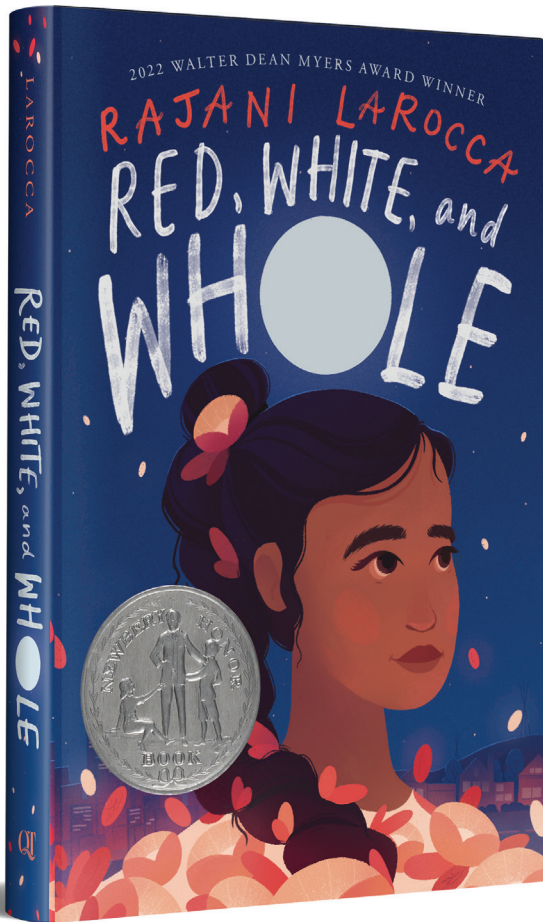


# RED, WHITE, and WHOLE



## About the Book

Reha feels torn between two worlds: school, where she's the only Indian American student, and home, with her family's traditions and holidays. But Reha's parents don't understand why she's conflicted—they only notice when Reha doesn't meet their strict expectations. Reha feels disconnected from her mother, or Amma. Although their names are linked—Reha means “star” and Punam means “moon”—they are a universe apart.

Then Reha finds out that her Amma is sick. Really sick. Reha, who has dreams of becoming a doctor even though she can't stomach the sight of blood, is determined to make her Amma well again. She'll do whatever it takes—even donating bone marrow—if it means saving her Amma's life.

This Walter Award winner and Newbery Honor winner by acclaimed author Rajani LaRocca is a radiant novel in verse that the author describes as “the book of her heart” about the ties that bind and how to go on in the face of unthinkable loss.

ALA  
**NEWBERY**  
HONOR BOOK

NEIBA  
**NEW ENGLAND**  
BOOK AWARD WINNER

ALSC  
**NOTABLE**  
CHILDREN'S BOOK

SCBWI  
**GOLDEN KITE**  
AWARD WINNER

**PROJECT LIT**  
BOOK CLUB PICK

WNDB  
**WALTER AWARD**  
WINNER

NCTE  
**NOTABLE**  
VERSE NOVEL

ILA  
**NOTABLE**  
BOOKS FOR A  
GLOBAL SOCIETY

CCBC  
**CHOICE**  
BOOK

**NERDY BOOK**  
**CLUB AWARD**  
BEST NOVEL IN VERSE

## Questions for Group Discussion

1. Describe Reha as she's depicted in the first part of the novel, including her personality and her daily life. What's she like as a daughter? As a friend? As a student? What makes her happy? What bothers her? What does she enjoy doing in her free time?
2. What is Reha's relationship with her mother like, at the beginning and later in the story? What does Reha appreciate about her mother? What are examples of conflicts between them? Discuss Amma's background, her work, and what she's like as a mother. Talk about the letter that Reha writes (but doesn't give) to her mother and the one she receives from her mother.
3. What is Reha's father like? When is he more easygoing than Amma? How well do he and Reha get along? How do you know? Describe his background and his work. Identify scenes where it's clear how much he loves Reha.
4. Reha's two best friends are Sunny and Rachel. She also grows close to Pete. How does she interact with each of them? How do they react to the problems that Reha faces? How do they show what good friends they are to her?
5. Describe Amma's illness and its effect on Reha. When does Reha first learn about it? What is the progression of the illness? How does Reha cope with her fears? Discuss the poem "Guilt" (pp. 122–123) and how it reflects Reha's emotions.
6. Starting with the book's first lines, Reha often reflects on ways that she lives in two worlds. What are the different worlds she lives in? How does she feel about the divisions? How does her mother's illness change Reha's feelings about being divided?
7. The author weaves several metaphors throughout the novel including blood, rivers, and the night sky. Find examples of each and discuss ways they relate to Reha's life. How are the three metaphors connected to each other? How does the title tie in to the metaphor of blood? Discuss the poem "Red, White, and Whole" (p. 27) and why the author chose that title for the book, too.
8. What details helped show that the narrative is set in 1983? Identify aspects of the era that are similar to today and some that are different. Talk about the role of music in the setting and in Reha's life, using specific examples.
9. Discuss the book's ending and its emotional impact on you. How has Reha changed since the beginning of the story? What do you think her future will be like? How will her mother remain with her in the years ahead?
10. Why do you think the author chose to use a verse novel format? Find some examples of poetic language that you especially like. How would the book have been different if it had been written in prose? Why did the author write the aerogrammes in prose instead of poetry?

