

Bamboo People: A Novel

Mitali Perkins

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Chosen as a Junior Library Guild selection and included on IndieBound's Summer 2010 Kid's Indie Next List, *Bamboo People* is remarkable in its honest, poignant exploration of the everyday people involved in the conflict in Burma. Author Mitali Perkins exposes a major global issue, perhaps less known to juvenile readers, through an unassuming narration, and in doing so, creates an original work that will leave a lasting impression with readers of all ages.

Told in three sections, *Bamboo People* features two teen narrators, Chiko and Tu Reh. Chiko is an intelligent, literate Burmese boy who is strongly opposed to the Burmese military effort, but is conscripted into the army. Tu Reh, on the other hand, the son of a respected, peaceful Karenni leader, fights for independence fueled by deep anger towards the Burmese, who burned down his family's farm and home. While Chiko must find a way to get through his training and use his intelligence to his advantage, Tu Reh struggles with balancing his need for revenge with the integrity and values instilled in him by his family and community. The boys, whose journeys and struggles often seem to represent the average Burmese and Karenni experiences, are brought together when Chiko is put in a dangerous position that leaves him injured.

While the problems of a foreign land might not initially attract some juvenile readers, the candor and simplicity of Perkins' writing make not just the book, but the intellectual and political ideas behind the plot and theme, accessible. Short chapters help the book's readability as well. Perkins has written six other novels, including *Rickshaw Girl*, also published by Charlesbridge, which won the Jane Addams Honor Award, the Maine Lupine Honor Award, and the Julia Ward Howe Honor Award. A world traveler, Perkins' firsthand views of Thailand, and Karenni and Burmese refugees inform her writing.

Bamboo People strikes a wonderful balance between readability and meaning, exploring deep thematic issues such as honor, family, and the consequences of conflict. Without getting too graphic, the book communicates the struggles felt on both sides, and though the main characters are boys, the role of women is explored to an extent as well. At its core, *Bamboo People* gives nine-to twelve-year-olds an opportunity to broaden their horizons and learn about other cultures—and isn't broadening our experience one of the chief pleasures of literature? The book's Web site provides even more information about the conflict, all generally presented in a non-threatening way. Through *Bamboo People*, even juvenile readers can become part of an intelligent, global community that will be empowered to truly effect positive change.

ALICIA SONDHI (July / August 2010)

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