

# BOOK CLUB KIT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALKA JOSHI



# *The* HENNA ARTIST

A NOVEL

INCLUDES  
RECIPES,  
SHARED WITH  
LOVE FROM  
THE AUTHOR

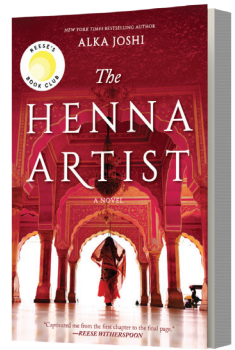
"Captivated me from the first chapter to the final page."

—REESE WITHERSPOON

## BOOK SUMMARY

Escaping from an abusive marriage, seventeen-year-old Lakshmi makes her way alone to the vibrant 1950s pink city of Jaipur. There she becomes the most highly requested henna artist—and confidante—to the wealthy women of the upper class. But trusted with the secrets of the wealthy, she can never reveal her own...

Known for her original designs and sage advice, Lakshmi must tread carefully to avoid the jealous gossips who could ruin her reputation and her livelihood. As she pursues her dream of an independent life, she is startled one day when she is confronted by her husband, who has tracked her down these many years later with a high-spirited young girl in tow—a sister Lakshmi never knew she had. Suddenly the caution that she has carefully cultivated as protection is threatened. Still she perseveres, applying her talents and lifting up those that surround her as she does.



**“Captivated me from the first chapter to the final page.”**

**—REESE WITHERSPOON**



*A New York Times*  
Best Seller



A Reese Witherspoon  
Book Club Pick



SOON TO BE A  
TELEVISION SERIES  
produced by and starring  
Freida Pinto

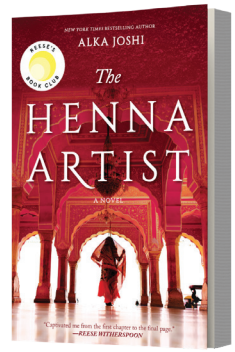


**ALKA JOSHI**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Henna Artist*, is a graduate of Stanford University and received her M.F.A. from the California College of the Arts. She has worked as an advertising copywriter, a marketing consultant, and an illustrator. Alka was born in India, in the state of Rajasthan. Her family came to the United States when she was nine, and she now lives on California's Monterey Peninsula with her husband and two misbehaving pups. Her second novel, *The Secret Keeper of Jaipur*, is the follow-up to *The Henna Artist*. Visit her website and blog at [thehennaartist.com](http://thehennaartist.com)



# DISCUSSION GUIDE

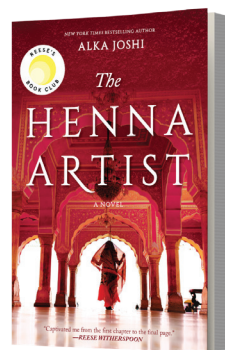
## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



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?
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 of the rack and asked me 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.

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.

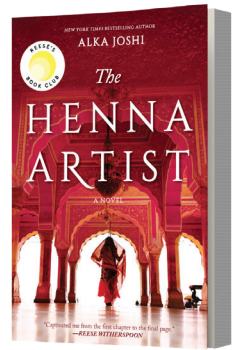
# THE STORY OF HENNA

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 inermis* 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

*Makes enough for application on one woman's hands and feet.*

Many people believe that the deeper the red of the henna design, the more a woman is loved by her husband, and Lakshmi's henna never disappoints. In the 1950s, Lakshmi would have made her paste with the most natural ingredients available, so the recipe below calls for the freshest, more organic products you can find. The henna plant grows abundantly in a hot, dry climate like Rajasthan's, and the henna from that part of India is considered to be the finest. Lakshmi would have used pure essential oils, and instead of refined sugar, she would have mixed mango or guava fruit juices into her henna paste. We've adapted the recipe for modern day henna artists.

### INGREDIENTS

**Henna powder, fine grade:**  
4 tablespoons

**Sugar:** 2 teaspoons

**Fresh lemon juice:** 2 teaspoons,  
slightly warmed

**Warm water:** as needed

**Plastic wrap**

**Mixing bowl**

**Plastic henna cones**

**Optional:** Clove oil for massage  
after henna has been removed.  
Heat from the massage helps seal  
the design, making it last longer.

### DIRECTIONS

1. In your bowl, mix henna paste and sugar.
2. Stir warmed lemon juice and geranium oil into the powder with a rubber spatula.
3. Mix until the paste is creamy with no lumps, the consistency of a lovely pudding. Hand mixing is preferable to using an electric mixer, which can make the paste stringy. If it's still too dry, add a few drops of warm water. If it's too wet, add a little more henna powder. Making henna paste is an art; it may take a few tries before you reach the perfect consistency.
4. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap, pressing down to remove air between the paste and the wrap.
5. Let sit in a cool spot for 6-12 hours.
6. When you're ready to use, stir the paste again to remove any lumps, adding a few drops of lemon juice or essential oil to get the desired consistency.
7. Insert the paste into a henna cone, snip off the tip, and you're ready to create beautiful art!

