A detailed illustration of a woman with glowing green eyes and ornate jewelry, holding a cobra with its mouth open. The background is a vibrant green with wavy patterns.

A DROP OF VENOM

BY SAJNI PATEL

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

HYPERION
 RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Sixteen-year-old Manisha is no stranger to monsters—for years she’s been running from both the beasts who roam the jungle and the King’s army, which forced her people, the naga, to scatter to the ends of the earth. You might think that the kingdom’s famed holy temples atop the floating mountains, where Manisha is now a priestess, would be safe—but you would be wrong.

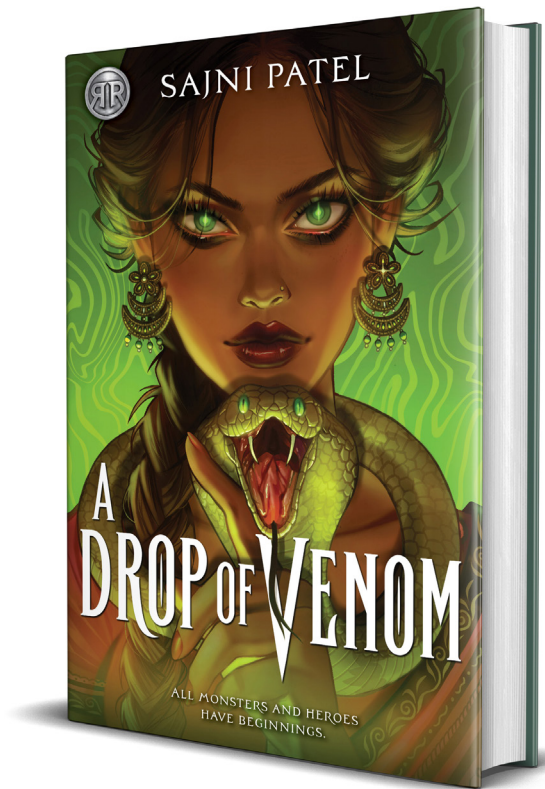
Seventeen-year-old Pratyush is a famed slayer of monsters, one of the King’s most prized warriors and a frequent visitor to the floating temples. For every monster the slayer kills, years are added to his life. You might think such a powerful warrior could do whatever he wants, but true power lies with the King. Tired after years of fighting, Pratyush wants nothing more than a peaceful, respectable life.

When Pratyush and Manisha meet, each sees in the other the possibility to chart a new path. Unfortunately, the kingdom’s most powerful players have other plans. The High Priestess delivers Manisha into the hands of the King’s General, who rapes Manisha and pushes her off the floating mountains into a pit of vipers. A month later, the King sends Pratyush off to kill one last monster—a powerful nagin who turns men to stone—before he’ll consider granting the slayer his freedom.

Except Manisha hasn’t died, despite the hundreds of snake bites covering her body and the venom running through her veins. As she travels the kingdom in search of her family with her golden serpent companion, Noni, she meets and defends young women threatened and violated by men, finding she has risen from the snake pit with heightened senses, armor-like skin, and blood that can turn people to stone. And Pratyush doesn’t know it, but the “monster” he’s been sent to kill is none other than the girl he wants to marry.

Alternating between Manisha’s and Pratyush’s perspectives in asynchronous, converging timelines, this reimagining of the Medusa myth in a fantasy setting inspired by Indian lore demands an answer to the question “What does it truly mean to be a monster?”

CONTENT WARNING: SEXUAL ASSAULT, RAPE CULTURE, MISOGYNY, VIOLENCE, AND GORE





APPROACHES FOR USING *A DROP OF VENOM* IN THE CLASSROOM OR LIBRARY

These suggestions can be used for class or small group discussion or offered to students as reflective writing prompts. For even more meaningful discussions, readers should also develop their own questions. As students read, encourage them to note ideas they find interesting or that make them wonder, passages they don't understand and those they like, and things they question, predict, and conclude.

- Feature *A Drop of Venom* in a book display for Sexual Assault Awareness Month with other titles that relate to sexual violence and rape culture, discuss consent and relationships, and help manage trauma and mental health. Consider partnering with a local sexual violence prevention initiative, sexual assault crisis center, or other organization that can provide information and resources for the display.
- Use *A Drop of Venom* as either a starting point or welcome addition to a text set. (Text sets are collections of resources in a variety of formats—articles, essays, histories, short stories, novels, picture books, poems, music, photographs, videos, film, art, artifacts, etc.—and complexity levels. By contemplating resources that offer many different perspectives, students gain a deeper understanding of topics, concepts, and themes.)
- Approach *A Drop of Venom* as a book club selection for an excellent way to promote productive, respectful conversation without assigned literature discussion roles. During and/or after reading, small groups of students can share their personal responses, their thoughts on monsters and mythology, and their reflections on themes addressed in the book such as war, rape culture, sexual assault, trauma, misogyny, identity, oppression, justice, revenge, family, and friendship. A book club approach can also go hand in hand with a text set, giving students the opportunity to discuss ideas and themes across multiple texts.

Sixteen-year-old Manisha is no stranger to monsters—for years she's been running from both the beasts who roam the jungle and the King's army, which forced her people, the naga, to scatter to the ends of the earth. You might think that the kingdom's famed holy temples atop the floating mountains, where Manisha is now a priestess, would be safe—but you would be wrong.

Seventeen-year-old Pratyush is a famed slayer of monsters, one of the King's most prized warriors and a frequent visitor to the floating temples. For every monster the slayer kills, years are added to his life. You might think such a powerful warrior could do whatever he wants, but true power lies with the King. Tired after years of fighting, Pratyush wants nothing more than a peaceful, respectable life.

