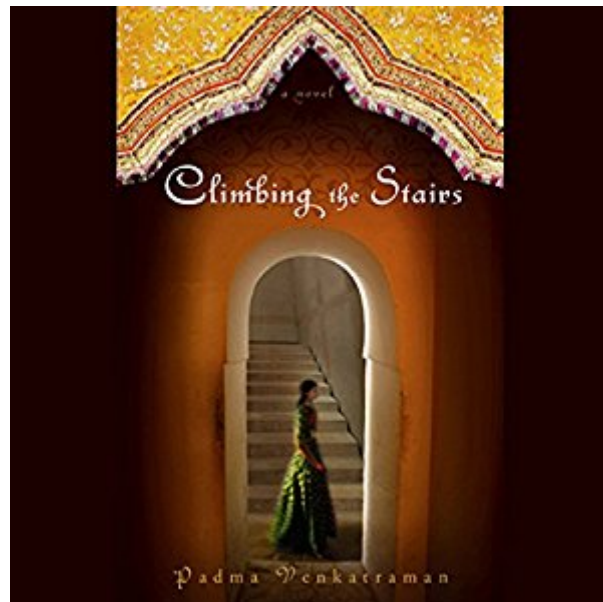


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# Climbing The Stairs



## Synopsis

Here is a remarkable debut novel set in India that shows one girl's struggle for independence. During World War II and the last days of British occupation in India, 15 year-old Vidya dreams of attending college. But when her forward-thinking father is beaten senseless by the British police, she is forced to live with her grandfather's large traditional family, where the women live apart from the men and are meant to be married off as soon as possible. Vidya's only refuge becomes her grandfather's upstairs library, which is forbidden to women. There she meets Raman, a young man also living in the house who relishes her intellectual curiosity. But when Vidya's brother decides to fight with the hated British against the Nazis, and when Raman proposes marriage too soon, Vidya must question all she has believed in. Padma Venkatraman's debut novel poignantly shows a girl struggling to find her place in a mixed-up world. *Climbing the Stairs* is a powerful story about love and loss, set against a fascinating historical backdrop.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Have you ever wondered how it might feel to have your marriage arranged for you by your parents and relatives? Have you ever imagined permanently living under the same roof as your extended family? Have you ever known the desperation of living without rights or a voice of your own? If so, Padma Venkatraman's "*Climbing the Stairs*" is the book for you. This book gives readers a glimpse into what it means to live in a traditional Indian joint family and of the restrictions imposed on people due to social and cultural norms. It speaks to the searing pain of oppression and the struggle for

independence, both national and personal. Vidya, the protagonist of this story, is a curious girl who tries to make sense of the changing world in which she finds herself. India is in the midst of its freedom struggle against British rule and there are strong opinions on how this must be attained. Vidya grapples with the question of "means and ends" and "love and loyalty," while trying to remain true to her still-formulating beliefs. Despite circumstances that unalterably change the course of Vidya's life, this courageous spitfire of a girl navigates her circumstances to uncompromisingly reach for her goals. Venkatraman's "Climbing the Stairs" is a fast-paced book full of memorable characters, a strong story line, and a satisfying conclusion. I highly recommend readers accompany Vidya on her journey; they will be changed just as she is.

Climbing the Stairs by Padma Venkatraman is a YA historical fiction about a fifteen-year-old girl named Vidya that takes place in India during the struggle for Indian independence and WWII. Outspoken and willful Vidya is excited about her future, but when her father is injured in a freedom rally, Vidya's hopes of entering college are shattered when her family is forced to move in with her grandfather and his straight-laced, traditional household. Her only way to escape is to climb the stairs to her grandfather's library where she is forbidden to go. Vidya is a delightful protagonist, but at first she seems a little naïve and immature for her age. For example, in a strange scene in the first chapter, she is unable to identify a stain on her father's shirt as blood, despite the fact that she is fifteen years old and the daughter of a physician. However, after witnessing a British officer brutally beat her father, she becomes a much more believable character as she struggles with guilt about her role in her father's injury and shame about her father's resulting brain damage. I also thought that a few of the interactions Vidya has with her love interest, Raman, are sometimes very awkward and her uncle's family comes across as a little too mean to be realistic. Despite these shortcomings, I would highly recommend this novel to anyone who is interested in Indian history. The setting and time-period covered by this book are not often covered in American literature and especially not in such a truthful, open way. Sometimes I find that Indian-American authors tend to romanticize India and their novels read as odes to a perfect country where problems such as caste-based discrimination and sexism don't seem to exist. However, through Vidya's eyes, the author unflinchingly shows us her view of what it was like to live in a male-dominated society and where oppression was a fact of life. We see shocking events and difficult social problems portrayed honestly, and this important time in India's history comes to life in a believable and interesting way.

CLIMBING THE STAIRS is a wonderful, well-written, and thought-provoking book that navigates the

historical and political context of India during WWII, commenting and using it as a backdrop without letting it overwhelm the story. There are so many threads beautifully woven together. The book also shows the devastating consequences of pride, something modern teens don't think about too much. The ending was so satisfying, as well, the way Vidya learns and grows.

This book is targeted at young adults, but I really enjoyed it as an adult reader. It took me back to a time when my parents would have been teens, pre-teens and really captured their daily life, as well as the larger arena of events. I was a teen nearly a half century after the protagonist Vidya was, but her situation, the choices she has to make and how differently the same events shape different members of her family and lead them down different paths was captured brilliantly. I enjoyed that Vidya was feisty, independent and even a bit feminist. Like most Indian novels, this one is wrapped around a family tragedy -- Usually, that would mean I'd pass on the book, but the very real, empathetic characterization pulls you in through to the end.

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