



A People's History of Heaven

Mathangi Subramanian

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A politically driven graffiti artist. A transgender Christian convert. A blind girl who loves to dance. A queer daughter of a hijabi union leader. These are some of the young women who live in a Bangalore slum known as Heaven, young women whom readers will come to love in the moving, atmospheric, and deeply inspiring debut, *A People's History of Heaven*.

Welcome to Heaven, a thirty-year-old slum hidden between brand-new high-rise apartment buildings and technology incubators in contemporary Bangalore, one of India's fastest-growing cities. In Heaven, you will come to know a community made up almost entirely of women, mothers and daughters who have been abandoned by their men when no male heir was produced. Living hand-to-mouth and constantly struggling against the city government who wants to bulldoze their homes and build yet more glass high-rises, these women, young and old, gladly support one another, sharing whatever they can.

A People's History of Heaven centers on five best friends, girls who go to school together, a diverse group who love and accept one another unconditionally, pulling one another through crises and providing emotional, physical, and financial support. Together they wage war on the bulldozers that would bury their homes, and, ultimately, on the city that does not care what happens to them.

This is a story about geography, history, and strength, about love and friendship, about fighting for the people and places we love--even if no one else knows they exist. Elegant, poetic, bursting with color, Mathangi Subramanian's novel is a moving and celebratory story of girls on the cusp of adulthood who find joy just in the basic act of living.

A People's History of Heaven Details

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From Reader Review A People's History of Heaven for online ebook

Nancy Mijangos says

I received an ARC of this novel from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Good characterization and story line about a desperately poor community.

Beth says

I finished this book though I considered not doing so. Maybe there were too many characters for a short book. Maybe the best way I can summarize is to suggest lots of characters in an underdeveloped story. I got to know some of the characters like Janaki Ma'am and Banu and Deepa BUT I kept waiting for something to engage me (even as a backstory and there were backstories told). Yes there were some described strong characters but I didn't get to see and feel that strength as much as I would have liked. Debated rating a 1 or 2 but I opted for a 1.

Fabian says

The times today don't allow jaded jokes or malicious irony: no, today we want what feels like goodness. Things can go sour quickly we've noticed, and nothing is more certain than this in a small "slum" of Bangalore. But gee, we've traversed terrains like this before, on screen (Slumdog Millionaire) and popular lit (Animal's People); but, scratch that. It's actually nothing like that. And it comes with a bonus too: we need this kind of stuff!

Our modern spoiled-brat me me me and things to buy days need this shattering cry from a place on the outskirts of our modern age, the outliers of their own geography and place in history. The downtrodden in the book give you such a sense of gratitude in "Heaven", that first-time novelist Subramanian can rest assured she's done a public service. AND written a beautiful book. Her storytelling is always surprising, always emotion-filled. And guess what? Want to read THE Global #MeToo Novel of NOW, encapsulated with beautiful female characters and stories about mothers and daughters that will keep you fully engrossed? Eh? Now...How about THE LGBTQ+ Indian Novel You Never thought EVEN existed? Well, "A People's History" is BOTH. The writer is nothing but a revelation; one that drops precisely when we need it most.

Carol M says

Heaven is a place where women support each other, despite their differences. Religion, education, sexual preference, disability do not separate them from their bigger goal--saving their slum village from destruction. This story reveals the beauty of everyday kindnesses in a place the larger world overlooks. These women will stay with you long after the last page is turned.

Thanks to NetGalley for providing me with an ARC in exchange for a fair review.

Alice says

First of all, thanks to NetGalley and Carla from Algonquin Books for sending me ad eARC in exchange for a honest review.

You have to know English isn't my first language, so feel free to correct me if I make some mistakes while writing this review.

Real rating: 3,5 stars.

We're in Bangalore, India. Decades ago it was called "the market" or "the town" but then globalization and technology came, followed by the western mentality based on money and expansion and now Bangalore is something that eats itself and its poor inhabitants in the name of business and profits.

Heaven is the slum where *A People's History of Heaven* unfold.

