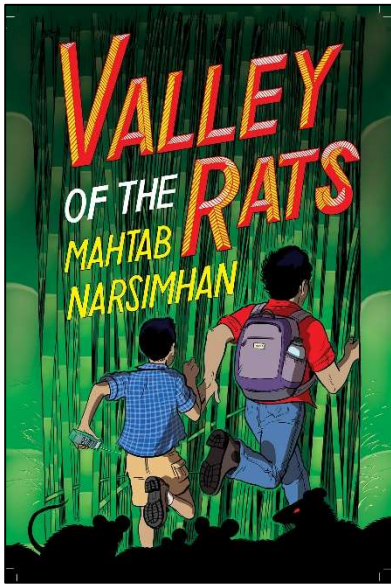


***Valley of the Rats* by Mahtab Narsimhan Teacher's Guide**

Created by Martha Brack Martin with support from Mahtab Narsimhan



Krish and his dad have left their home in Delhi to go on a camping trip in the northeast mountains of India. Krish is far out of his comfort zone, but wants to impress his father, a travel photographer who thinks nothing of trekking cross country in unknown terrain. Krish is hoping he can manage his anxiety without too many panic attacks, but the wilderness is not a great place for a germophobic kid who sees danger at every step.

When Krish and his father become lost in the mountains, they encounter a remote village that, on the surface, appears to offer refuge. Unfortunately, things are not always the way they appear, and when Krish's father breaks the rules of the village, Krish will have to overcome all his fears – and find new inner strength – if he is going to save them both.

Themes

Some key themes and “big ideas” in this book include:

- Survival
- Betrayal
- Appearance versus Reality
- Family relationships
- Overcoming fear

The Plot

Book nerd Krish hates the outdoors, and camping. But especially germs. When Krish and his father, Kabir, take a camping trip to Ladakh, he convinces himself that they will bond, despite their differences.

When they're lost in a bamboo forest, teeming with black rats, and germs, Krish is at an all-time low. His GF (gut feel) and a couple of rats lead them to a hidden village, Imdur, unmarked on any map.

Krish and his father are allowed to stay, only if they follow rules. But Krish soon realizes the village has an odd custom of worshipping rats. They also have a secret. And so does his dad. Turns out, Krish has a secret too.

When all the secrets explode into the open, Krish and Kabir are in grave danger. Can Krish overcome his fears and phobias to take the chance offered to him? Or are he and his dad doomed to spend the rest of their lives among rats?

The Setting

This story takes place in Ladakh, the north and eastern part of the Kashmir region, in the Indian subcontinent.

What Kind of Reader Will Love This Book? One who...

- Enjoys horror and creepy elements in their stories
- Likes learning about cultures around the world
- Appreciates quirky characters and underdogs
- Is fascinated by rats
- Has a fondness for mythology and secret societies

Pre-Teaching Prep

Trigger Warning: This book's main character is dealing with an anxiety disorder. He also has a poor relationship with his father. While neither are catastrophic, consider the life experiences of your students. To improve your own awareness and support your students, some resources are provided below.

Teaching Children about Anxiety Disorders:

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/learn-about-anxiety/anxiety-in-children/>
[Real kids talk about coping with anxiety](#)
[Anxiety: Fight, flight, freeze explained | CBC Kids News](#)

Chapter Questions (for Independent Work or Class Discussion)

Pick and choose the questions that work for *your* students in *your* classroom. Use as many or as few as you like.

Before Reading:

1. Look at the cover of the book. What do you notice? What do you wonder?

2. What do you look for in a book cover? What kind of covers are most likely to catch your eye or make you want to read the book? Discuss with a friend or the class.

Chapter 1

3. On page 5, Krish's dad tells him, "Argue for your limitations and they're yours." What do you think he means by this? How would you say this, in your own words? Reread the conversation between Krish and his dad again to help you.
4. "If I spoke now, I'd probably cry. *At least it's not raining*, I thought." Why did the author use italics in the second sentence? Explain your thoughts.
5. Krish talks about his "happy place" at the bottom of page 6. What is your own happy place? What do you like to have with you when you're there?
6. On page 8 Krish says, "And yet I'd *made* the effort." The author uses italics for a different reason in this sentence. What is it?
7. At the end of the chapter, a gruff voice tells Krish to run. Who do you think is the one telling Krish to run, and why do you suppose the voice is saying that? Explain your thoughts.

