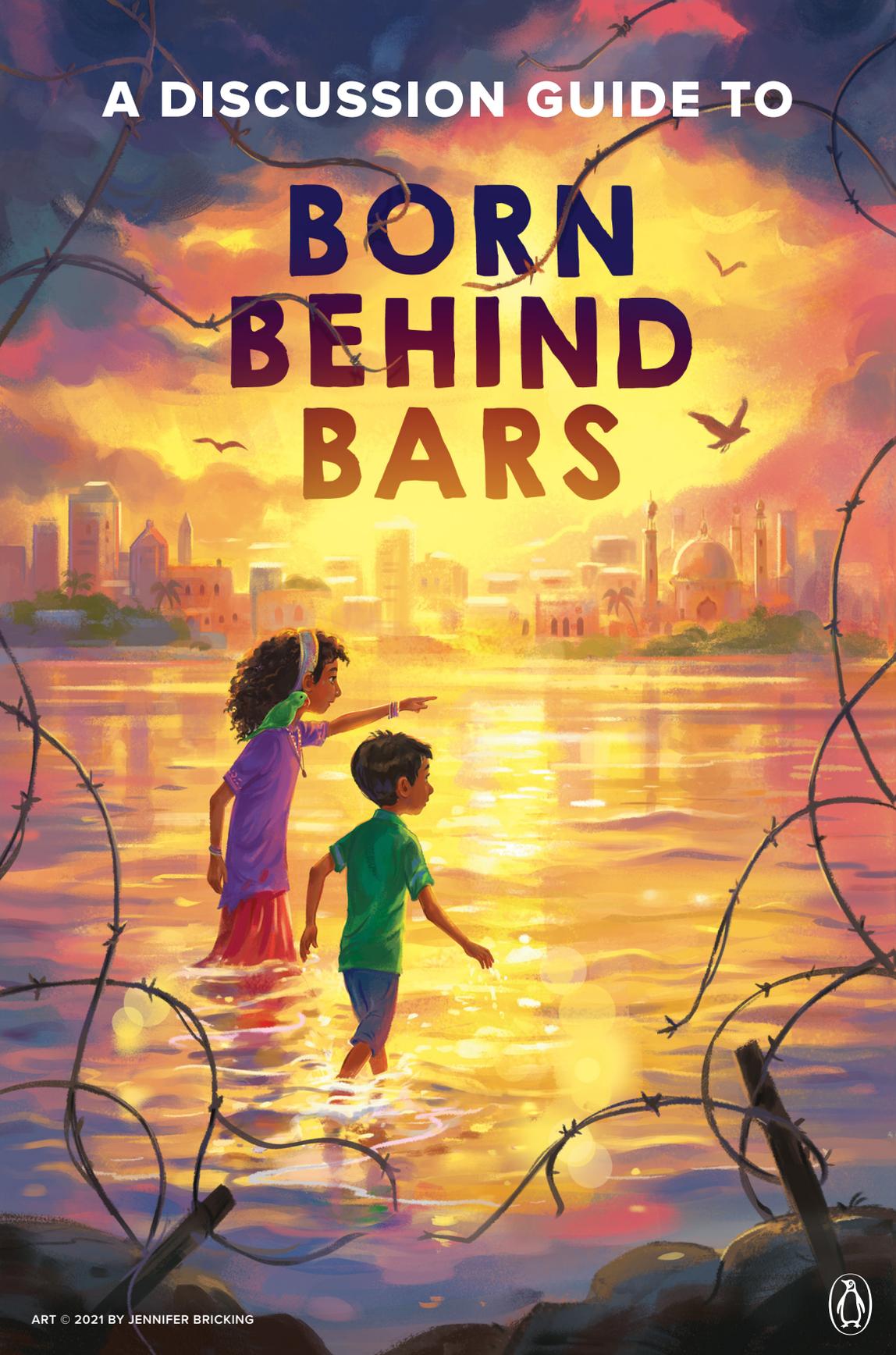
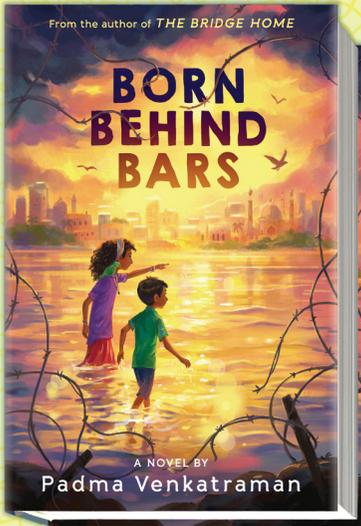


