



Chaos and Strength

by Jeanne E. Fredriksen | Feb 27, 2012

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Teens are hard sells when it comes to reading choices. Often they require escapism, high-octane action, or perfect romance in a compelling story. In Cathy Ostlere's *Karma: A Novel in Verse*, young adult readers find ample amounts of all three. It is an intricate and powerful coming-of-age story set during one of modern India's most turbulent times.

A 15-year-old girl from the prairies of Manitoba, Canada, travels to India to deliver her Hindu mother's ashes. No sooner than when she and her Sikh father land in Delhi is Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assassinated. Separated during the melee that follows, the girl—Maya to her late mother, Jiva to her father—is forced to make hard and split-second decisions in the middle of a human firestorm. She finds herself lost in the chaos of a country she doesn't know, witness to unspeakable murder, then sheltered by a family torn by her presence. Mute, shocked, and fearful, Maya cannot express her feelings or reveal her identity. Subject to physical and verbal abuse by backward, superstitious people, it is only the devotion of a young man named Sandeep that makes her feel safe, loved, and whole again.

In 1984, Ostlere traveled the world and quickly fell in love with India. It was later in Nepal when she learned of the prime minister's assassination and the subsequent riots and bloodshed. Upon her return to Canada, she recorded her feelings and observations. Eventually, those words formed the basis for the novel, and *Karma* began to solidify following her second trip to India in 2005. On her website Ostlere writes, "India is a complicated country. Desperate. Frightening. Passionate. But she is also full of faith, joy and hope. In *Karma*, I wanted Maya to come to a similar understanding about the country where her parents came from."

Divided into three distinct sections—Maya's diary, Sandeep's notebook, and Jiva's journal—*Karma* is the written word of two seemingly-disparate characters. But as different as the two might appear by virtue of upbringing and environment, they are comparable in age and basic needs—understanding, love, and respect.

There are two factors that make this novel a powerhouse. *Karma* is written in verse, which facilitates the urgency of youth as well as the situations the characters find themselves in. Verses range from short and pointed to lengthier, prose-like entries still within the demanding confines of the poetic. Some verse is conversational and set apart on the page so it becomes vital, visual dialogue. The entire novel features an economy of language that yields sharp images, raw emotions, and tender acts. Verse is outside the norm for young adult novels, so Ostlere is often asked why she chose to tell the story in this unique way.

“*Karma*’s poetic form suits the emotional lives of Maya and Sandeep,” she says. “Their feelings are intense, their insights into the world are sharp and critical, and their understanding of what it means to be human is fresh, ragged, not yet smoothed by maturity, not yet smoothed by conventional narrative. Poetry is the perfect medium for their age. The short sentence. The precise image. The outbursts of feeling.”

As a complement to verse, the convention of the personal diary affords the characters honesty and provides them privacy, a place where their most intimate thoughts, questions, and feelings are free to exist. Ostlere is fully aware of the impact this device has on her story.

“Teenage diaries are often filled with half-thoughts, memories, laments, and emotional outpourings,” she states in her blog. “The brief phrases and absence of punctuation offers so much movement within the text—an almost stream-of-consciousness writing that carries the story along at a fast pace.”

Ostlere’s writing is filled with crisp figurative language, pinpointing the characters’ emotions and propelling the story, the characters, and the reader forward. Rich and lyrical, the text offers a deep study into Maya, Sandeep, and the world in which they find each other.

Most notable about Maya is the inner strength and a maturity not typical of 15-year-old girls. “I believe Maya’s strength of self comes to her from two streams: from her direct experience of alienation at home and school and, genetically, from her willful parents,” Ostlere says. “Maya is a child born to two dreamers cut off from their families, detached from their new community, and ultimately separated from each other because of different responses to their Canadian life. Maya must learn to be emotionally self-reliant in the midst of her mother’s instability and loss of self; And though passionate and sensual like her mother, sinking into despair and silence, Maya finds the strength that her father has modeled and eventually chooses life instead of death.”

When writing for young adults, it is imperative that the readers feel kinship with the characters immediately. Maya easily fits the bill. On the surface she is interested in boys, loyal to her best friend, and a product of her parents. However, when tragedy impacts her in India, she experiences conflict over which side she should take based on her own blend of cultures. Sandeep reflects his own culture and environment, and he exhibits other traits that will resonate with teens. He is energetic, brutally honest, and sharp-witted. He becomes Maya’s voice when she is unable to communicate.

Teens also will identify with a debate between Maya and her father about independence, understanding, and control of one’s own life. And they will recognize the conflict Maya feels

about who she really is. At one point, her fear, frustration, and anger are clearly expressed when she says, “I mix up my words. And my languages. Hindi and Punjabi and English are stirred into an angry tongue. I am the embodiment of the painful history of this country.”

“In *Karma*,” Ostlere says, “I wanted to introduce the question: Why do human beings murder out of irrational fear and why are they not able to stop themselves? And, I do not address at all the belief that the slaughter in Delhi was organized, systematic, and supported by the government.

“In 2005, I flew to India for the second time, over the pole, witnessing the dance of the northern lights, and I reflected on the religious concept that the physical world is only a dream; if so, what then is reality? This is one of the central questions in *Karma*. If the world is a construct made of thought, what will the new generation create out of their thinking?”

When the blog Wicked Awesome Books asked what she would like readers to learn from *Karma*, Ostlere responded, “That young hearts and minds are powerful in their capacity for love, strength, intelligence, and forgiveness. Injustice must be met with strength—a constant vigilance. Beware the frail heart, particularly one’s own.”

Wise words for adults of all ages.

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