Chapter 2

8. There are a number of interesting words the author uses in this chapter to make the story better. Define the underlined words in the quotations below. Use a dictionary if you need help.
 - a. "Don't let me fall became my mantra at every step" (p. 15).
 - b. "My hands were chafed and raw as I clung to the rocks" (p. 15).
 - c. "I glanced at the village below, its glowing huts in concentric circles, shaped around a clearing" (p. 16).
 - d. "It was the red eyes that bothered me the most. Conjunctivitis?" (p. 18).
9. On page 15 Krish notices, "*Rattus rattus* returned with friends." Once again the author uses italics. What is the reason this time?
10. Who is Tashi, and what do we learn about her?
11. What kind of mood is created in this chapter and the one before it? How does the author create this mood? Explain using evidence from the chapters and your own ideas.
12. How would you describe the character of Krish? Pick three adjectives that describe him, and then explain why you selected them.

Chapter 3

13. Bamboo is very important to this village. In what ways is it being used? With a partner, research bamboo using the Internet or other materials provided by your teacher. Share your research with another group in the class.
14. On page 27, Krish says "Fanfaronade" to himself. Why does he do this?
15. How do you feel about Krish's dad asking Krish to *agree* to stay? Would most adults you know allow a kid to make that decision, especially when their job is on the line? Why do you think Krish's dad does? Explain your thoughts.
16. Are you surprised that Krish agrees? In your own words, why do you think he does?

17. How would you describe the relationship between Krish and his dad?

Chapter 4

18. Krish has some strategies that generally work well for him when he is becoming panicked or needs to relax. What works for you when you feel anxious or need to relax?
19. Krish is horrified when he learns his warm fur coat is made from rat fur. On page 46 he says, "Dorje stopped me from killing a rat last night. To make a coat you need to skin them. And to make a coat of this length, you must have slaughtered hundreds. You're all hypocrites!" What does Krish mean by calling them hypocrites?
20. Krish recalls how he used to watch a captive dancing bear in the streets of Delhi when he was young. We learn how he feels about animals in captivity now. How do you feel about animals in captivity? Are all zoos bad? What about animal testing? Share your thoughts with a partner or the whole class in a discussion.
21. On the top of page 53 Shalva says, "Guests are the avatars of God." What do you think he means by this? Explain.

Chapter 5

22. Krish's dad thinks the village of Imdur is practising rat worship. What do *you* think is happening in the village? Use evidence from the book and your own ideas to prove your theory.
23. Is it ever okay for a parent to lie to a child? Share your thoughts.
24. Imagine you are Krish in this chapter, learning your father has lied to you all along. How would you handle it?
25. "An agonizing scream shattered the silence, and just as suddenly, it was cut off" (p. 65). Who do you suspect was the screamer, and what do you think the punishment was? On what do you base your conclusions?
26. On page 65 the author writes, "Dad was going to do something that would get us into serious trouble. I had to stop him before we were caught and punished."
 - a. What do you think Krish's dad is going to do?
 - b. How do you predict Krish might stop him?
 - c. How do you feel about their father-son relationship at this point in the story?

Chapter 6

27. Do you ever feel judged by your family? How about by your friends, or in situations where you don't know anyone? How do you handle it? Write down your thoughts, and then share them with your classmates in a small group or with the whole class.
28. "The men, not to be outdone, wore maroon or green tunics with cummerbunds" (p. 72.) Using the clues in the sentence, explain what you think cummerbunds are.
29. Krish is reminded of the African click language of the Xhosa nation (p. 74). Do a little research, with your teacher's help and/or permission. How does this language work?

Chapters 7 and 8

30. Describe the purification ceremony in your own words.

31. Think of a time when you were very afraid. How did you handle it?
32. Who do you think Imma meant when she spoke about the others?
33. What do you think happened to the others Imma mentions? Use evidence from the text and your own ideas to explain your conclusion.

