
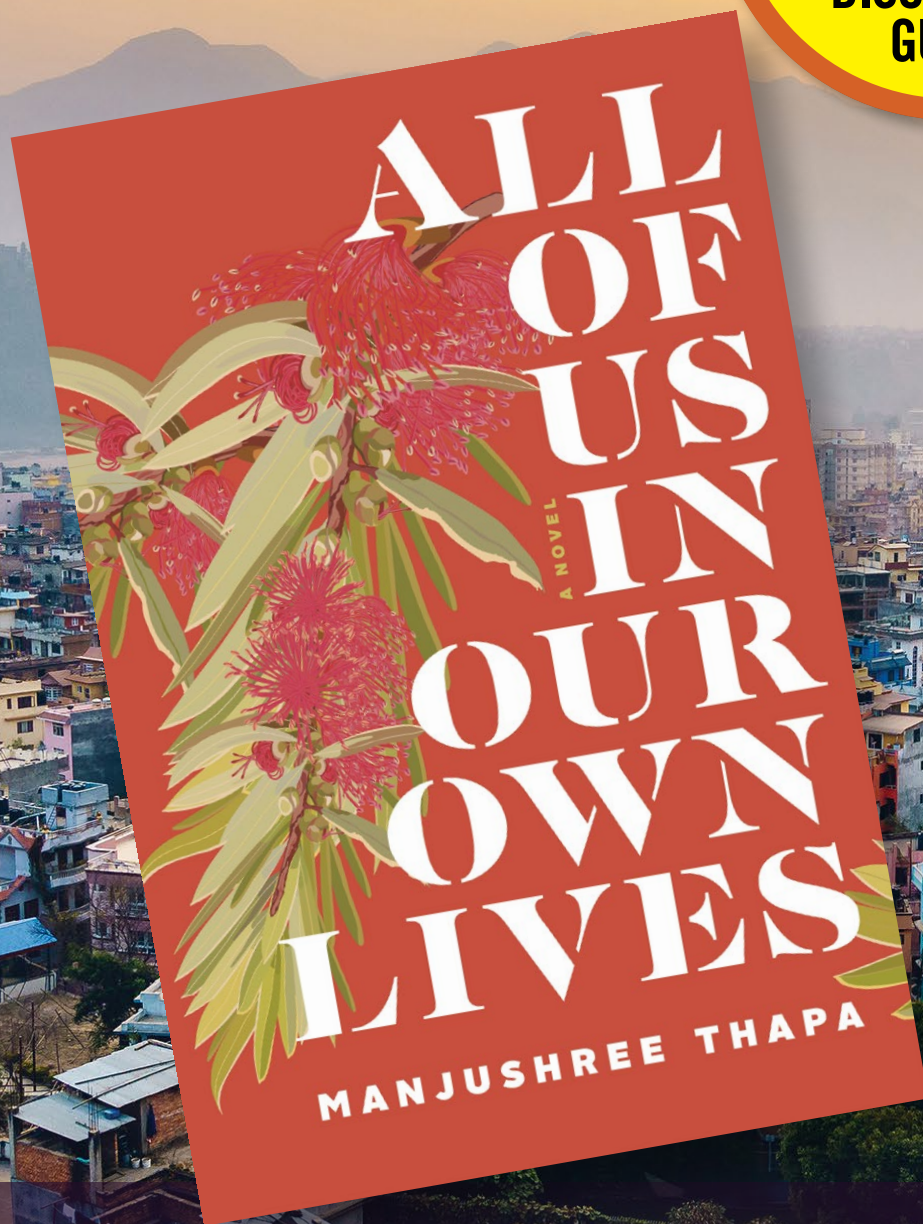


JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



ALL OF US IN OUR OWN LIVES

BY MANJUSHREE THAPA

RECOMMENDED BY FARZANA DOCTOR

WELCOME

Amnesty Book Club members

Welcome back to the Amnesty International Book Club! All of us at Amnesty International wish you a very happy new year! With the beginning of a new year we are thrilled to introduce our first novel of the year, *All of Us in Our Own Lives* by Manjushree Thapa. *All of Us in Our Own Lives* discusses important topics such as human interconnectedness, privilege, and the ethics of international development assistance. This touching novel has been recommended by guest reader Farzana Doctor, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about some of the most important and timely concerns of human rights.

In this guide, you will find Doctor's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to call on Saudi Arabia to release jailed women's rights activists.

All of Us in Our Own Lives is a beautiful story of strangers who shape each other's lives in fateful ways, it delves deeply into the lives of people in Nepal and into the world of international development assistance.

