

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



Amita Parikh



A war.
A forbidden love.
One girl's survival.

a novel **THE
CIRCUS
TRAIN**

"A passionate and gripping tale of unlikely alliances and hidden strengths."

—PAM JENOFF, author of *The Orphan's Tale*

Book Club Kit

PUTNAM



A CONVERSATION WITH Amita Parikh

What inspired you to write this novel?

I drew upon many of my own personal interests to write *The Circus Train*. The starting point was always an illusionist father and his young daughter. That part came from my deep love of magic. Growing up, I remember watching magicians like David Copperfield and being completely mesmerized. “How did he do it?” I would yell at the end of each show—and yet part of me didn’t want to know, because it would break the spell. I wanted to bring that sense of childlike wonder and curiosity to my novel. Magic requires observers to suspend their disbelief and I wanted that same sort of feeling in my work of fiction. Plus, for the very astute reader, there is misdirection in the book early on. Very early on. If you read carefully, perhaps you’ll catch it.

I also loved the performing arts and circus world as a child. I grew up dancing and figure skating and there are tiny details of my past life interwoven into the smallest of moments throughout this book—the material a costume is crafted from, the name of a piece of music a troupe member performs to. I think theaters and circuses bring that same sense of wonder to the everyday person. They help us forget about reality, if only briefly.

On the flip side of all the above are the scientific and medical aspects of the book. My best subjects in school were always science and math and I earned a premed degree from university. I love science as much as art and wanted to bring that to my book. There’s so much creativity and imagination that goes into being successful in these fields. Think about all the scientific

discoveries over the years. You really do need a mind that thinks on another level to come up with cures to diseases, to discover another planet, or to figure out how to send someone into space safely.

Finally, I’m a sucker for romance, so there had to be a love story.

This novel is the summation of many years of hard work, but it’s also a love letter of sorts to things that on the surface are seemingly disparate, but that I then knitted together into the novel you’re holding in your hands today.

While the beginning of *The Circus Train* takes place on and around a fantastical traveling circus, this is very much a novel rooted in World War II and its aftermath. Why did you want to write about this era? Why do you think it’s important for readers to understand this time in history?

When I started writing this novel in 2014, I had only Theo and Lena at the start. I didn’t yet know how their story was going to unfold and what time and place they would inhabit. Then one evening, I attended a lecture on Greece’s involvement in World War II and that became the catalyst for this book. While I’ve read and loved so many novels with World War II as the backdrop, the only one I’d read set in Greece was *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*. I was excited to bring a different perspective to a well-trodden territory during World War II. What would it have been like for a circus to travel during this time? How would it affect performers?

And I'm a firm believer that there is so much we can learn from conflicts in history, not just World War II. It's crucial not to forget what has happened in our past, because that can and should inform how we live our lives today.

You included an extensive author's note in the back of the book about your research for *The Circus Train*. How did you go about this research, and was there a fact or piece of history you learned that surprised you?

It took me years and years. It was agonizing at times. I visited and trawled through so many archives, museums, and libraries. Then COVID hit and I couldn't travel to any of the places I'd written about, so I had to rely on archives and old maps and emailing with people back and forth.

Learning about the history behind Theresienstadt was the most surprising but devastatingly sad part of researching this novel. I think one of the most humbling bits of feedback I've gotten so far is from a reader who had family in Theresienstadt. They thanked me for writing about it and for shining a light on the experience. The stories of their relatives had been passed down and they were very moved by what I had written. It's a work of fiction and I'm aware it won't resonate with everyone, but when I do have moments like that, it reminds me of why I write.

Lena is a courageous and intelligent person in an era that isn't always kind to those who are different. How did you come to her character? Why did you decide for the protagonist to have physical limitations?

I grew up with a sibling who has a disability, and I witnessed firsthand the struggles they endured and still go through. I've heard both able-bodied and disabled people alike tell disabled people that they're fine the way they are and don't need to change. I agree with this completely—but the reality is unless you've lived with it day to day, or observed someone living with a disability every day, you can't possibly understand how hard it is to embrace that mindset. Much of our world—from our transport systems to our social and health care systems, are not set up in a way for individuals

with disabilities to thrive. This lack of accessibility can lead to emotional distress, reduced educational and work opportunities, and increased isolation, among other things. Today, people are more sensitive compared to the lack of inclusion, equality, and autonomy that occurred in the era *The Circus Train* is set, but I think many people still may not consider accessibility issues, so I wanted to offer insight through Lena's experiences.

When writing Lena's character, I was reminded of a piece of history I learned at university—how children were affected by polio during this time period. Adding this backstory to Lena's character felt appropriate for the era. I knew she would be this strong yet vulnerable girl, full of curiosity and kindness, but that she might not feel as if she fit into the circus world. Usually, we think of circuses as the place where outsiders can feel that they belong, but because of her physical limitations and disinterest in performing and magic, Lena automatically feels like a bit of an outcast. What I love about her is that even though she doesn't fit into the circus on the surface, she doesn't necessarily mind it. She's always had her own mind and interests.