Although there's a male presence - husbands, fathers, brothers, cousins, uncles - in Heaven, Heaven is mostly inhabited by women: women whose husbands died, women abandoned by their husbands for younger wives or because they "failed" in producing a male child.

And their lives - their histories - are now at risk for the second time, since the city decided to demolish Heaven to build a shop mall. They obviously don't take it well, so they form a human chain to protest and to defend the slum from the bulldozers.

The narrative style is something unusual, something I don't see often: the first plural person. And I like it.

It reminded me somehow of *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides with its storytelling, but it's different at the same time. Even if we learnt a few names inside "The Virgin Suicides", there was nothing else to distinguish the boys or their lives - so the voice stayed a collective one. Also, the point was another: their morbid obsession about the Lisbon sisters.

Here, instead, the first plural person serves as a "glue" for these lives - lives that literally depend on each other. This voice makes them a solid and close-knit group, it makes them stand together in the face of everything thrown at them. Still, this voice fades when it comes to tell us about these girls and these women in a third singular person - giving them their own voice, their history and their identity.

We met a group of teenage girls: Banu, Rukshana, Deepa, Joy, Padma.

They're different under many aspects: aspirations, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity. Still, they unconditionally love each other.

We met their mothers, we met Banu's grandmother, we met a girl from another slum, we met their headmistress at school - a woman determined to give a future to her students.

It's a story about how it's difficult to be a female in India, among a society where male children are favorite because girls have to obey to their mothers first and then to their husbands with marriage - a marriage where they often can't say their opinion about. Because girls can't always complete their studies based on the

opinion that it's such a waste of money - money that are preferably spent on male children.

It's a story about poor people living in a slum, people the city doesn't care about - something to push away to create space for progress and money. It's about how they have to fight for water, food and a roof above their heads while rich people treat them like they're nothing but an inconvenience.

And this is *A People's History of Heaven*: a fight story.

Because it's true these women fight for survival, but they also fight for a better future - a future where they can be winners despite their caste, religion and gender identity.

Was there something I didn't like? Yes, there was.

I liked the style, but I had a problem with time jumps - when the "us" fades to tell a specific episode these girls want us to know about. The chronological order wasn't always clear - I thought the girls were all together when they told about the new girl in their class, then it's said it was Padma.

I feel like the book lacks a sort of... background.

I have a different culture since I'm Italian and even if I have a vague knowledge of the caste concept from my religion classes in school, for someone who ignores it and doesn't know why the skin color is so important it's not clear why there are so many references to that.

This leads me to Joy's mother, a woman sometimes avoided by others - I didn't know why she was labeled as "Dalit", I didn't know what it meant so I had to search it on my own.

I can say the same about the languages: Kannada, Hindu, Telugu...

What are the differences? Are they official languages, are those local dialects instead? Why the girls speak one and someone else in Heaven speak another?

For someone who knows that culture is implicit knowledge, but if I want to talk about Italian and all its dialects that change based on the region and the town you live to someone who has no idea what I'm talking about, then I also have to explain the difference - I can't simply throw names around.

A little background on those subjects for those not knowing that culture wouldn't have hurt.

Still, I liked the book and it delivers a beautiful message about female support, inner strength and courage - and if you have unconditional love and support from those around you, even a slum under the right light can be home and a little piece of heaven.

Liz says

This book is not perfect, but then, neither is life, which is what *A People's History of Heaven* perfectly depicts. This book was beautiful, moving and read like poetry. I thought the first person plural perspective was a brilliant choice: the reader is effortlessly placed right in the middle of all these stories, friend groups and families.

The characters were so well depicted and developed. We get to know Heaven because we get to know the

characters so well; this is a people's history, after all. This isn't the 'official' history or the winners' history, this is the true history, an accurate representation of lives.

The story does jump around quite a bit chronologically without very good cues. While this is jarring in some places, I do think it works in a way because the memories and real time events all jumbled up do seem life-like. All these moments together are what make the characters themselves and what lead them to protesting the bulldozers. I do wish that particular thread (the bulldozers in real time) had been a little stronger throughout, but all in all I loved this book and had trouble putting it down.