Chapter 9

34. Krish's dad mentions proudly that he "has never slipped up on an assignment. It's a personal guarantee, and when people approach me, they know I will not fail them" (p. 93).
 - a. How do you feel about the pride Krish's dad takes in his work?
 - b. In your opinion, should they be staying in the village? Why or why not?
35. Krish thinks to himself, "*But you'll fail me, because I'm not that important to you*" (p. 93). Is Krish overreacting, or do you agree with his feelings? Explain your thoughts.
36. In this chapter we learn what caused the issues between Anjali and Krish. Do you think Anjali was right to be upset with Krish? What advice would you give to Anjali and to Krish, so they could understand the other's point of view?

Chapter 10

37. How do the herbs that Imma gives Krish affect him? Why do you think she gives them to him?
38. Tashi warns Krish to try to get the radio working. She tells him, "It's your best chance of getting out of here alive" (p. 110). What do you predict is in the future for Krish and Kabir if they stay in the village?

Chapter 11

39. Despite many signs pointing to danger, Krish's dad is committed to attending the secret ceremony during the night. In your opinion, what does this say about him?
40. Krish is terrified but despite his shaking hands, he gets dressed so he can follow his father (p. 119). What does this say about Krish? Would you have done the same thing? Why or why not?

Chapter 12

41. Define the underlined words in the quotations below. Use a dictionary if you need help.
 - a. "The cacophony at the grove intensified" (p. 121)."
 - b. "Flibbertigibbet" (p. 122).
 - c. "A giant deity, carved from white stone, stood in the centre of the temple" (p. 125).
42. On page 127 the author writes, "Imma grabbed a fistful of the boy's hair and pulled his head back. She lowered her face and bit his neck." How did this part of the story make you feel? Describe your thoughts and feelings.

Chapter 13

43. Krish's dad tells Krish, "...you cannot let fear rule your life" (p. 136). Do you agree with this advice? Explain your opinion.
44. Krish finally shows his dad his true feelings on page 136. How do you feel about his dad's reaction to Krish's outburst?
45. How do you think Krish will get them out of the danger they are in?

Chapters 14 and 15

46. As a reader, how does the author make the rat swarm described in chapter 14 come alive for you? Use examples from the text to make your ideas clear.
47. Tashi yells at the rat at the end of chapter 15. Krish wonders if she's yelling at a rat or a human. What do you think is the "correct answer" that Krish feels in his gut (p. 149)?

Chapter 16 and 17

48. Why is Imma so determined not to let Krish or his father leave Imdur?
49. Are you surprised Tashi is willing to help Krish, even though she will be working against her own family? Explain your thoughts.

Chapter 18

50. Why is Rinchen not happy with his current situation? What do we learn in this chapter?
51. How does Krish prepare for the escape? What is the plan?
52. At the end of the chapter, Tashi says "Not your dad. Just you" (p. 172). What do you think she means by this?

Chapter 19

53. How did you feel when you read about the "wall of souvenirs" on page 173? What do you think happened to the owners of these things?
54. Krish notes, "People around the world eat lots of weird things – frogs, cats, dogs, even cockroaches and crickets" (p. 176). Are you surprised by this list? Do you think it's true?
55. In your own words, describe the "secret" of the Imdur people.
56. At the bottom of page 181, Krish stumbles and Tashi tries to steady him by grabbing his hand. He instinctively snatches it away.
 - a. Why do you think he did this?
 - b. How did Tashi feel about it, and how do you know?
 - c. What would you do, in his place?
57. What does the word "Taazamaas" on page 183 mean?

Chapter 20

58. Krish reflects that he could have been on his way to safety if he had left when he had the chance earlier. On page 189 he thinks, "Had I done the right thing staying back, or had I made the biggest mistake of my life?" Do you feel he made the right choice? What would you have done, in his place? Explain.
59. How does Krish deal with his panic in this chapter?

Chapter 21

60. Who comes to Krish's rescue and how does he repay the help?
61. This chapter has some very dramatic moments in it, but there are also some humorous elements.
 - a. What did you find funny in this chapter? Share a quotation you found amusing.
 - b. How important is it to you as a reader, to have both humour and drama in the stories you read?

Chapter 22

62. How has Tashi arranged things to give Krish and his dad their best chance of escape?
63. Krish's character has really changed since the beginning of the book, and we see it most in this chapter. In what ways has he changed since we first met him? Explain using specific references in the book to demonstrate your conclusions.