I have always believed that our differences should unite us, not set us apart. Despite how Lena changes throughout the story, those closest to her didn't base their love for her on what she could or couldn't do, physically or intellectually. I think my favorite part of the novel is Lena's inner growth trajectory—for me, it was never about how she changed or didn't change on the outside. It was always about her acknowledging what she wanted to do and then actually pursuing it, with grace. Lena exudes a quiet, calm confidence that grows over time, and I love this about her. I truly feel that she learned to believe in herself over the course of the book, and ultimately achieve her dream.

I invite anyone wishing to read more about disability and representation to refer to my author's note in the back of the book.

What are some of the core qualities you wanted Lena and Alexandre's relationship to have? What do you think makes their relationship special?

Because Lena and Alexandre are so young when they meet, I wanted their relationship to have that sweet, slightly naïve, adolescent love feel to it. When you're

young and impressionable, it often feels as if it's the end of the world if the person you like doesn't like you back. Crushes on people at school can be all-consuming. You feel the lows at an extreme, but you also feel the highs of young love and the gamut of emotions that comes with that.

I wanted to highlight that against the backdrop of what was happening around Lena and Alexandre. I think sometimes people forget that even though the war was horrific, people still had to live. If anything, they needed love and relationships even more, to sustain themselves through such a dark period. Time and rules seem to slip away when you're caught up in a conflict as deadly as the one Lena and Alexandre were living through—you kind of think, "Well, tomorrow isn't a guarantee, let's do this."

I also love that Lena and Alexandre's relationship started out as a friendship. I do believe the best relationships are built on a strong foundation of friendship and honesty.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that while this is a story about Lena's coming of age and her relationship with Alexandre, it's also about family and the complicated bond between parents and children. Why did you feel it was important to include Theo and Lena's dynamic in the novel?

I love Theo and Lena's relationship and feel they have a special bond. Unlike a lot of parents, Theo does give Lena the choice to pursue her own interests and he goes out of his way to create a nurturing environment for her to grow in. Interestingly, their dynamic contrasts with the one Alexandre shared with his father. Alexandre's relationship with his father was very tenuous, it was rife with conflict, and yet you can see how it's followed him around his whole life. Despite his knowing in his gut that what his father did was wrong, blood really can be thicker than water.

Also, coming-of-age novels do tend to have some sort of child-guardian dynamic to them. When we're young, our parents are often the ones we take our cues from. Theo loves Lena so much and, like most parents, wanted her to feel loved and safe. I'm not saying he always went about it in the right way, but his intentions were good.

Did you always know where Lena and Alexandre's relationship would lead at the beginning of the novel? Were there moments in their relationship that surprised you while writing?

Yes, I did know. As you'll see from the next question and answer, I knew how the story would start and end, so I knew before I began writing what would happen to Lena and Alexandre. There weren't moments in their relationship that surprised me. That was one of the aspects of the novel I felt strongly about from the start.

Without giving anything away, did you always know how the story would end?

I did always know. I always knew how the novel would start and how it would end. But I struggled to fill in the parts in between!

What do you want readers to take away from *The Circus Train*?

A sense of magic and hope. It may sound a bit whimsical, but I think life is better when you believe in magic.

I'd also love it if my story inspired someone to believe in themselves and persist in their dreams just a little bit longer. Often the turning point to realizing our goals is right around the corner. I encourage anyone who feels like giving up to take a step back, breathe, and then continue forging ahead. Take heart in knowing that good things take time. I've always thought of myself as a tortoise, not a hare. And the thing is, the tortoise won in the end.

What's next for you?

I am working on my second novel, a work of historical fiction with a magical, fantastical twist. I can't say more than that. I am a storyteller at heart and as long as I can keep creating, that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Discussion Questions

1.

Lena is faced with difficult hardships in her youth. How do you think those obstacles shaped her? Were you surprised by Lena's journey throughout the novel?

2.

If you could describe Lena and Alexandre's relationship in three words, what would they be? Do you think their relationship is special, and if so, how?

3.

The Circus Train portrays themes of disability and representation, magic and illusion, and the horrors that occurred during World War II. Were there any facts about these topics that you were surprised to learn about? If so, what were they?

4.

What was your favorite scene in the novel and why?

5.

If Lena was born in today's age, where do you think her path would have taken her? Do you think the historical context of this novel is an important aspect of her journey? Why or why not?

6.

Discuss the positives and negatives of Theo and Lena's relationship. Do you think Theo was a good father to her? Why or why not?

7.

Who was your favorite character in the novel and why?

8.

Do you think Theo did the right thing by keeping his secret from Lena? What would you have done in his position?

9.

How do you think Lena and Alexandre save each other in the novel? If they didn't have each other, how do you think each of their stories would have ended up?

10.

Were you surprised by the ending?