Celebrating our sixth anniversary this month, we thank you for being an amazing part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020: *All of Us in Our Own Lives*

About this month's author, **Manjushree Thapa**



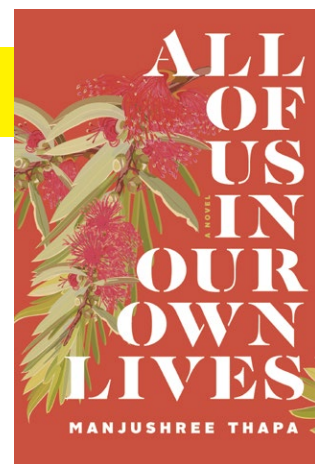
Manjushree Thapa grew up in Nepal, Canada and the United States. She began to write upon completing her BFA in photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. Her first book was *Mustang Bhot in Fragments* (1992). In 2001 she published the novel *The Tutor of History*, which she had begun as her MFA thesis in the creative writing program at the University of Washington in Seattle, which she attended as a Fulbright scholar. Her translation of Indra Bahadur Rai's *There's a Carnival Today* won 2017 PEN America Heim Translation Grant. Her best known book is *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* (2005), published just weeks before the royal coup in Nepal on 1 February 2005. The book was shortlisted for the Lettre Ulysses Award in 2006.

Before she became a writer she was the project manager of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project's office in Lo Monthang, Mustang, and as the

Picture Editor of *Himal* in Kathmandu. During this time she was witness to the revolution in political consciousness that followed Nepal's transition to democracy 1990. Her early experience in Nepal has informed much of her later writing.

Manjushree received a Master of Fine Arts in English (Fiction) at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she studied with Maya Sonenberg, Shawn Wong, David Shields and Charles Johnson. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, and a high school degree from National Cathedral School in Washington, DC.

She was born in Kathmandu, and raised in Nepal, Canada and the United States. Her family also lived in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Switzerland and India at various periods. She lives in Toronto.



About this month's reader, **Farzana Doctor**



Farzana Doctor is the Toronto-based author of three novels: *Stealing Nasreen*, *Six Metres of Pavement* (which won a 2012 Lambda Literary Award, was short-listed for the 2012 Toronto Book Award and was the One Book One Brampton 2017 winner), and *All Inclusive* (a Kobo and National Post Best Book of the Year). Farzana was recently named one of CBC Books' "100 Writers in Canada You Need to Know Now".

She is also a founding member of WeSpeakOut, a group that is working to ban female genital

mutilation in her Dawoodi Bohra community, and this work inspired her fourth novel, *Seven*, which will be released August 2020.

She is active in the local writing community. She mentors emerging writers and promotes books she loves (while exploiting the cuteness of her dog) through #MaggieWithBooks.

She is also a part-time psychotherapist and amateur tarot card reader. www.farzanadoctor.com



Farzana Doctor's Reflection on *All of Us in Our Own Lives*

All of Us in Our Own Lives by Nepali-Canadian Manjushree Thapa brings together a group of strangers who have a profound influence on one another. Told through the perspectives of four protagonists, Thapa offers a sweeping look at Nepal, its aid industry, the place of women in society, and the impact of globalization on its citizens.

The story begins with Ava, a Canadian seeking deeper meaning in her life. She leaves behind a husband and corporate job and moves to Nepal to work in international aid. She is an adoptee who was born there, and the mysteries of her beginnings both motivate and haunt her.

Ava meets Indira, a woman burnt-out from the misogyny in her personal and professional life. She's made a career being a gender expert and unbeknownst to Ava, is jockeying hard to be the first female director of a Nepali NGO.

When Ava travels to "the field" to see the "real Nepal," she is inspired by Sapana, a young woman who volunteers with a community-based organization and who hopes to improve the situation of the impoverished women of her village.

Gyanu, Sapana's brother, works at an upscale restaurant in Dubai where he's found love, friendships

and some stability. When he comes home to perform his father's obligatory death rites, he loses his job, and as a migrant worker, wonders what his future holds. Ava and he form an unexpected bond.

The NGO world is almost a fifth protagonist (and sometimes villain) in this novel, and as each character intersects with it, we get a glimpse into this sector and its workings.

One of the joys of fiction is learning about a place I've never visited. Thapa writes Nepal beautifully, painting a panorama of contrasts: smoggy Kathmandu, majestic Himalayas, spartan village life. More than that, she shows the reader the realities of social class and gender divides through her settings and characters' diverse struggles.

