

ALKA JOSHI

*The*

# HENNA ARTIST

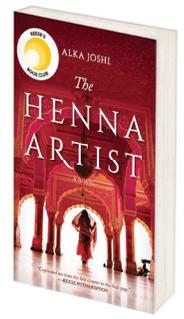
A NOVEL

"Captivated me from the first chapter to the final page."

—REESE WITHERSPOON

**READER'S GUIDE**

# Discussion Guide



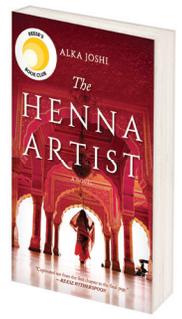
## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Lakshmi is such a strong and multifaceted character. What makes her that way? What are three things a great protagonist needs to truly stand out?
- 2) Could Lakshmi have found another way to escape her abusive marriage? What do you think of the choices she made to change her circumstances?
- 3) Should Lakshmi have tried to make her marriage work the second time around? Why or why not?
- 4) What do you think Lakshmi has ultimately learned about herself and about her place in the world by the end of the novel?
- 5) What do you see as the basic similarities and differences between Lakshmi and the Maharanis she works for? Who has more freedom? Who has more advantages?
- 6) Lakshmi and Malik are very close, even though she is Hindu and he is Muslim. What does this say about the relationship between these two religions?
- 7) What does the novel show about the caste system in 1950s India and people's ability to navigate the rules and restrictions within it? Is this same caste system still in place today?
- 8) When Radha enters Lakshmi's life, Lakshmi becomes responsible for raising her headstrong younger sister. Do her conflicts with Radha resonate with any of your experiences parenting teenagers?
- 9) The lullaby that Lakshmi uses to test whether Radha is really her sister was composed by their father. If you were to create such a lullaby, what familial clues would you include to identify members of your circle?
- 10) Indian proverbs are used throughout the text to emphasize certain points in the novel. Do these sayings resonate with you or remind you of proverbs from your own upbringing? Do any in particular stick out in your mind?



# Discussion Guide

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

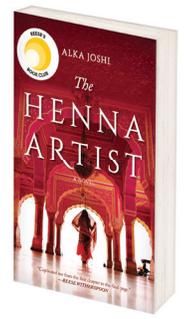


- 11) What does the novel tell you about the role of the henna artist in Indian culture in general and in wedding traditions in particular? What does the henna itself symbolize? Did the description of any of Lakshmi's henna applications particularly appeal to you?
- 12) Lakshmi's knowledge of natural health remedies is recognized as valuable not just by the Maharinis, but by Dr. Kumar, too. What role do natural remedies play in modern medicine in India and in conventional medicine elsewhere? Do you rely on any particular natural remedies yourself for certain ailments?
- 13) This novel is set in the 1950s just as one hundred years of British rule is ending, and Indian society is going through a huge transition. What did you learn about life at that time of cultural shift in India's history? Did that realization change any of your assumptions about India?
- 14) Given what you know about India now, has the status of Indian women changed much since 1955, do you think? On what are you basing your assumptions?



# Discussion Guide

## A CONVERSATION WITH ALKA JOSHI



### What inspired you to write *The Henna Artist*?

I have my mother to thank for my first novel.

When I was fifteen, my mother and I went shopping for school clothes. We'd been living in the States—in the Midwest—for six years by then, but she still wore saris. As we passed the dresses, she plucked one with a plunging halter top off the rack and asked me to try it on. An American girl might have thought her mother hip, but I was embarrassed.

For my sixteenth birthday, my mother made an appointment at Merle Norman Cosmetics so I could learn to wear makeup, something she knew nothing about but felt I needed to learn.

At eighteen, when I told her I wanted to sleep with my first boyfriend, she immediately took me to get birth control pills and urged me to experiment—she, who had had an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen and still stumbled over her English.

It took me years to understand that what my mother wanted was a life for me that she herself had been denied. She wanted me to experience the freedom of choice.

