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Magical, Mythical, and Girl Power
Roshani Chokshi's new middle grade novel based on Hindu mythology launches the Rick Riordan Presents imprint

Adolescence isn’t easy for anyone, but for Aru Shah, who suddenly learns she’s part of an epic story out of Hindu mythology, being 12 years old is particularly challenging and wildly exciting. Aru is the titular character of Chokshi’s effervescent fantasy adventure, Aru Shah and the End of Time, the first of four books in her planned Pandava series and the launch title of the Rick Riordan Presents imprint from Disney-Hyperion.

In order to fit in at her posh middle school, Aru sometimes exaggerates the truth. She has plenty of material at her fingertips: her mother curates the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture, a treasure trove of archeological wonders. After her classmates dare her to light an ancient lamp called a diya, she releases a dangerous demonic entity, the Sleeper, who intends to unleash the Lord of Destruction. She also discovers that she is the reincarnation of one of the five sons of the Hindu god Pandu—and that the only way to save the world is to locate the other Pandava brothers.

Chokshi is the author of the young adult fantasies The Star-Touched Queen and A Crown of Wishes, both of which draw from Hindu myths and folklore. Chokshi counts the work of her contemporaries Holly Black, Catherynne Valente, and Laini Taylor as inspirations.

Aru Shah and the End of Time represents a departure for Chokshi on two counts: it’s her first series title and her first foray into middle grade. In order to get into the headspace of her 12-year-old character, Chokshi stuck close to home: “I looked at my old yearbook, and died a thousand times in my imagination,” she says. She also admits that she used to be a lot like Aru. “I was always lying and getting trapped by something I probably shouldn’t have said, but I never got powers or a lightning bolt.”

In order to write Aru’s story, she delved deeply into the stories she grew up hearing in her bicultural Indian and Filipino household, particularly those from the Mahabharata, one of the two foundational epic poems of ancient India. Chokshi noted that translations and interpretations of the myths vary from source to source, which presented challenges when adapting the material for the story. Yet she believes that their openness to a degree of interpretation is part of their appeal.

Chokshi decided to write the Pandava brothers as girls not only because she believes girls don’t always get their share of adventures but also because “Hindu mythology has a lot of fluidity to it. For example, one of the forms of the deity Vishnu is as Mohini, the Enchantress. Then there’s the famous Mahabharata character Shikhandi, who, in many stories, is male but born female,” she says. Chokshi is overwhelmingly excited that her book is the first title in the Rick Riordan Presents program, which publishes middle grade fantasy stories from underrepresented cultures: “It feels like I guzzled moonlight,” she says. “Rick’s work has touched the hearts and sparked the imaginations of so many kids that I’m still floored that Aru gets to launch the imprint.”

She applauds Riordan for his devotion to stories that weave in myths from various cultures: “Mythology and fairy tales tell us how to interpret the world. They tell us what to care about.” Chokshi sees myths as being especially accessible to young readers because they not only involve magical and fantastical elements but also often have traditional coming-of-age themes. And she doesn’t see the focus on cultural myths as a passing trend: “I would call what we’re seeing more of a hunger. Readers are demanding to be seen, and authors are responding to that.”