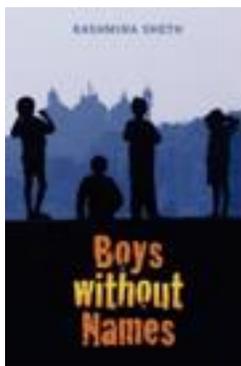


Children's Book Review

Sheth, Kashmira. (2010). *Boys without Names*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Children's Books. 305 pp, ISBN: 978-0-06-185762-1, \$6.29 (ages 8 & up).

Reviewed by Susan Bakay, Eastern Univeristy, U.S.A.



While this book is a fictional account of an 11-year-old Indian boy, it targets real, present-day conditions surrounding child labor in India. Author Sheth makes a point of addressing the consumers of the goods made by these children, along with writing an engaging novel for students in 4th-8th grades.

The story begins in a rural Indian village near a local tourist attraction area. Eleven-year-old Gopal and his family are making a difficult decision to move to Mumbai to live with extended family members in order to avoid their mounting debt. They hope that there will be good jobs and educational opportunities when they arrive. Along the road they encounter several mishaps that end up separating the father from the rest of the family for a time. While they are travelling, Ms. Sheth gives us searing background images about India, its countryside and its people. Once in Mumbai, the family settles into slum housing that is decidedly less than their expectations. Gopal takes it upon himself, in the absence of his father, to find ways to help his family financially. His first effort works out well, but he is only providing for the blank paper he will need for his studies. In his travels, however, he runs into an older boy who is searching for his uncle's factory where there are jobs. Gopal is taken in by the prospect of work and decides to have tea with the older boy. The tea is drugged, and when Gopal wakes he finds himself a prisoner along with five other boys who are forced to work for food. He remains there for months gluing beads onto picture frames, breathing in chemical fumes and working for seemingly endless working hours.

Early on in the book, Sheth establishes some cultural expectations for Indian families. She shows the village families to be tight-knit and extended families supportive of each other. However, there is a very specific hierarchy within the family. Fathers and adult males are first, mothers and older boys are second, with younger children being looked after by all family members. Gopal respects and defers to his parents, but the reader can see that, while he obeys his father, he and his mother are equal in decision-making power. Both are decidedly below the adult males in their lives. When the father is lost during their travel to Mumbai, Gopal then takes on the leadership role of the oldest male in the family.

Sheth makes excellent choices with her use of language for the audience of the book. She uses Indian words for mother and father from the start. It is introduced in a familiar context that would be comfortable for young readers. She continues this pattern throughout the book using Indian foods and other obvious terms. A glossary is provided but is hardly necessary during reading; context clues are sufficient. Overall, the language and phrasing is American, making it easy for young American readers to

comprehend, although this may interfere with understanding for students from other countries.

The Indian vocabulary with the Americanized phrasing led me to check on Sheth's background. She was born in India but moved to the United States when she was 17 years old to attend college. She has remained in the United States, only returning to India for visits and book research. This background lends credibility to the cultural aspects of the story but also allows her to make Indian culture very accessible for American readers. As students read, they will be able to pick out the strangeness experienced by a person who has made the cultural shift from India to the United States as Sheth has.

One element of that shift is the class system. Sheth makes a smart choice not to focus on the castes because it would take away from her central issue—child labor. However, she shows evidence of it throughout the family's travel from the village to the city. In one instance, the family is living on the streets on the outskirts of Mumbai. They are, essentially, homeless. They sleep in a shop doorway for the night. The following morning, Gopal sees two young girls enter the shop next to theirs with beautiful clean clothes and shoes. They come out an hour later with many bags, talking about the sandals they've just purchased. Gopal says he cannot image why anyone would need more than one pair of sandals. The juxtaposition of Gopal's homeless situation and the girls' wealthy life is clear. This is an instance where students could relate Indian and U.S. culture through attitudes about money and power.

Later, when Gopal and the other boys are slaves, we see more examples of power utilized to keep the children subservient. In the family, power was based on respect and gender role. That theme is repeated through other family characters and by stories the boys tell about their families at night when they are supposed to be asleep. However, in their two-story, single-room factory, power manifests itself in other ways. In almost every case, power lies in fear. The businessman who owns the factory, and so owns the boys, is nicknamed Scar by Gopal because of his looks and his attitude. He provides them with food based on their usefulness to him. Each boy must fill a quota of frames in order to eat. However, boys who help keep the others in line receive more food and privileges. This keeps the boys divided and unable to escape. Throughout the factory section of the book, the reader sees different kinds of power wielded by Scar to keep the boys in slavery. Scar uses money in two ways. He tells the boys he is paying their families the money they earn, but he also tells them he can't buy them more food or medicine because it costs money. He also uses food by withholding food from any boy who does not comply and feeding the rest barely enough to survive. He keeps them weak physically and mentally. He uses a punishment system, physically hurting the boys who offend him by lying or whatever he perceives to be maneuvering against him. He also uses psychological fear by threatening the other boys and the boys' families to be sure he has control, even when he is not present. The boys are unable to act against him. Escape, which consumes Gopal at first, is eventually such an impossibility that, when the opportunity arises, Gopal does not take it. While Gopal struggles with himself over the decision to escape or remain, the author describes how the police and the local business community are completely dependent on their child laborers and so the children receive little hope of outside help.

Ms. Sheth is tackling the issue of child labor in India with this book. But, just as she shows the relationships between characters in the novel, she also repeatedly points to the power relationship between India and the United States. Scar often demands better, faster work for overseas clients. These “special orders” are symbolic of the effect of the power of American money on the Indian children’s lives. In the classroom, these issues would require some direct instruction from the teacher to be sure they do not remain just part of the story. Webquests or alternative texts from articles on social justice could provide a reality check for the world that the story describes. On the other hand, Gopal provides Indian students with a strong, smart, resourceful positive image of themselves. He does not appear to be overly stereotyped, and the other characters in the story also provide alternative characteristics and views of Indian culture. Also, a variety of home life situations are portrayed through the working boys, which may be helpful for students living with grandparents, extended or adoptive families.

This is an engrossing story with a likable main character and a happy, comfortable ending. It requires some extra work from the teacher to be beneficial in a transformative way, but it is a worthwhile read for older elementary and middle level students.