

*The Sea Elephants* by Shastri Akella

Meeting date: Thursday, June 13th, 2024

Time: 7 p.m.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins six months after Shagun’s sisters have drowned. How does this tragedy affect Shagun throughout the novel?

2. When Pita-jee leaves for London again, he tells Shagun, “One day you’ll know I loved you” (p. 42). Do you think he’s right? Discuss Shagun’s complicated relationship with his father, and how it evolves over the course of the novel. Do you sympathize with Pita-jee?

3. On page 6, the story of the sea elephants is introduced. How does this first tale relate to the novel’s overall themes of family and grief? The novel contains many other excerpts of tales from The Dravidian Book of Seas and Stargazing. Do you have a favorite tale? Discuss.

4. While at Magpies, Shagun is sexually assaulted by Senior, an older student. How does Shagun respond to Senior’s actions? What does he learn about his sexuality? How do you think Senior’s abuse affects Shagun as he explores romantic relationships later on?

5. Shagun has conflicting feelings for Rusty even before they leave their hometown. How does this change by the time Shagun leaves Doon? What is his motivation for visiting Rusty in the final part of the novel?

6. Shagun meets his cauldron friend after years, but he doesn’t seem resentful or upset with him. Why do you think that is, especially since he was Shagun’s only friend at Magpies?

7. Compare Shagun’s boarding school experience with his experience in the theater troupe. What does he gain and lose by leaving school to join the troupe? Do you think he made the right choice?

8. Saaya is Shagun’s teacher and first friend. He is also the first to challenge Shagun’s binary worldview. Discuss the ways in which, over the course of the story, the friendship between them changes and becomes complicated, and how these complications influence Shagun.

9. Discuss the nature of performance described by Nandi on page 92: “Day after day in strange new places, traveling on nonexistent roads for weeks, sleeping on railway platforms, depending on the kindness of villagers for your meals, and in the face of these difficulties, living the myth for your audience—king, priest, god, demon, animal, whore—you don’t become them, they become you.” What do you think he means? What sacrifices do the troupe members make for theater?

10. When Vikrant first approaches Shagun about attending the Hanuman Male Fixing Center, he tells him he has a “spiritual illness” (p. 102). What does he mean by this? What is the relationship between spirituality and sexuality in the novel, specifically for Shagun? What is Shagun’s relationship to each of them by the final scene?

11. Throughout the novel, characters are described as having “feminine” and “masculine” traits. How do the characters in the novel, and in the theater troupe specifically, defy this gender binary?

12. Shagun’s and Radha’s parents attempt to arrange a marriage between them, but they both have other romantic interests. Discuss how their friendship blossoms. In what ways do they support each other? What commonalities do they share?

13. Shagun meets three of Marc’s friends, but Su is the one he gravitates toward most. Why do you think that is? In what ways does Su become a vital catalyst in Shagun’s life, and how does he, in turn, foster her growth? How is their friendship important to the story?

14. When Shagun visits the Singer family, he realizes the lack of intimacy in his own family. Discuss the intricacies of Shagun and Ma’s relationship. How does it evolve over the course of the novel?

15. Marc and Shagun have a tumultuous relationship. How does their relationship work? In what ways does it not work? Discuss how their different upbringings, cultures, and personalities affect their relationship.

16. After forty-five days in the Hanuman Male Fixing Center, the boys must complete one final test to prove their heterosexuality. How does Shagun use performance to complete his test? Katha, the Handmaiden, is proud of her job at the facility. “We’re all playing our part,” she says (p. 329). Do you sympathize with her view? Discuss.

17. The novel follows Shagun through eight years of his life—from age sixteen to twenty-six. How does he grow and change over the course of the novel? What does he learn?

18. At the end of the novel, Shagun writes an article exposing Vikrant’s conversion facility, which results in Vikrant going to jail. What do you make of this ending? Do you think justice for the men who attended the facility is served?

19. The novel is set in 1990s India. How does that time period and setting shape the story? What themes and messages are still pertinent today?