Chapter 23

64. How successful is the first part of the escape? Are you surprised?
65. What are your predictions for the remaining chapters of the book? Why?

Chapter 24

66. The author writes, "Rats fell on us like fat black drops of rain. They bubbled up from holes in the ground like oil, spreading, trying to hem us in" (p. 214) What kind of poetic device is used in this passage? How do descriptions like these help a reader understand a story better?
67. Krish's dad has also learned some important life lessons from their journey into Imdur. How does the author show this in chapter 24? Explain using details from the chapter and your own ideas.

Chapter 25

68. Using a timeline, a flow chart, or another graphic organizer that shows events in sequence, outline the most important events of chapter 25. Which events did you feel were significant enough to include? Compare your completed graphic organizer to those of your peers. Did you all choose the same events? Discuss.
69. Are you surprised by the choices that Tashi made as the story was ending? Why or why not?
70. If you were Krish or his dad, what kind of story would you create to explain your adventure without giving away the secrets you have promised to protect? Do you think Anjali would believe your created story? Explain your thoughts.

Culminating Activities

Give students the opportunity to make connections to the world and themselves, as well as to other texts, and to choose their own way of demonstrating them. Here are some other activities to consider once you have finished the novel:

If Only We Could All Just Get Along:

Krish and his father have an unusual relationship. Part of the reason Krish comes on the trip is to improve it...but often fixing relationships requires more than just throwing two people together.

Imagine you are a therapist, and you have been hired to counsel Krish and his dad in order to improve their relationship. You meet with them and hear about their experiences in the Valley of the Rats. Now choose one of the following tasks:

- A) In your role as therapist, write your “notes” after “meeting” with each of them. Which of their experiences would you find most important to their relationship? What conclusions would you make?
- B) What advice would you tell each of them when you met with them separately? What advice would you give when you spoke to them together? Write down your advice so you don’t forget anything you wanted to say.
- C) Find a partner or two and present the therapy sessions as a role play for the class. Be sure to have a script for each of the players.

Survival 101

In chapter 4 we learned that Krish had watched a survival video quite a few times before the camping trip (p. 43). Now it’s your turn...only this time, you are going to be the creators of the videos!

Step 1: You will choose, or have chosen for you, a specific habitat or terrain for you and your classmate partners to research. What would someone visiting this habitat need to know beforehand? What would they need to bring? What would they need to do once they were there?

Step 2: As a class, co-create the requirements for a fabulous survival video that would both educate and entertain the viewers. You may need to watch a few videos (both good and bad) to fully understand the requirements. Consider some of these: [Kids explore CAVES with waterfalls, slides and CAVE CRICKETS?!! | River and Wilder Show](#) or [How to Survive Alone in the Forest](#)

Step 3: Now, with your partners, create a video that prepares your potential visitor for what they can expect in your designated habitat or terrain. Remember, because this is a media project, you need to keep in mind the form, audience and purpose of your video.

Let’s Take a Trip

Krish’s dad is a professional travel photographer. His photographs teach people about the places he visits, showing what makes these places unique, entertaining or appealing.

Think about what countries, cities or regions you would most like to visit. Alternatively, your teacher might give you a specific place, or even a specific time that fits your curriculum of study in school (e.g., ancient Rome, the province of Alberta, etc.).

Now research your chosen place, using whatever research options you have (e.g., Internet databases, curated websites, books, magazines, etc.) Look for visuals that will make your audience interested in your chosen place but also teach them about it. When you have enough visuals according to your teacher's instructions, combine them to create a travel vlog, presentation, brochure or article. The type of media format you choose will depend on your teacher's preference as well as your access to technology.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Nature photography is a popular hobby for many people, and some even make a living doing it. Now it is your turn!

Using the Internet, magazines, or databases at your disposal, look through a variety of nature photographs. What kinds of nature photographs most catch your eye? What subject matter do you like best? How is the space used in the photos that appeal to you most?

Now take a camera, a tablet or a smart phone and use your imagination to capture the world around you. Take at least 5 – 10 pictures. Try different angles, filters and subject matter. When you have your photos, share them with the class using a slideshow, a gallery showing of printed photos, or through an Intranet program your school may offer. Your teacher will decide the best method.