## *Extension Activities*

**Who Can Be a Hero?** As a class, talk about the characteristics that Reha and Pete think define a hero. Discuss whether an ordinary person can be a hero. Together review the story of Savitri as told in the novel. Then write an essay about Reha and heroism. Address ways in which Reha is a hero, using specifics from the novel, and draw connections between Reha's and Savitri's stories.

**Time Travel: 1983.** What's happening in the world around Reha in 1983? Do some research and write down a short paragraph about each of five events or facts that interest you from that year. Categories could include top news stories, world events, politics, disasters, technology, popular or award-winning media (books, movies, television, video games), fads, "firsts," and more. Gather in small groups to compare and discuss your findings, tying them in to the novel if possible.

**Pop Music Connects Us.** Reha observes, "Pop music connects us — / all my friends, / everyone I know, / Indian and not" (p. 47). As a class, compile a list of the songs, singers, and bands mentioned in the narrative. Videos and lyrics of most of the songs are available online. Choose a song to explore, listening to it and reading the lyrics. Then have a class "Music of 1983" celebration to share the songs and your reactions to them. You can check out the author's playlist [here](#).

**Dear Reha.** Imagine that you are a friend of Reha's and you want to console her for her loss. Write her a letter expressing your sympathy and highlighting good memories of her mother, as seen in the narrative. Point out some of Reha's strengths and the people in her life who will help sustain her. Send her specific good wishes for her future.



### *About the Author*

Rajani LaRocca was born in India, raised in Kentucky, and now lives in Massachusetts, where she practices medicine and writes award-winning books for young readers. She's always been an omnivorous reader, and now she is an omnivorous writer of novels and picture books, fiction and nonfiction, in prose and poetry. A graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, she lives outside Boston with her family. Visit her at [www.RajaniLaRocca.com](http://www.RajaniLaRocca.com).

Guide prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than 15 years, who now gives workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. Kathleen chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.

## *A Note from the Author*

Although Reha's story is fictional, much of this novel is based on my own experiences—the sense of living in two worlds; the balance between celebrating uniqueness and wanting to be like everyone else; and bearing the worst thing you can imagine and somehow making your way through it.

The truth is, I've always felt split in two.

Growing up as an immigrant in Louisville, Kentucky, in the 1980s, I felt like a normal American girl . . . but I wasn't quite a typical American. In my home we ate different food, we sometimes wore different clothes, and we spent our weekends with our Indian community, our second family since our relatives lived half a world away. I spent my adolescence wondering which one was the “real” me: the weekday American or the weekend Indian.

I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a doctor, and that desire only grew as I went through school. Then, when I was a teen, my mother was seriously injured in a car accident. She spent months in the hospital, and my father and I spent them with her. And I realized that the world of medicine that I was so eager to enter could be a very scary place, and I wasn't sure if I still wanted to be a part of it.

When I was a kid, I read American novels, nonfiction, and comic books along with Amar Chitra Kathas—Indian comics that depicted stories from history and mythology. I loved all these books and empathized with characters from all kinds of backgrounds. But I never truly saw myself in a novel until much later, when I was an adult and read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, her gorgeous, multigenerational story of immigration and assimilation. That book spoke to me in a way I'd never felt before, because it wasn't about being Indian or being American but about being both. And that is the kind of book that I wanted *Red, White, and Whole* to be for young readers.

As I've gotten older, I've felt even more contradictions—as a premed government major in college, a working mother, and a doctor who writes books for children. It hasn't always been easy, but I've learned to accept this feeling of living in different worlds, because it's part of what makes me who I am, and even more important, it's what all of us feel. At some point, every single one of us wonders whether we really belong, whether we're truly good enough, and whether we're allowed to dream big.

We all contain multitudes, and not only is that okay, it is essential.

I hope you enjoyed reading this book of my heart. I hope it helps you understand that even when you feel torn apart, you can still be a whole person—not just despite the things you struggle with, but because of them.

 Rajani LaRocca