

MFAH Book Club

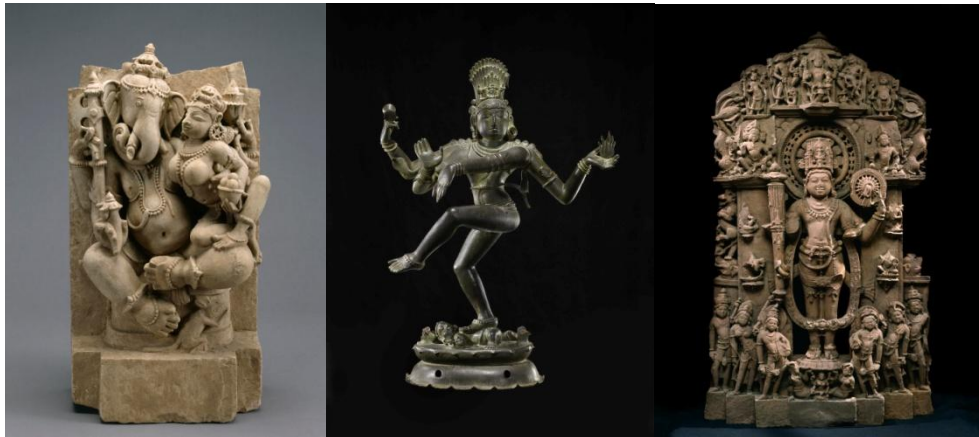
The Palace of Illusions
By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Summer 2010 MFAH Book Club Selection

Use the discussion questions on the following pages to facilitate your book club's conversation!

Then visit www.mfah.org/bookclub to request a tour for your group!

Tours feature works of art on view in the Arts of India gallery at the MFAH that explore subjects, themes, and ideas similar to those outlined in the questions below.

To get warmed up, how might the following works of art connect to *The Palace of Illusions*?



(left to right)

Indian, *Ganesh and Siddhi*, 10th-11th century, Buff sandstone, the MFAH, Gift of Milton D. Rosenau, Jr., and Dr. Ellen R. Gritz, 99.310

Indian, *Shiva Nataraja*, 13th century, Bronze, the MFAH, Gift of Carol and Robert Straus, 73.77

Indian, *Vishnu and His Avatars*, c. 10th century, Red sandstone, the MFAH, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Agnes Cullen Arnold Endowment Fund, 71.1

Discussion Questions

(written and adapted from various sources)

1. In the book's opening pages, Panchaali tells the story of her magical birth out of fire. Given that this narrative is a retelling of an ancient Indian epic, what might such a beginning ask us as readers to consider regarding the relationship between reality and illusion throughout the book?
2. As a girl, Panchaali is told by Vyasa the sage that her destiny is to change the course of history and that she will be the cause of the greatest war of her time. How does this fate influence her as she matures? Does she look for ways to fulfill it? Avoid it?
3. As predicted, Panchaali marries the five Pandava brothers. Discuss this arrangement - how did she come to marry all five? How did they act amongst each other? Did their relationship surprise you – why?
4. Despite her marriage to the five brothers, Panchaali continually finds herself thinking of the mysterious warrior Karna. How would you describe their relationship? How do her thoughts about him guide her throughout the narrative?
5. Panchaali relates, "Palaces have always fascinated me, even a gloom-filled structure like my father's that was a fitting carapace for his vengeful obsession. For isn't that what our homes are ultimately, our fantasies made corporeal, our secret selves exposed?" How does the Palace of Illusions, built by Maya (an architect whose previous "clients" were gods and demons), reveal the fantasies and longings of Panchaali's husbands and Panchaali herself? Why is its location significant? If Maya could build you a palace, what would it be like?
6. Discuss the turn of events that occur in which Yudhistir loses everything—including Panchaali—to Duryodhan. What causes him to continue playing Duryodhan in dice? How is this catastrophe a personal turning point for Panchaali?
7. *The Palace of Illusions*, like *The Mahabharat*, is set in a half-magical world populated by gods and sages who have supernatural powers as well as by humans, some of whom manage to harness magical powers (though not without consequence). Throughout the novel, gods and goddesses are presented as part of everyday life. How does the author use stories of encounters between humans and the divine to support and advance the narrative? What do they tell us about the relations of humans to gods in Panchaali's world?
8. Discuss the various references to Panchaali's hair that appear throughout the novel. What is the significance of her hair? Why might the author have spent so much time referencing it?
9. After Yudhistir receives word that Krishna's city has been destroyed, why does he decide that it is time for the Pandava brothers to die?
10. As Panchaali goes with her husbands to the base of the Himalayas, to the path of death and great departure, how do her final thoughts and experiences as a mortal confirm her destiny? What discoveries does she make about love? About Krishna? As Krishna guides her through death, how does she remember her life?
11. There are numerous characters in *The Mahabharat* through which Divakaruni could have retold the story. Why do you think she chose Panchaali? From what character in the book would you like to hear the story (or part of it) retold?

12. The novel's title, *The Palace of Illusions*, refers in part to the beautiful and fantastical palace that Panchaali and her five husbands build and that she considers her one true home. What other illusions do Panchaali and the novel's other major characters face?

13. Epic narratives and myths often function to teach a moral or message to readers. What might be some of the lessons that *The Palace of Illusions* seeks to convey? Although the story is an ancient one, how might it resonate with readers today? What message about war does the author convey throughout the text?

About The Mahabharat:

The Mahabharat is one of the greatest—and longest—epic poems of ancient India, some of its verses tracing back to the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E. A major text of Hinduism and a cornerstone of Hindu mythology, it was originally written in Sanskrit, and authorship is traditionally attributed to Vyasa (he appears as a sage in *The Palace of Illusions*). It tells the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of an Indian dynasty, who are consumed in a lifelong battle for the throne of Hastinapur. In addition to this epic narrative, *The Mahabharat* also contains philosophical and devotional material, such as the Bhagavad Gita.

About the Author:

Chitra Divakaruni is the author of several best-selling and award-winning novels. She was born in India and lived there until 1976, at which point she left Calcutta and came to the United States. She studied English and holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants. Her work has been translated into 20 languages and included in over 70 anthologies. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*, won an American Book Award in 1995, and two of her novels—*The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*—have been adapted into films.

She lives in Houston and teaches at the University of Houston, where she is the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Creative Writing.

Visit www.chitradivakaruni.com to learn more about the author and her work.