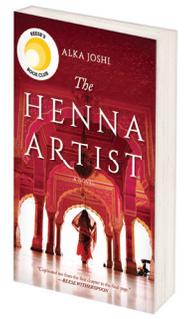
At some point, I began imagining a different start to my mother's life. What if her father hadn't made her marry at such a tender age? What if she hadn't had three children in rapid succession? What would a creative, fierce, smart woman like her have done to survive on her own if she had defied her father and refused to marry?

Lakshmi, the henna artist, embodies the alternative life I imagined for my mother. The frenetic period following India's independence from the British, when India was building new universities, government and cultural institutions, roads, dams and bridges at an unprecedented rate, was an ideal setting for Lakshmi to start a new life for herself. Like my mother, Lakshmi wanted to make her own decisions about what she would do, who she wanted to be with and where she would go. She rejected convention even when she knew the cost would be steep, not only for her but also for her family.



# Discussion Guide

## A CONVERSATION WITH ALKA JOSHI



Yet, like the citizens of a newly independent nation, Lakshmi finds that progress takes time. While Lakshmi is recognized for her talents publicly the way my mother was not, the cultural norms she grew up with will not easily bend to accommodate a clever, headstrong young woman. Ultimately, she is forced to create a new path that will satisfy her ambitions and society’s expectations of her.

My mother is no longer with us, but she lives in every breath Lakshmi takes and every word she utters. Through Lakshmi, my mother revels in the freedom she never had in real life.

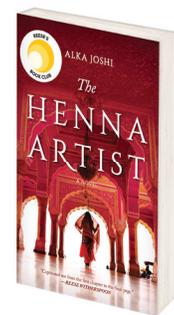
### Are you working on another novel?

Yes, I am exploring what the future will look for a few of the characters central to *The Henna Artist*—the year is 1967 and the younger characters are now the new generation of progressive Indians moving the country forward.



# THE STORY OF HENNA

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For more than five thousand years, henna (or *mehendi*) has been used to adorn bodies. In the hot climates of India, Pakistan, China, the Middle East and North Africa, the *Lawsonia enermis* plant is abundant, growing to five feet high. The plant—whose leaves, flowers and twigs are ground to make henna powder—is easy to find and inexpensive.

Mixed with water, sugar, oil, lemon or other ingredients, the powder’s color is intensified, and its medicinal and healing properties enhanced. Henna cools the body in hot weather and protects skin from drying. In India, men and women apply henna, instead of chemical dyes, to their graying hair, where it has a similar, soothing effect. It is common in some cultures to dip hands and feet whole in henna to stay cool.

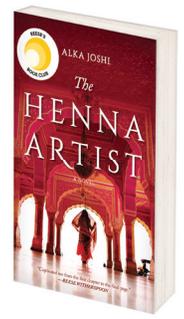
Usually associated with weddings and bridal preparation, henna is also used on other significant occasions: engagements, birthdays, holidays, religious celebrations, naming ceremonies and more. Ancient Egyptians applied henna to bodies before mummification. In Southern China, henna has been used in erotic rituals for three thousand years.

Today’s henna artists continue to create increasingly elaborate, intricate and unique designs even in the absence of a special occasion. The ability of an artist to customize the design to the wearer, no matter their geographical location, allows the art of henna to transcend culture, religious beliefs or ethnicity.



# RADHA'S RECIPE FOR HENNA PASTE

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The leaves, flowers and stems of the henna plant are first dried, then ground into a powder, and tough bits, like veins, are removed. The action of grinding releases the bonding agent so when the powder is mixed with hot water, the resulting paste sticks to the skin for a considerable period of time and the fresh herbal fragrance lingers on the wearer.

The darker the color of the henna, the longer the design will remain on the skin. Acidic elements like lemon juice, vinegar or strong black tea help intensify the henna color from amber to dark brown. Same goes for tea tree, eucalyptus, geranium, clove or lavender oils, which have the ability to bind the stain to the skin more strongly. The soles of our feet and our palms, the thickest parts of our skin, absorb the henna stain best.

