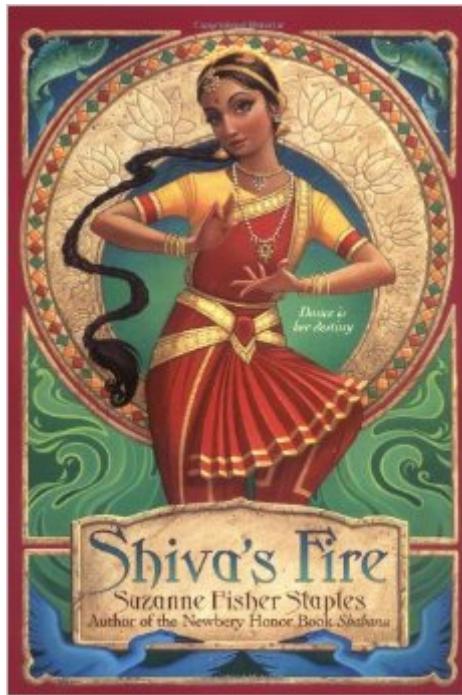


The book was found

Shiva's Fire



Synopsis

On a remarkable day when fish leap among the stars, and birds, mar beneath the waters, a girl is born in the South of India. From her childhood, Parvati is known in her village for the extraordinary events that seem to spring from her dancing feet, and which set her and her family apart. One day a great guru, a master of Indian classical dance, comes to see Parvati. He invites her to study with him, and she commits herself to a rigorous program of dance, study, and devotion. Then she meets a gentle-eyed boy who turns her life upside down, and she learns that destiny can be an elusive thing.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A new novel from the author of *Shabani* and *Haveli*. Parvati is born the same day a cyclone devastates her village in Nandipuram, India, and kills her father. The beginning of the novel tells of her mother's experience as a widow with small children forced to live with a loving uncle and bitter aunt, and of watching her unusual daughter grow up. Parvati is conscious of her surroundings from the day of her birth, and remembers everything. Her aunt and the villagers are suspicious and treat her as an outcast, so Parvati grows up without friends. At twelve, a traveling guru seeking students for his traditional Indian dance academy offers Parvati a scholarship. Unsure of leaving her family, she accepts because the "dowry" the academy will pay for her will afford her mother and brothers to move into their own house and land. Once at the school, Parvati does make one friend, but she is again ostracized by the other students for the unusual occurrences that accompany her. Her natural

affinity for dancing accelerates her pace through the school, and after only two years of study, she is invited to perform at the birthday party of the Maharaja of Nandipuram. This allows her to visit her family for the first time since she has been away, and to spend a few days in the luxury of the Raja's palace. The contrast between palace life, her impoverished childhood, and the almost monastic existence at the dance academy are stunning, and this is one of the few books I wish was a movie instead because the descriptions of the countryside, the dancing, and opulence of the palace, complete with trained elephants, would be a sight. Staples writing is superb, as usual. Unlike Shabanu, however, the character development is not as strong.

Our family of four (mom, dad (me!) and two daughters - 10, 13 yrs) listened to the audio cassette version of this book on a long long car ride - driving from Minneapolis to Mt. Rushmore this summer. Being from India, it was wonderful to have the sights, smells and flavors of our country observed and transmitted with so much realistic detail in the book. Often, we found ourselves at a rest stop and with none of us wanting to get out of the car as we were at a critical juncture in the development of the story. The story itself is pretty simple, Parvati is a child born with magical powers that puzzle, intimidate and scare people in her village. The family goes through tough times after her father dies and the wonderful bond between Parvati and her mother as well as her brothers are treated with extreme sensitivity. I must confess that there were occasions when I was driving looking straight ahead to keep my family to see that I was crying. Parvati is discovered by a leading dance guru, leaves her family to live in the gurukulam (school) near Madras and grows up to be an extremely accomplished dancer. The final denouement occurs when she returns to the town as a famous dancer. However, I do have some quibbles with the author. While she has set the story in contemporary India, as someone who is familiar with the context, I can say that there are details that don't quite add up. For instance, the ex-maharaja of the province is described as distributing his weight in gold to the public on his birthday - a practice that to the best of my knowledge really stopped in the early part of the century - around WWI.

It's hard to describe this novelette in a few words; I just admire it too much. First of all, I'm very fond of Lord Shiva, and it was my original driving factor to buy the book. Second, the book is about a twelve year old girl (named after Lord Shiva's cosmic consort, Parvati, of all names!) who is very fond of dancing, and always wants to dance. The third: well, I'm weak towards India-themed books, for the spices, curries, and the jingling of payal (anklets) are usually mixed with spirituality at a certain level. This book did not disappoint me at all. It took me a while to read it, for I had many

things to do, and perhaps because the story did not pick at a quick pace anyway. But after the first chapter, everything flew quickly and amazingly. I was particularly amazed at how Suzanne Fisher Staples brought Shiva and His tandava (dance) to life through many levels: from the sandalwood statue that had captivated little Parvati since her first day in this world, through the veena that suddenly humming in every time Parvati lit a fire, and through Parvati's determination to dance. Having learnt Bharatanatyam myself (though, alas, I am by no means a devoted Devadasi), I am familiar with various dancing terms in the book. The book went further to evoke my longing for dancing, as I read how Parvati suffered through all physical and mental difficulties to perfect her dance. Learning Bharatanatyam is not easy, let alone mastering it! I was a bit confused with the time frame of this story. First, I thought it was during the 18th century or something. Then, the cars and busses were mentioned, and I thought the story took time during the first days of India's independence.

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