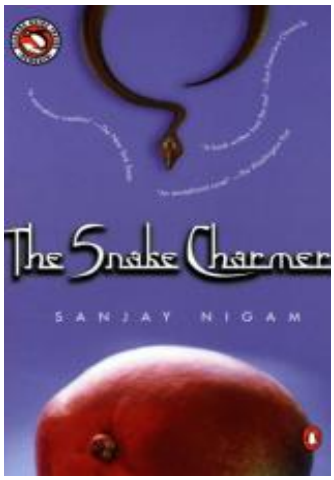
The Snake Charmer

by Sanjay Nigam



About the Book

The Snake Charmer begins with a perfect moment. Sonalal, a middle-aged snake charmer from Delhi, is plying his trade for a group of tourists. Raju, his prized snake, is performing beautifully, responding attentively to the music Sonalal plays on his been. It is as if the snake, the music, and Sonalal are?along with the reader?all bewitched, and, for a few minutes, Sonalal experiences the joy that comes when our inner and outer worlds become one. For most of us, moments like this are few and far between. What is tragic about Sonalal's experience is that his attempt to prolong his euphoria results in its utter desecration when he destroys the very thing that has made his happiness possible. Raju, exhausted, wants to stop dancing. Sonalal urges him to continue. But when the snake charmer hits a false note, the snake rebels, biting his master. In a fit of rage, Sonalal bites Raju in two. The moment is over and the results of Sonalal's attack are disastrous. Sonalal's quest to recapture his perfect moment, and his regret over its destruction, will consume the rest of his life.

With lucid and lyrical prose, Nigam effortlessly weaves humor, realism, metaphor, and cultural commentary, luring the reader into Sonalal's voyage of self-discovery and his quest for the ineffable. Beneath the smooth-sailing surface of the novel, the writer is tackling some very big philosophical and cultural issues. The power of the novel in part derives from the reader's sense that the story is both universal and particular to a time and place. Modern-day India is a country of clashing cultures, a place where disparate forces coalesce and factionalize the population. Nowhere in India is that clash of cultures more apparent than in Delhi, with its chaotic blend of ancient temples and new construction projects, its fly-by-night businesses and generations-old practices, its brothels and teahouses and open-air markets, its oppressive heat and seemingly eternal monsoons.

Although Nigam makes reference to some of the political and social factors that characterize contemporary Delhi?including the accidental death of Sanjay Gandhi, the government's attempts to sterilize adult males, the increase in economic and class mobility, and clashes between Hindus and Muslims?it is in Sonalal's family life that we witness the profound changes taking place in India today. Like many members of his caste, Sonalal is poor and unschooled, carving

out a life in a crowded, disordered city. But unlike the generations of snake charmers before him, Sonalal has a chance to overcome his poverty. His sons will be educated and able to achieve careers and knowledge beyond what Sonalal could ever have hoped for. His wife's dreams of prosperity are, just barely, within reach. Sonalal's passion, snake charming, is perceived by most of the population, including his family, as a shtick performed solely for the busloads of foreign and native tourists that visit the city. Nevertheless, he is content to live his life working at his ancestral trade, secure in the knowledge that he is the world's most talented practitioner of a dying art form. Standing at the crossroads, where the old and new India converge, Sonalal is confused, misunderstood, and searching for ways to satisfy his many desires.

It is this very search, motivated by the deepest sorrow and a yearning for redemption, that moves us to sympathize and empathize with this frail and slightly comical man, who, though hardly of Ulysses-like stature, is nonetheless caught up in an odyssey of mythical proportions?so fundamental are the questions he grapples with. Racked by physical and emotional pain, he seeks help from all quarters: doctors, sex therapists, magicians, prostitutes, and fellow snake charmers. Bombarded with facts and ideas that leave his head spinning and his heart aching, Sonalal must sift through the "science" to find his own truth. Why do we destroy the things we love? What is real and what is magic? And, in the end, what does any of it mean? Sonalal's perfect, fleeting moment, and its devastating, all-too-human end, catapult him to a level of consciousness few of us have the courage to withstand. His heroic, painful attempts to divine life's greatest mysteries leave us wondering if he wouldn't have been better off never having experienced "the ether that flows through the universe." But it also leaves us, like Sonalal, grappling with questions as universal and unanswerable as those posed in the song of Kabir that Reena sings to him:

> From which place did you come? And to which shore do you fly? Where will you stop to rest? And what are you looking for?