Another engaging aspect of the story is the relatable relationship messiness that leaks from every character: Ava's avoidance of her divorce; Indira's martyred "care" of her maid; Sapana's grief over a beloved friend's migration and Gyanu's yearning for his lover in Dubai. I loved that Thapa doesn't tidy these loose ends.

Rather, the book ends on a hopeful but unresolved note. Thapa shows us, that in this globalized world, despite being in our own lives, all of us are inextricably connected to one another.

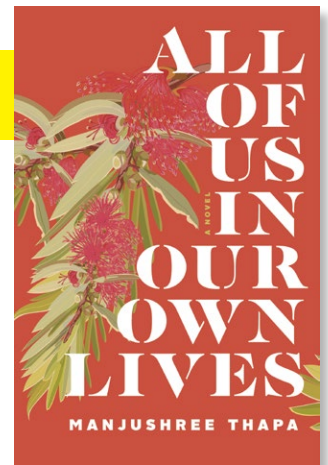
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM GUEST READER FARZANA DOCTOR

1. Thapa explores the experience of migrant workers through Gyanu and Chandra's sister Surya. Ava and some of her IDAF colleagues are a different class of migrant worker. What did you think of the way Thapa portrayed these contrasts?
2. Ava's adoptee status was central to her decision to move to Nepal yet she rarely discloses her ancestry to her colleagues. What did you think of this internal conflict?
3. Indira is full of contradictions: she's a jet-setting gender expert; a daughter-in-law not "allowed" to drink in her home; an ambitious and not entirely ethical leader and; an employer who is both dismissive and caring to her maid Durga. Why do you think Thapa might have written her in this way?
4. It's painful for Sapana when her best friend Chandra leaves. How did you feel about this relationship and her wish for Chandra to stay in the village?
5. All of the characters intersect with international aid sector in various ways. How did you feel about Thapa's portrayal of the NGOs?
6. Gyanu and Ava form an alliance toward the end of the book. On page 297, Ava says, "I feel like I've found a brother in you." How did you react to that line?
7. According to the World Economic Forum's "The Gender Gap Report 2018" (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf) which measures gender parity across education, health, economic and political systems, Nepal ranks 105 of 149. After reading this novel, do you have a better sense of what that might look like in the day-to-day lives of women in Nepal?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM THE AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BOOK CLUB

1. Which aspects of *All of Us in our Own Lives* did you enjoy the most, and which ones did you find the most challenging? Why?
2. What are some of the barriers that women human rights defenders, including those working in the development sector, face in creating gender equality through their work?
3. What did you learn about some of the power dynamics between NGOs carrying out development projects, and project beneficiaries in communities in the Global South? How can Canada's development assistance funding and programming promote gender equality and transform some of these unequal power dynamics between funder, implementer, and beneficiaries?
4. What do you think the author's purpose was in writing this book? What ideas was she trying to get across?
5. Did the characters seem believable to you? Did they remind you of anyone?
6. Who would you recommend *All of Us in our Own Lives* to? Why?

BACKGROUND: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN SAUDI ARABIA



Saudi Arabia: Release women human rights defenders now!

The arrest of women human rights defenders is part of a broader crackdown in Saudi Arabia on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman continues to promote his 'reforms' to the international public, while silencing anyone at home who dares to question his policies. The space for civil society to peacefully advocate for human rights is shrinking not only in Saudi Arabia, but all over the world.

Why are women human rights defenders being targeted?

People who advocate for freedom, justice, and equality in countries including Saudi Arabia often do so in an environment where they are demonized and restricted in their work. Many human rights defenders are smeared, threatened, physically attacked, criminalized and sometimes even killed, just for daring to stand up to those in power. In many countries, women human

rights defenders are arrested to silence their voices, and to deter other activists from publicly speaking out.

The threats to women human rights defenders are compounded because they are targeted both for who they are and what they're advocating for.

In most parts of the world, including Saudi Arabia, women are considered less worthy because of their gender, or because they work on issues related to gender and sexuality. They're more likely to be seen as not fitting in with social norms and expectations. They're at greater risk of violence, sexual attacks, and harassment. They're all too often the target of sexualized smears and of being judged by the value of their "honour" when they speak out.

Women human rights defenders are often ignored, dismissed, and silenced. Their extremely courageous, cutting-edge work continues to be underrepresented and insufficiently recognized by mainstream society, policy-makers, and the media.

Women human rights defenders need special recognition of their work, a safe space to work in, and specific protection to meet their needs.