Exploring the Same Themes in Different Texts

After reading *Valley of the Rats*, consider reading *Stuntboy in the Meantime* by Jason Reynolds, *Guts* by Reina Telgemeier, or *OCDaniel* by Wesley King. Older students might also consider *I'm Good and Other Lies* by Bev Katz Rosenbaum. How are some of the same themes repeated in these stories? How are they handled differently?

Create a presentation comparing the themes in your choice of books, or share your ideas orally in a class discussion or with a friend.

Interview with the Author

Martha: How did you decide to set the story in the Ladakh region of Kashmir?

Mahtab: I needed the story to be in a remote location in India, where access to the nearest city was far away, and where one might find an isolated village in a hidden valley. The Ladakh region in Kashmir fit the bill perfectly. Unfortunately, I haven't visited it myself, but I did a lot of online research for it.

The setting was also inspired by H.G. Wells' short story *The Country of the Blind* in which our main character, Nunez, finds an isolated village where the people have their own rules/customs, and are blind. He believes that being able to see will make him superior to the

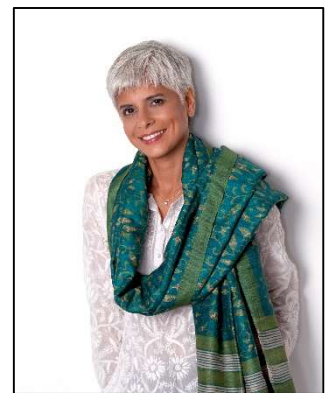


Photo: Dean MacDonell

villagers, and boy, was he wrong! I was fascinated by the concept that an outsider might think they know more than the locals and how the dynamics of that would work.

Martha: What is your writing process like? Are you an “outliner” or a “fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants” kind of writer?

Mahtab: When I first started writing, 19 years ago, I was a pantsier. I had no idea what I was doing except that I had a headful of ideas, a computer, and the discipline to put words on paper. Fast forward to 2022 when I published ten books!

I tend to outline all my novels but leave enough room for surprises and detours. I plot backwards and write forward. I always know how my story is going to end and then I work backward to where it needs to begin. This method has worked out well for me because I know the end and so the “dreaded middle” of the novel tends to be easier to write.

Martha: Did you stick closely to your initial vision for this book, or did you find yourself making significant changes?

Mahtab: My wonderful editor, Barry Jowett, made me work very hard and that’s as it should be! There were some significant changes to this story such as merging of characters for depth rather than width, making Krish’s emotional arc and character development more solid, plus a few other tweaks. All in all, I did stick to my vision for this book but made it better with Barry’s help.

Martha: You do a great job of projecting Krish’s absolute horror of rats in the book. Do you share that sense of horror?

Mahtab: YES! Fun anecdote: While I was working on the edits, I encountered a *tiny* mouse in my office (I live in a rural area so, sometimes, the “wildlife” find its way indoors). I was petrified and screamed for my husband to help capture and release it back outdoors. And then I went right back to describing the large hairy rats without batting an eyelid.

Writers can be brave on a page, and make their characters suffer in order make a story exciting and interesting. In reality, they could be scared of the very things they’re writing about. I’m a perfect example!

Martha: Krish and his dad have a complex relationship. Often their roles seem to be reversed from the stereotypical father-son relationships found in many adventure stories. How did that come to be?

Mahtab: I prefer to avoid the stereotypical and try to flip common themes on their heads. I enjoyed writing about the reversed roles of Krish and his dad.

It was also satisfying to explore the theme that kids have such little agency in life and must go by the rules set by their parents and caregivers. That’s not always the best course of action. Sometimes the kids know more and deserve to be heard.

In *Valley of the Rats*, Krish's Gut Feel, that there was something wrong in the village, turned out to be spot on. And he gets to save the day!

I did something similar in my book *Mission Mumbai*. Instead of writing a story about an immigrant kid settling into North America which is a common and stereotypical story, I chose to write about a kid from North America visiting India, and learning how to navigate the culture and customs, and the hilarity which ensues when he gets it wrong!

I love taking the path less trodden.

