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Conch Bearer

Laura Wadley

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Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Conch bearer*. Roaring Brook Press, 2003. ISBN 0761319352. \$16.95. 265 pp.

Reviewer: Laura Wadley;

Reading Level: Intermediate; Young Adult;

Rating: Dependable;

Genre: Fantasy fiction; Adventure stories;

Subject: India-Juvenile fiction; Voyages and travels-Juvenile fiction; Magic-Juvenile fiction;

Book--Reviews;

The Conch Bearer begins in Kolkata, India, where Anand works long hours in a tea shop for a harsh master. Anand with his mother and sister in a shack instead of in the nice apartment where his family lived before his father mysteriously disappeared. When Anand helps an old man, Abhaydatta, who was abused by the shop's owner, his adventures begin. Abhaydatta is a member of the Brotherhood of Healers. The Brotherhood sent him forth from a sacred and secret valley to retrieve the conch, an object of power, which a renegade member of the order stole. Abhaydatta, Anand, and Nisha, a child from the streets, set out on a perilous journey, pursued by the evil dogged Surabhanu who wants the conch for himself and uses many wicked means to wrest it from the children and their guide.

Divakaruni's story begins with great vigor. Anand and his family are sympathetic, well-drawn characters, and the dirty, busy, exotic streets of Kolkata are realistic. As the story progresses, it flattens out. The mystical world of the Silver Valley is not as real and attractive as the real world Anand comes from. At the end of the tale, when Anand is faced by a classic decision, the reader may be surprised and disappointed with his choice. Still, the fantasy is imaginative, and the setting is extraordinary and unusual. One would wish for just a little more zip to an otherwise fine addition to children's quest literature.