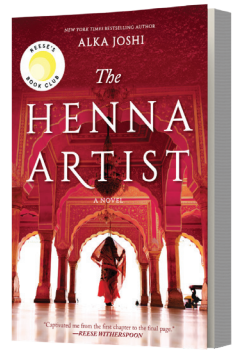
## MALIK'S RECIPE FOR BATTI BALLS

### *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

**Whole yogurt:** ¼ cup  
(do not use low fat or nonfat)

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

**Lukewarm water:**  
2 tablespoons

### *DIRECTIONS*

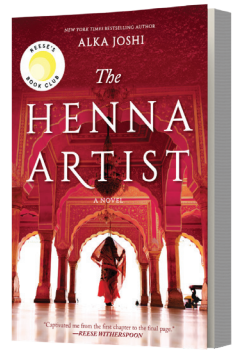
1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Add the fennel seeds, salt and ghee/oil to the wheat flour and mix well.
3. Stir the water in the yogurt until smooth. Add to the flour mixture.
4. Knead the dough until all the flour is well mixed. It should feel firm, like cookie dough, not cake mixture.
5. Roll the dough between your palms to make 1 ½-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

### ***MAKES 10 SERVINGS***

In *The Henna Artist*, Lakshmi's eight-year-old helper charms the Maharani, who asks Malik to name his favorite dessert. After a pause, he replies "rabri." She orders the Palace Chef to make the dessert immediately, alarming Lakshmi, who knows how long it takes to make the recipe and how much vigilance it requires. But the Maharani assures her: she is punishing the Chef, who would rather cook for a king rather than a queen, and never prepares food the way she likes. The rabri scene is about power—who wields it and how, no matter how large or small the issue.

An easy-to-make dessert, rabri is creamy, rich and wholesome. It's time-consuming, but definitely worth the effort. There are many variations of rabri: each chef customizes the recipe with their preferred toppings like golden raisins or pistachios. This is the recipe as I remember my mother making it.



### ***INGREDIENTS***

**Whole milk:** 10 cups

**Heavy whipping cream:** 2 cups

**Sugar:**  $\frac{4}{5}$  cup

**Cardamom seeds, crushed:**  
1 teaspoon

**Toasted sliced slivered almonds:**  
2 tablespoons

**Saffron:** 6 threads

**Rose or kewra essence (optional):**  
1 teaspoon

### ***DIRECTIONS***

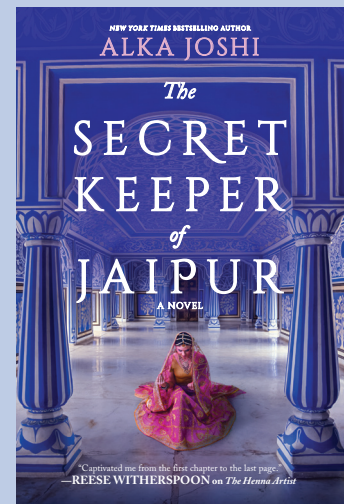
1. Combine milk and cream in a deep saucepan. Boil for 2 hours on low heat, stirring continuously. Scrape the cream that collects on the sides of the pan, adding it back into the mixture. Do not let the milk burn.
2. Set aside 2 tablespoons of hot milk mixture in a bowl and soak the saffron threads in 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.



*Also by Alka Joshi*

# THE SECRET KEEPER OF JAIPUR

ON SALE JUNE 22



Twelve years after Lakshmi leaves Jaipur to work at Dr. Kumar's clinic in Shimla, she is now happily married and has taken under her wing a young tribal widow, Nimmi, who is raising her two young children on her own. Gold smuggling is rampant in the nearby mountains and Nimmi's brother has fallen to its temptations. Afraid that her enterprising helper Malik, now a young man who has recently finished his education, will also be lured into this treacherous business, Lakshmi arranges for him to apprentice in Jaipur at the Palace. She is also concerned about the romantic attachment Malik has formed with Nimmi, as she doesn't approve.

Back in the Pink City where he was once a wily street urchin, Malik again encounters the wealthy Singhs, including Samir Singh's feckless son Ravi, who caused Lakshmi's younger sister Radha so much heartache. Malik is assigned to help Ravi Singh build the new public cinema. But when the cinema balcony collapses on opening night, it signals trouble for Malik and for Lakshmi too. Malik is implicated in a ruthless scandal of Ravi's making that will ultimately threaten his livelihood, his reputation and the people he loves most.

## THE MAHARANI COCKTAIL

### *MAKES 1 SERVING*

During the winter holidays, my brothers and I used to look forward to coming home from our various colleges. My mother would call my older brother, Madhup, ahead of time to ask which cocktail he wanted to make for the family—he chose a different cocktail every year—so she could have the ingredients ready for our arrival. She rarely drank, but she made an exception when we were all together, savoring the limited time with her three children. Madhup would mix the cocktails and we'd stay up late into the night sipping, trading stories, laughing and teasing one another. Because the dowager queen is a fan of gin and tonics, I asked Madhup to create a cocktail just for her. Enjoy it with a samosa, pakora or any other savories Lakshmi has on offer.

### *INGREDIENTS*

1.5oz gin

Pinch of freshly ground  
cardamom

4 strands saffron

3 oz tonic water

3 drops Patrón orange liqueur

Ice

### *DIRECTIONS*

1. Combine cardamom and saffron with the gin and let stand for 5 minutes until flavors are infused. Strain.
2. Then add tonic water, Patrón orange liqueur, and ice.

*Cheers! Sláinte! Prost! Na zdрави! Cin-cin! Salud!*