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO

# BORN BEHIND BARS





## ABOUT THE BOOK!

**T**he author of the award-winning *The Bridge Home* brings readers another gripping novel set in Chennai, India, featuring a boy who's unexpectedly released into the world after spending his whole life in jail with his mom. Kabir has been in jail since the day he was born because his mom is serving time for a crime she didn't commit. He's never met his dad, so the only family he's got are their cellmates, and the only place

he feels the least bit free is in the classroom, where his kind teacher regales him with stories of the wonders of the outside world. Then one day a new warden arrives and announces that Kabir is too old to stay. He gets handed over to a long-lost "uncle" who unfortunately turns out to be a fraud, intending to sell Kabir. So Kabir does the only thing he can—run away as fast as his legs will take him. How does a boy with nowhere to go and no connections make his way? Fortunately, he befriends Rani, another street kid, and she takes him under her wing. But plotting their next move is hard—and fraught with danger—in a world that cares little for homeless, low caste children. This is not the world Kabir dreamed of, but he discovers he's not the type to give up. Kabir is ready to show the world that he—and his mother—deserve a place in it.

★ **"A GRITTY STORY FILLED WITH HOPE AND IDEALISM."**

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY AMEENA GHAFFAR-KUCHER, EDD, a researcher, writer, and podcaster. She teaches at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, where she is the director of the International Educational Development Program. Her research and practitioner work centers on migration, schooling, curriculum development, and anti-Muslim racism. She is host of *The Parent Scoop*, a podcast that brings research and knowledge to parents, from parents who are researchers and practitioners in education.

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# THEMATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



## LOVE:

1. Rani and Kabir both have people who are their chosen family. For Kabir, it's the women in prison, and for Rani, it was the old man who taught her to tell fortunes and gave her his parrot. Are there people in your life who you consider family even if they're not related? What makes them family for you?
2. When talking about the prison cell, Kabir says, "Only one thing in this room is soft." What is Kabir referring to?

## LIFE:

3. When Kabir learns he is going to leave the jail, his mother tells him, "When you get out, don't waste a minute looking back." Why does she say this?
4. Mouse Girl says, "Being good isn't as important as being rich"—what does she mean by this? In contrast, Kabir recounts his mother saying that being brave and kind are the most important things in life. What do you find important in your life? Why? Did your friends, family or experience shape your ideas?
5. Kabir accuses Rani of lying when she tells people their fortunes, but Rani says she's just telling stories. Who do you agree with, and why?

## FREEDOM:

6. What are some small things that Kabir gets to do for the first time after he leaves jail? Can you find scenes or sentences in the text (when Kabir experiences new-found freedom) that make you think about freedoms that you take for granted?
7. How does Kabir experience his newfound freedom at his grandparent's house? How is this different from his first taste of freedom outside the jail?

## (IN)JUSTICE:

8. Why was Kabir's father afraid to tell his parents that he had a wife of a different religion? Can you think of other examples of this kind of fear in the United States?
9. Injustice is a central theme of this book. What are ways in which you see injustice in your everyday life?

# THEMATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## **(IN)JUSTICE (continued):**

10. Kabir's character is loosely based on a true story of a boy who was born in jail and fought to free his mother. Did this fact surprise you? Why or why not?

