A Distant Heart by Sonali Dev
Wednesday April 25, 2018,
Naperville Public Library
Naper Blvd Branch
2pm
24 people
Notetaker: Becky Spratford

Discussion was led by Karen Toonen

Karen began by explaining how she runs her crime club since part of the point of Book Club Study is for the participants to see different examples of leadership styles. First, she sends them an email just before the discussion with things for them to think about. For the day of she makes a slideshow with information about upcoming programs, extra info about the book and super handy character charts. She included a few examples from past discussions.

Slide show is here

Then she moved into slides specific for this book. She had a slide with the covers of all of Dev's books so we could talk about how hard it is to get some book clubs to try romance based solely on the covers. Some covers are better than others. She also had a slide with a map of India showing where Mumbai is and then another map of the areas in Mumbai.

Finally a slide with a character list.

Question: Was this you first Dev title? More than ½ answered yes. This led to a discussion of where libraries file their copies of this book. Many had it in regular fiction not romance. We talked about how each library shelves romances.

Some people didn't even think this was a romance because it was not more than 50% romance. The gangster and crime fiction elements were very strong.

But, it is a classic "friends to lovers" trope which is popular in romance. Not everyone who likes romance likes this trope. In fact for many romance readers the trope is why they do or do not like a book.

This book has been described as a retelling of Rapunzel in Mumbai. Many romances also have a fairytale as a frame but for most of the group this was not as obvious. Comments:

- Maybe more patterned after Rapunzel than a retelling
- It reminded me of the marketing for Boy Snow BIrd by Oyeyemi. When we read that it was billed as a retelling of Snow White, but I didn't really see it.
- Cloistered female with no choice but to stay that way…. I guess.
- For me those scenes were my favorite part of the story so I totally thought of it as Rapunzel.

- I thought it was more about what does “love” mean than about her being Rapunzel.

Someone brought up her annoyance with the misunderstanding issues in romance in general. Comments:

- Say what you mean! There was too much of Kimi and Rahul NOT saying what they mean, or even saying the opposite.
- Usually these misunderstandings and the conflict they cause are what make me not like romances. Often these are the main conflict in a romance and I don’t like it.
- I know, in those books, I just want to lock them in a room together and force them to talk to each other. But here, not so much. That wouldn’t work.
- Yes, in this book the issues and conflicts went much deeper than a misunderstanding. I enjoyed that.
- Conflict of black market organs was definitely a big part
- But so too was the parent-child love conflict. Her illness leads to smothering.

New question: How does a heart transplant fix her disease, which is immune deficiency based? Karen was ready for this and said the disease was cured separately but the cure weakened her heart. Needed a transplant to keep living.

Let’s talk about the fact that story is told “out of order.”

- For some readers in a book club, this will drive them crazy and they won’t get past it. It was suggested you could warn those readers.
- For this story the shifting back and forth in time worked really well. It obscured the plot enough to add mystery.
- It also led to the confusion in their relationship. Where are they are this point? Lover or Friend? Made the when and how will they finally get together more exciting.
- For some the past storyline was more enjoyable and for others the present.

Question: Is this book too “dark” for romance?

- I mean it has organs being stolen and gangsters killing people.
- I definitely needed a historical romance as a palate cleanser after this one.
- Karen got us to refocus and remember that this billed as Bollywood Romance and “Bollywood” storylines are supposed to be exaggerated.
- If you don’t know that or know what Bollywood means, it might seem over the top in the drama and the darkness.
- High drama is to be expected.
- Many Bollywood movies now have a crime/suspense angle too.
- Someone who listened to the audiobook said she got a Bollywood vibe from the way the book was read.
- It was a very visual book.

This led us into a larger conversation about the foreignness of the story to our mostly white group:

- Some of the people needed help with the food.

- While there was no glossary in this book like some other Indian novels, Dev has a nice glossary of Indian words, especially the food, on her website. One library is doing a program with one of her books and is making flashcards for the food with the name on one side and her definition/description on the other.
- I liked that this book didn't have a glossary. I just read the book and fell into the story. I didn't worry about it.
- Everything was explained in the text.

We talked about Kirit [Dad] and Rahul and what between them keeps Kimi and Rahul apart:

- So complicated.
- Kirit is so desperate. He plays whatever card hr can when it suits him.
- Others were more compassionate and understanding about the Dad. He loves his daughter, he is a good man.
- We moved quickly into talking about the class differences keeping Kimi and Rahul apart
- But the Dad's guilt is huge. Can it overpower the class differences?
- As American readers we like to think we are better than these class issues, but are we?
- People shared stories from their own lives where class kept a couple apart here in America.
- A few other people chimed in about their daughters having Indian boyfriends and having to be interviewed by the family.
- We aren't as different as we might think at first.
- We might not have castes, but we sure have a lot of social and economic boundaries that keep couples apart.
- The story did a good job of forcing us to look at ourselves even with its foreign setting.
- Also, while modern India, there are many connections one could make to traditional Regency romances here. While this book had no arranged marriages, many readers expect that in an Indian story. Regencies are filled with those too. Also the class issues.

Let's talk more about the urban setting and the crime aspects:

- There was a lot of violence, but not more than an American city.
- It had a 24 hour news cycle, ripped for the headlines feel.
- People in the story are numb to the violence because it is always happening around them. Not too different than Chicago.
- The intensity and density of the crowds was portrayed very well. Karen enhanced this part of the discussion by sharing statistics about how densely populated Mumbai is with comparisons to here.
- Dev did a great job making us feel the density of people and then when the story switched to the parts where Kimi was in her room, with all of that space, it was even more shocking. It made those scenes even more special.

Who is more evil Kirit or Asif Khan:

- Kirit is controlling and ruled by fear. Khan is just a bad guy. He is clearly evil. Kirit's situation is so much more complex

- But, wouldn't you kill for your kids? Maybe
- Everyone can kill for the right reasons.
- The story is set up very well to make the case. Kimi's parents have everything in life except children. They tried and tried and Kimi was the only one.
- He had no choice, but looking back, the fact that we are debating it means it was well written.

We talked a bit about Rahul's superstitions with hospitals. Some people cannot deal with sickness and death. People in the discussion shared stories of family members who will not enter hospitals for any reason.

We looked at all the covers together again. A Distant Heart, her 4th book looks the least "Indian" and also the most women's fiction as opposed to romance.

We discussed who we could handsell this title too?

- Jodi Picoult fans
- Thriller readers
- JoJo Moyes fans
- Upper teen readers like John Green
- Later in the afternoon in part 2 of the discussion, Sonali mentioned that she thinks Sidney Sheldon, Ken Follett, and Jeffrey Archer are good readalikes.
- You can give this book to people who like angsty books but with happy endings
- Those who like Bollywood movies
- Those who like "Friends to Lovers" stories -- you can do a power search for the trope in All About Romance.