

Same Sun Here

BY
SILAS HOUSE AND NEELA VASWANI







ABOUT THE BOOK

An Indian girl who has emigrated to New York City and a coal miner's son from Kentucky seem unlikely kindred spirits—yet that is what pen pals Meena Joshi and River Dean Justice quickly discover about themselves. Underneath their surface differences, they have so much in common: families trying to get by in hard times, fathers working away from home, grandmothers who mean the world to them, an interest in social action, and even faithful dogs. Funny, sometimes testy, and always lively, their letters powerfully capture one momentous year in the lives of two friends who live far apart but are growing up beneath the same sun.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Meena start writing to River? Why do they mainly use snail mail, not e-mail? How do letters differ from e-mail? How might their relationship have developed differently if they used only e-mail? Do you prefer to receive e-mail or letters? Which do you prefer to send?
2. Meena's older brother, Kiku, says that "all people in Kentucky are Americans—not like New York City, where most people are from everywhere in the world" (page 1). Is this true, or a stereotype? According to River, how do some Kentuckians view New Yorkers?
3. Meena's grandmother in India, Dadi, lives on the other side of the world from Mamaw, River's grandmother in Kentucky. What are the significant differences in the lives of these two women? What are the important similarities?
4. River spends most of his time with Mamaw, and Meena is close friends with the elderly Mrs. Lau. What do you think young people gain from a relationship with older people? Are you close to an older person? What has he or she taught you about life?
5. What is mountaintop removal (MTR)? Why do coal companies use this mining process? Why do some of River's neighbors support MTR? Why do Mamaw and River oppose it?
6. Quoting Mamaw, River tells his classmates that "the only way to be a good American is to speak up for what you believe in" (page 67). How do River's teacher and principal respond to that remark? Do you agree with it?

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7. When Meena goes to citizenship class, the teacher says, “That’s what it means to be an American. To be free to love who and what you want, and to keep a lot in your heart at once” (page 262). Do you agree with this? What does being an American mean to you and your family?
 8. Meena and River believe that mountains have different moods. (Meena believes that cities do, too, but River doesn’t have enough experience in cities to have an opinion.) What do they mean by that? Have you ever seen a mountain (or a city) change moods?
 9. Neither Meena nor River has a permanent home. Why are River and his mother staying with his grandmother? Why must Meena’s family lie about their living arrangement?
 10. Meena is part of the Drama Club, and River loves playing basketball. How do you think group activities help people? To what groups or teams do you belong?
 11. Like all good writers, Meena and River are both passionate readers. What are some of the books they recommend to each other? Which have you already read? Which would you like to read? Why?
 12. What is civil disobedience? How does Mamaw use it in her fight against MTR? How did Rosa Parks use civil disobedience to combat segregation in America? How did Gandhi use it against British rule in India?
 13. Meena tells River about the Chipko movement in 1970s India. What was its goal? What were its tactics? How was it similar to what Mamaw is trying to do in Kentucky?
 14. Where do you see injustice in your community? Is there something you would fight for because you believe in it so strongly?
 15. “Ignorant people don’t know any better,” Mawma tells River, “but stupid people WANT to be stupid” (page 103). What do you believe is the difference between ignorance and stupidity? Which is more dangerous?
 16. The 2008 presidential election occurs during the course of this novel. Why are the two friends following this political contest so closely? How does Meena’s neighborhood respond to the result? How does River’s?
 17. Even best friends have disagreements. What do Meena and River quarrel about? How do they resolve their differences?
 18. Meena and River seem to find true friendship with each other. How do you know when someone is your real friend? What does it mean to be your “own true self” with someone? What do you think your responsibility is as a true friend to someone else?
 19. What sacrifices did Meena’s parents make to come to America? Why didn’t they bring their daughter with them? How does Meena feel about staying behind in India for several years? How would you?
 20. River’s mother is often too sick to be with her son. What is the nature of her illness? How long has she been suffering? When does she get better? Why?
 21. When Meena sends River forty-six sample questions (pages 275–279) from the demanding citizenship exam her parents just passed, he can answer only ten correctly. How many can you get right?
 22. River makes the cover of *Time* magazine and is asked to appear on the *Today* show. Why does he feel undeserving of all this attention? Do you agree? Why or why not?

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23. As the novel ends, Meena and River are about to see each other for the first time. Try to imagine their meeting. Is it fun? Awkward? A mix of both? What do they talk about? What do they do together?
24. Take a closing look at the title, *Same Sun Here*. What makes it so fitting for this book? At what point in the novel does Meena use that phrase?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Silas House is the nationally best-selling author of *Eli the Good* as well as the award-winning novels *Clay's Quilt*, *A Parchment of Leaves*, and *The Coal Tattoo*. He is the director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College and lives in eastern Kentucky with his family.

Neela Vaswani is the author of *You Have Given Me a Country*, winner of an American Book Award and named a *ForeWord* Magazine Book of the Year, as well as of *Where the Long Grass Bends*. She is also the recipient of an O. Henry Prize. She teaches at Spalding University's MFA in writing program and lives in New York City, where she founded the Storylines Project with the New York Public Library.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *SAME SUN HERE*

★ “Even better than reading a refreshingly honest story by one talented writer is reading one by two such writers.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A finely detailed depiction of two separate worlds that demonstrates a deep well of shared humanity.” —*Kirkus Reviews*



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