## **FEAR AND COURAGE:**

11. Kabir and Rani both show extreme bravery throughout the book. Kabir's father used to say, "Fear is a lock, and courage is a key we hold in our hands." What does he mean by that? Have you ever tried something that scared you? What did you do?

## **ON NAMES:**

12. What is the significance of Kabir's name? Do you know the meaning of your name? What does your name mean to you?

13. Rani explains that she named herself, and her name means "queen." If you had to name yourself, would you keep your name or choose something different?

## **ON LEARNING:**

14. Would you want to go to a school like Viji Aunty's school? Why or why not?

15. Viji Aunty explains to Rani that she has to go school so that she can have "more ways to deal with the world out there" and that "learning things at school isn't going to take away your independence—it's going to add to it." In what ways has school helped you "deal with the world out there" and added to your independence?

16. Kabir enjoys speaking to his mother in Kannada, a language no one else in the jail speaks. Later, when he goes to Bengaluru, he finds that lots of people speak Kannada, and this makes him feel proud. Do you have a language that you speak with your family or in your community? How does it make you feel? If you don't speak a language other than English, what language would you want to learn? Why?

★ **"AN OPTIMISTIC AND EARNEST TALE OF THE POWER OF HOPE AND THE GIFT OF FAMILY IN ALL FORMS."**

—BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW

# ACTIVITIES



1. **ESSAY:** The concept of home is brought up throughout the book. Kabir’s mother describes home as a place “where you’re looked after by people who love you”; Rani says, “I don’t think you need a roof to make a home;” and at the end of the story, Kabir says “home is a feeling, not a place.” Which statement resonates most with you? What does home mean for you? Write a short essay describing the meaning of home for you.

2. **MIND MAPPING & CREATIVE WRITING:** Imagination is a central theme of this story, and Kabir imagines the world outside while still living in jail. Describe a day in Kabir’s life as you imagine it to be from reading this story. Draw on all five senses in your descriptions—you can do this by creating a mind map. In the center of the page, write “Kabir’s life in jail”; next, make five bubbles, one for each sense (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste). Write words or images that come to mind for each of the senses that relate to Kabir’s life in jail. Finally, put it together as if you were writing a page in Kabir’s diary about a day in his life.

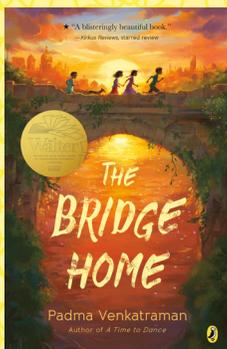
3. **DESCRIPTIVE WRITING:** Much of this book shows the wonder of first experiences as Kabir encounters the world outside jail—for example, the tastes of a new food, walking on a beach, taking a bath; many of them are things we take for granted. Make a list of things that you often don’t think about but make your life easier or more enjoyable in many ways—for example, running water, a hot shower, electricity. Pick one thing from your list and describe it as if you are experiencing it for the first time. Be sure to use lots of descriptive words!

4. **RESEARCH & PRESENTATION:** In the author’s note, Padma Venkatraman explains that many inequities and injustices exist in the criminal justice systems in both India and the United States. She also lists several organizations that work to address injustices in the USA. Research one of these organizations and create a presentation to highlight their work to share with your peers in class.

5. **ADVOCACY THROUGH LETTER WRITING:** Write a letter to your representative telling them why you think the US needs to reform its criminal justice system, especially when it comes to juvenile justice. You will need to do some research to back up your arguments.



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—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW

## ABOUT PADMA VENKATRAMAN

Padma Venkatraman is an American author who was born in India. She worked as an oceanographer before writing her award-winning novels *The Bridge Home*, *A Time to Dance*, *Island's End*, and *Climbing the Stairs*. Visit her on [twitter \(@padmatv\)](#), [Instagram \(@venkatraman.padma\)](#), or [www.padmavenkatraman.com](#).