Discussion Guide

1.Why does Sonalal kill the snake? Aside from being angry that the snake has bitten him, what else is going on in this scene that might account for Sonalal's extreme rage? What do we learn later about Sonalal's relationship with his biological sons, and about the extent of his happiness with Raju, that might explain the action?

2.Nigam returns again and again to the moment when Sonalal bit Raju. How does that single incident?and the events leading up to it?shape the novel itself?

3.How would you account for the various maladies visited on Sonalal after Raju's death? Are they coincidental or triggered by the guilt he feels about killing Raju? Does he deserve this fate? Do you think he should have tried harder to redeem himself through his own actions rather than through the healing suggestions of various doctors?

4. What can science do for a man like Sonalal, who is illiterate, poor, and ignorant? Would education make him happier, or would it merely "rob the world of its poetry"?

5.What does Sonalal really learn from his encounters with Dr. Seth and Dr. Basu? How do both doctors hinder?and help?him in his efforts to relieve his suffering?

6. Although the novel is chiefly about Sonalal, Nigam creates a number of strong and quirky characters. How do

Sonalal's interactions with each of these characters propel him along? What do the consequences of these interactions reveal about Sonalal?

7.What do you think of Sarita, Sonalal's wife? Is she really just a shrew with no compassion for her husband, or does she have a right to be impatient with his apparent lack of ambition, his disregard for his sons, and his lack of feeling for her? What do you think accounts for the times, rare as they may be, when the couple seems to be getting along?

8. What aspects of Sonalal's story and character strike you as being distinctly Indian? How does Nigam infuse the novel with Western overtones? If Sonalal were a character in a novel that took place in America, what do you think would be his occupation? What sorts of doctors would he visit to heal himself? How might his story have ended differently?or would his fate resemble Sonalal's?

9. How does magic figure in this novel? Do we?or Sonalal?witness any true feats of magic? How does Jagat define magic when he comments to Sonalal that "Maya's veil isn't over the world, it's over their eyes. Your eyes! You must lift the veil, Sona?see the way you used to"?

10. Why do you think Sonalal is able to find such happiness with Reena? What does she give him that Sarita cannot? What happens during their weeklong vacation that changes Sonalal's outlook on life and his feelings for her?

11. Why do you think Sonalal is so drawn to Dr. Seth? Even though the doctor makes all sorts of distasteful and strange suggestions about what may be causing Sonalal's ailments, Sonalal continues to seek him out, even in prison. What does Sonalal learn from the doctor? Is he really a quack? What does Dr. Seth's prescriptive potpourri of psychology, philosophy, and holistic medicine say about how we can heal ourselves?

12. How does Sonalal's search for redemption and relief from his emotional and physical ailments reflect the encroachment of Western ideas and practices into traditional Indian culture?

Author Bio

Sanjay Nigam was born in India, but left as an infant when his father came to North America for postdoctoral studies. Although he spent most of his young life in Arizona, he regularly returned to India to visit his grandparents in Delhi, where The Snake Charmer, his first novel, is set. Nigam's colorful depictions of Old Delhi are derived from those childhood memories. While pursuing his medical training, Nigam found respite from his grueling medical residency in the world of literature. Eventually, his passion for reading led to his own fiction, which he began to work on while doing scientific research in New York City. There he became involved in writing workshops, and published his first short story?an excerpt from The Snake Charmer?in Grand Street, the prestigious literary magazine. He has published other works in The Kenyon Review, Story, and Natural History. Sanjay Nigam has lived on both coasts and been associated with a number of prestigious medical schools, including Harvard.

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