Women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia are incredibly courageous. Without special recognition of their work, a safe environment, or sufficient protection, they have spoken out in support of gender equality in a

country that up until June 2018 was the only country in the world to forbid women from driving. In a country where patriarchal systems of oppression are firmly in place, these women have stepped outside of traditional gender norms and national laws to advocate for justice and equality. And for this, they have been arrested and detained; some have been in jail for almost two years.

CAN WE HAVE AN IMPACT?

Saudi Arabia has been in the news for touting its “reforms” including allowing women to drive and relaxing some aspects of the male guardianship system.

Reforms cannot come at the expense of human rights, and they cannot come at the expense of the lives and wellbeing of women human rights defenders.

In 2015, jailed Saudi blogger Raif Badawi was publicly flogged. Public outcry—including concerted campaigning by Amnesty International—drew international attention to his case. Raif has not been flogged since.

Saudi officials monitor social media and are sensitive to international pressure. This is why Amnesty International's actions directly target the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Ottawa and official Saudi government social media feeds to:

1. Let Saudi authorities know that the world is watching;
2. Keep the issue in the public eye; and
3. Continue calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the women human rights defenders.

TAKE ACTION



Call on Saudi Arabia to release women's rights activists

In May 2018, authorities in Saudi Arabia detained University of British Columbia graduate Loujain al-Hathloul, along with Iman al-Nafjan and Aziza-al-Yousef. All three are prominent women's rights activists and leading campaigners for lifting the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia.

In early August 2018, two other women human rights defenders, Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sada, were detained. Samar Badawi is the sister of jailed Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. These five women human rights defenders were part of a larger group of Saudi Arabian women human rights defenders arrested in a sweeping wave of arrests.

The crackdown on freedom of expression, association and assembly in Saudi Arabia has continued unabated. Women human rights defenders around the world face harassment and violence because they are women,

and because they may step outside traditional gender norms to publicly advocate for equality.

Loujain, Iman, Aziza, Samar, and Nassima are courageous women human rights defenders who have publicly and peacefully advocated for an end to the male guardianship system, the right to drive, and more broadly, for justice and equality. The price they are paying for their activism is steep; they could face up to 20 years in prison solely for their peaceful advocacy.

Loujain, Iman, Aziza, Samar, and Nassima continue to be detained without charge.

Amnesty International firmly opposes all forms of Islamophobia and condemns any and all acts of white supremacist racism and violence against Muslim communities.

Click here to sign a petition: [amnesty.ca/free-saudi-feminists](https://www.amnesty.ca/free-saudi-feminists)



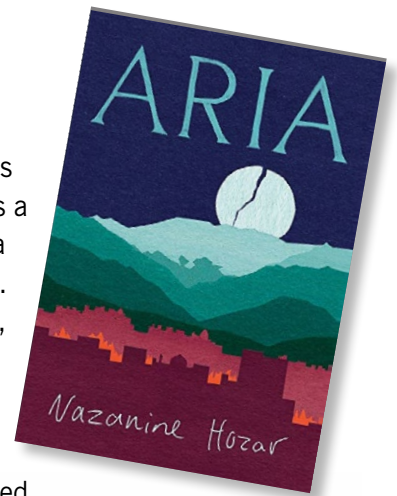
COMING UP IN MARCH/APRIL 2020

Aria By Nazanine Hozar

Recommended by guest reader: Anosh Irani

It is the early 1950s in a restless Iran, a country powerful with oil wealth but unsettled by class and religious divides and by a larger world hungry for its resources. One night, a humble driver in the Iranian army is walking home through a neighbourhood in Tehran when he hears a small, pitiful cry. Curious, he searches for the source, and to his horror comes upon a newborn baby girl abandoned by the side of the road and encircled by ravenous dogs. He snatches up the child, and forever alters his own destiny and that of the little girl, whom he names Aria.

Nazanine Hozar's stunning debut takes us inside the Iranian revolution--but seen like never before, through the eyes of an orphan girl. Through *Aria*, we meet three very different women who are fated to mother the lost child: reckless and self-absorbed Zahra, wife of the kind-hearted soldier; wealthy and compassionate Fereshteh, who welcomes Aria into her home, adopting her as an heir; and finally, the mysterious, impoverished Mehri, whose connection to Aria is both a blessing and a burden. The novel's heart-pounding conclusion takes us through the brutal revolution that installs the Ayatollah Khomeini as Iran's supreme leader, even as Aria falls in love and becomes a young mother herself.



The discussion guide will be sent out in March 2020.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

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