Martha: I was really impressed that you included Krish's mental health issues as the backbone of much of the story. I loved the Gut Feels especially. How important was it to you to show such a realistic portrayal of Krish's challenges – and more significantly, how he overcame them?

Mahtab: Really important! As I mentioned earlier, most times kids are ignored, and they have no say in any matter. Krish goes through the same treatment but later, comes into his own when his dad is injured and he has to step up and save them both.

Kids should not be afraid to express their feelings (fear, anxiety, or anything else) and ask for help when they need it. I also believe that they can work to overcome these fears. It's only when you stop trying, that you fail.

Martha: Krish is really not a nature lover, is he? <grin> How do you feel about a good camping trip in the wilderness?

Mahtab: There is a LOT of me in Krish. I tried camping for a while, didn't quite like it. For a while I tried glamping and that didn't work out well either. I cut short a camping trip because it rained too much (LOL!)

These days I'll settle for a brisk walk or a moderate to difficult day hike, as long as I can sleep in my own bed at night.

I'm a bit of a germophobe, too, and dislike grocery cart handles, doorknobs, public bathrooms and rats! I carried hand sanitizer in my bag, long before the pandemic.

Martha: I love how you weave mythology, or perhaps I should say spirituality, into your books. This one is no exception. How important is it to you that your readers become exposed to different cultures and their beliefs?

Mahtab: Learning about world cultures, about people who are different from you, is important. It helps kids to be more empathetic and tolerant when they're exposed to diversity at an early age. I believe that reading about the way other people live, their struggles and challenges, will make students appreciate their own lives a bit more.

This story was inspired by a video I saw on YouTube and an article I read about Mautam (Bamboo Death). The two melded together and the idea for *Valley of the Rats* was born. Of course, I did a lot more research after that, but the following is what started it all:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O0s1l8Fajc&t=42s&ab_channel=NationalGeographic

<https://www.eastmojo.com/mizoram/2022/09/19/rats-ravage-mizoram-farms-with-thingtam-set-to-return-after-48-yrs/>

And in case you're wondering, no, I have not visited the Karni Mata temple in Rajasthan and nor will I ever! Remember that mouse?

Martha: What do you hope to inspire in your readers as they turn the last page?

Mahtab: First off, I hope they enjoy this story for what it is: an entertaining, scary read. But after the last page has been turned, I hope the themes of friendship, loyalty, respecting the Other, and trying your best to overcome your personal challenges will come through.

When reading this book in class, and discussing the questions, students will have the opportunity to examine their own lives, and I hope they will be inspired to be kind, and to be better world citizens.

About Mahtab Narsimhan:

Mahtab's name, in Persian, means moonlight. She has had four careers in her lifetime. Writing is her fifth and favourite.

While training to be a general manager of a hotel, she's made hundreds of beds, cleaned way too many bathrooms, and served meals at restaurants. During kitchen training, she peeled and chopped a twenty-kilogram (forty-four lbs) bag of onions in one day, and cried throughout.

As a recruiter in the IT industry Mahtab thought SOAP was something you washed your face with, and ORACLE was the kind lady from the Matrix movies. She's come a long way since then!

Mahtab immigrated to Canada in 1997 and started writing in 2004. Her debut novel, *The Third Eye*, won the Silver Birch Fiction Award in 2009 and she hasn't looked back since. Mahtab is deeply committed to representing diversity in her stories.

Awards and Recognition for *Valley of the Rats*

CBC Kids and YA Halloween Books List – 2021

CBC Best Canadian MG/YA Books of 2021

Short-listed - Chocolate Lily Book Awards – 2022

Forest of Reading Kid Committee Summer Reading List 2022

Related Weblinks and Resources for Further Learning

<https://mgbookvillage.org/2021/08/18/interview-with-mahtab-narsimhan-about-valley-of-the-rats/>

<https://www.cmreviews.ca/node/2457>

<https://canlitforlittlecanadians.blogspot.com/2022/02/valley-of-rats-interview-with-author.html>
<https://www.audleytravel.com/ca/india/country-guides/ladakh-for-the-first-time-visitor>
[Valley of the Rats by Mahtab Narsimhan | Book Trailer | Middle Grade Fiction](#)