

America for Beginners

William Morrow

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Introduction

Pival Sengupta has done something she never expected: she has booked a trip with the First Class India USA Destination Vacation Tour Company. But unlike other upper-class Indians on a foreign holiday, the recently widowed Pival is not interested in sightseeing. She is traveling thousands of miles from Kolkata to New York on a cross-country journey to California, where she hopes to uncover the truth about her beloved son, Rahi. A year ago Rahi devastated his very traditional parents when he told them he was gay. Then, Pival's husband, Ram, told her that their son had died suddenly—heartbreaking news she still refuses to accept. Now, with Ram gone, she is going to America to find Rahi, alive and whole or dead and gone, and come to terms with her own life.



Arriving in New York, the tour proves to be more complicated than anticipated. Planned by the company's indefatigable owner, Ronnie Munshi—a hard-working immigrant and entrepreneur hungry for his own taste of the American dream—it is a work of haphazard improvisation. Pival's guide is the company's new hire, the guileless and wonderfully resourceful Satya, who has been in America for one year—and has never actually left the five boroughs. For modesty's sake Pival and Satya will be accompanied by Rebecca Elliot, an aspiring young actress. Eager for a paying gig, she's along for the ride, because how hard can a two-week "working" vacation traveling across America be?

Questions for Discussion

1. "Mrs. Sengupta was traveling scandalously alone, without a husband or a gaggle of women her own age..." Many people in Pival's orbit are shocked by her decision to go to the US by herself. What about a woman—especially an older woman—traveling alone is so alarming to them? Is it really about safety—as Pival's maid insists—or about propriety? Are solo women travelers viewed with the same concern in other cultures?
2. "Nothing would erase the sense of continued shame" that Satya feels for abandoning his friend Ravi and edging him out of a job. How do you feel about Satya's betrayal of Ravi? Is it understandable or unforgivable?
3. Mr. Ghazi sees Rebecca's "early enthusiasm become a hardened fear, and he worried for her." How do you feel about Rebecca's sadness and struggles compared to the sadness and struggles of other characters in the book? What does she, the American-born child of an affluent family, stand to learn from the journey, and from the other "beginners?"

4. Ronnie Munshi seems to have achieved the American Dream: arriving from Bangladesh with no money, building a successful business, bringing over a wife, and employing other new arrivals. What do you make of him? Is he the picture of a “model immigrant”? What about the Iranian immigrant Mr. Ghazi?
5. Bhim calls himself “the ice queen” because he is so painfully unaffectionate with Jake in public. Jake “thought that Bhim was determined to live in a way his parents would approve of, despite the fact that they would never know it.” Why can’t Bhim just be out and proud in this new gay-friendly country? How do Jake and Bhim navigate Bhim’s deep sense of shame and keep it from destroying their love?
6. Pival reflects that “at home Bangladeshis had no status. They did the worst jobs, if they had jobs at all. They were illegal immigrants with no rights and no names, just men who melted into the background and women who looked hungry all the time.” Because of this stigma, Ronnie Munshi is desperate to ensure that none of his Indian clients know he and his guides are Bangladeshi. Does this distinction between Bangladeshis and Indians matter in America? Do “illegal immigrants” in America face the same stigma as those Bangladeshis in India?
7. Pival reflects that “I do think most parents at the heart, want their children to be happy. It is only that we want our children to be happy in the right way. The way we were taught that happiness was. I think this is a cause of much pain, thinking, perhaps, that there is a right way.” Would Bhim agree? Would Rebecca, who has her own fraught relationship with her parents?
8. Did you think that Bhim might still be alive, and be reunited with his mother? Why or why not?
9. As a college student, before her marriage, Pival describes herself as “young, alive with purpose.” Does she regain her purpose by the end of the novel? How does Pival, the widow and bereaved mother in America, compare to Pival the miserable, voiceless wife in Kolkata?
10. “When she woke, the first thought Pival had was, *What happens next?*” What do you think happens next for these characters? Where will they be five or ten years after the end of this novel?