After mixing the paste, let it sit for six to twelve hours in a cool, dark place before applying it.

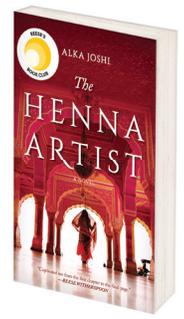
To prevent the henna from drying or falling off the skin before the dye has a chance to set, spray the damp design, carefully, with a sugar/lemon mix (or add sugar to the paste itself before application). Only use natural sugars, like nonacidic fruit juices of mango and guava, which also add to the color and intensity of the shade. The more fruit juice you add, the less water you should mix into the paste.

The wearer should not wash her hands right after the paste flakes off. Heat will help seal the design further, so massage the skin immediately after with clove or lavender oil. Within a few days, the color will darken from a light orange to a reddish brown. (For this reason, the wearer should have her henna painted a few days before a celebratory event, when the design will be at its peak.)



# MALIK'S RECIPE FOR BATTI BALLS

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MAKES 4 SERVINGS

An authentic Rajasthani meal, dal batti churma is a hearty dish, both savory and sweet, served at weddings and many other ceremonies. Dal is a simple curry that can be made from green, yellow or black lentils as well as dried garbanzo beans, and seasoned with cumin, turmeric, coriander, green chilies, onions, garlic and salt. There are as many recipes for dal as there are for chapattis.

Batti, a whole wheat flour rolled into a ball and baked in a charcoal fire or oven, accompanies the dal. It can be served whole, dunked into dal, or it can be crushed and mixed with sugar or jaggery to make the sweet dessert churma.

Following is a recipe for the batti balls, which Malik deep fries in ghee, but which can be baked in an oven for a healthier dish.

## INGREDIENTS:

Whole wheat flour: 2 cups

Fennel seeds: 2 teaspoons

Salt: 2 teaspoons

Melted ghee (or canola oil): 4 tablespoons (more, if frying the batti)

Whole yogurt: 1/4 cup (do not use low fat or nonfat)

Lukewarm water: 2 tablespoons

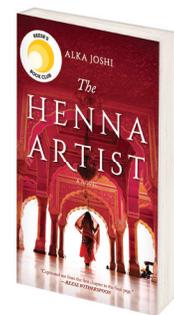
## DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Add the fennel seeds, salt and ghee/oil to the wheat flour and mix well.
3. Stir the water in the yogurt until smooth. Add to the flour mixture.
4. Knead the dough until all the flour is well mixed. It should feel firm, like cookie dough, not cake mixture.
5. Roll the dough between your palms to make 1 1/2-inch round balls.
6. Place the batti balls on a cookie tray, 2 inches apart, and bake for 15 minutes. The balls should be a golden brown on the bottom. Turn them over for another 15 minutes to cook the other side.
7. To test, break one ball apart and make sure it's cooked all the way through.
8. Serve with dal.



# THE PALACE RECIPE FOR ROYAL RABRI

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MAKES 10 SERVINGS

An easy-to-make dessert, rabri is creamy, rich and wholesome. It's time-consuming, but definitely worth the effort. Read a book while you're stirring—maybe even this one!

## INGREDIENTS:

Whole milk: 10 cups

Heavy whipping cream: 2 cups

Sugar: 4/5 cup

Cardamom seeds, crushed: 1 teaspoon

Toasted sliced slivered almonds: 2 tablespoons

Saffron: 6 threads

Rose or kewra essence (optional): 1 teaspoon

## DIRECTIONS:

1. Combine milk and cream in a deep saucepan. Boil for 2 hours on low heat, stirring continuously. Scrape the cream that collects on the sides of the pan, adding it back into the mixture. Do not let the milk burn.
2. Set aside 2 tablespoons of hot milk mixture in a bowl and soak the saffron threads in it.
3. Add sugar to the pan.
4. When the milk mixture is creamy and reduced to half its volume, remove the pan from heat. Let cool.
5. Fold the saffron essence, crushed cardamom seeds and almonds into the mixture.
6. Chill for 4 hours.