When Pratyush and Manisha meet, each sees in the other the possibility to chart a new path. Unfortunately, the kingdom's most powerful players have other plans. A temple visitor sexually assaults Manisha and pushes her off the mountain into a pit of vipers. A month later, the King sends Pratyush off to kill one last monster—a powerful nagin who turns men to stone—before he'll consider granting the slayer his freedom.



Except Manisha hasn't died, despite the hundreds of snake bites covering her body and the venom running through her veins. She rises from the pit more powerful than ever before, with heightened senses, armor-like skin, and blood that can turn people to stone. And Pratyush doesn't know it, but the "monster" he's been sent to kill is none other than the girl he wants to marry.

Alternating between Manisha's and Pratyush's perspectives, Sajni Patel weaves together lush language, high stakes, and page-turning suspense, demanding an answer to the question "What does it truly mean to be a monster?"

PRE-READING

IN ANTICIPATION

An **anticipation guide** is a reading strategy that gets students thinking critically and sharing their opinions about ideas, topics, and themes they will encounter in a text. The anticipation guide can also be used after reading to help students reflect on how the book may have shifted their earlier thinking or ideas.

When putting together any anticipation guide, start with examining what knowledge and opinions students may likely have about a topic. Then write some general statements that relate to the text's themes and make sense when applied to events in the text to challenge your students' beliefs. After you provide the statements to students, ask them if they agree or disagree with each statement and instruct them to explain why in two or three sentences. After completing the text, students can review their anticipation guide and reflect on any change to their initial reasoning in writing or through discussion.

For *A Drop of Venom*, consider themes and concepts from the book that will grab students' interest and provide them with statements to react to, such as those in the example anticipation guide. Depending on how many statements you choose to share with students, you may want to have students work in small groups to discuss their responses or limit the number of statements for which students need to explain their reasoning in detail.



A DROP OF VENOM ANTICIPATION GUIDE

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with each statement below, then provide 2–3 sentences (use a separate sheet if needed) that explain your reasoning for each response.

STATEMENT	AGREE OR DISAGREE?	REASONING	THOUGHTS AFTER READING
A hero always makes the right decisions.			
All choices have consequences			
Sexual assault is about power and control and is not motivated by sexual gratification.			
There is nothing anyone can do to prevent sexual violence.			
Those who win a war have the right to treat the defeated however they wish.			
Revenge is not justice.			
Different cultures all have different myths and different mythic themes.			
It takes a monster to defeat a monster.			
Assumptions made based on visible characteristics of an individual (age, ethnicity, sex, gender, disability, size, etc.) are typically correct.			



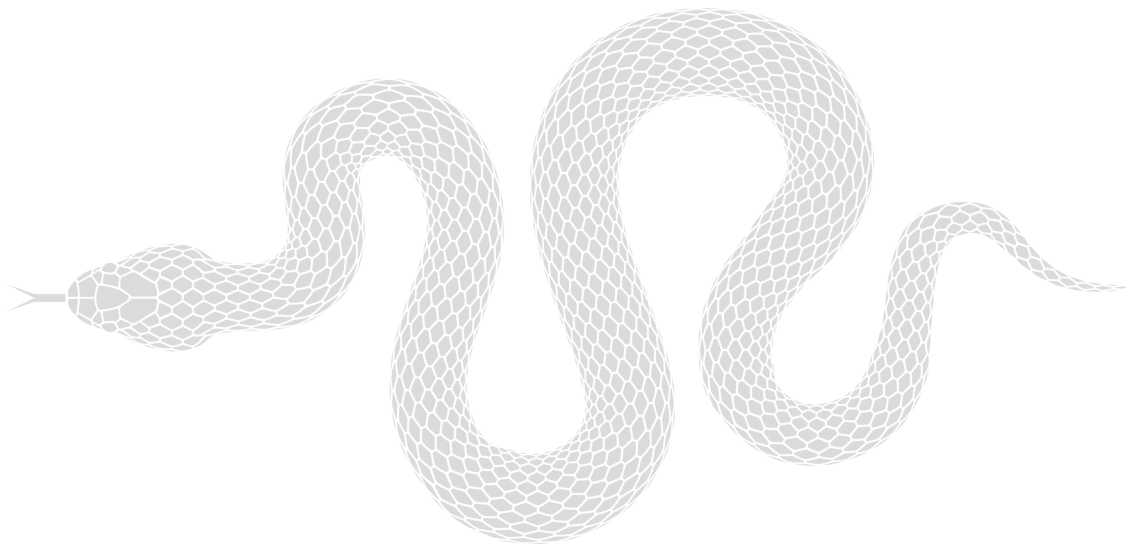
MYTHOLOGICAL MASH-UPS

Have students take time to build or activate background knowledge about both Medusa myths and lore related to the naga before and during their reading of *A Drop of Venom*.

Encourage students to explore books, videos, and articles on Indian folklore, Hinduism, and Greek or Roman mythology. Direct students to texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas* where they will find stories about the naga as well as details about their relationships to other supernatural beings, gods, and demigods. For more about Medusa, primary sources for the myth, including the *Theogony* and the *Metamorphoses*, are good places to start.

Focus students' exploration and research by having them work in small groups to develop character sheets (like those they might use in a role-playing game) featuring Indian and Greek mythological figures. Students should plan to develop *at least* one character sheet featuring a Greek mythological figure and *at least* one featuring a figure from Indian folklore. Sheets for each figure should include a physical description, ancestry, origins, relationships to others, personal details, special abilities, symbols, and strengths and weaknesses.

Students should also provide a drawing or image of their figures. Students may have additional ideas about what they'd like to include, particularly after you share that character sheets will be shuffled and redistributed to each group for students to take on the roles of a figure and work together to create a narrative about them. Have each group read their mythological mash-ups aloud to the class.





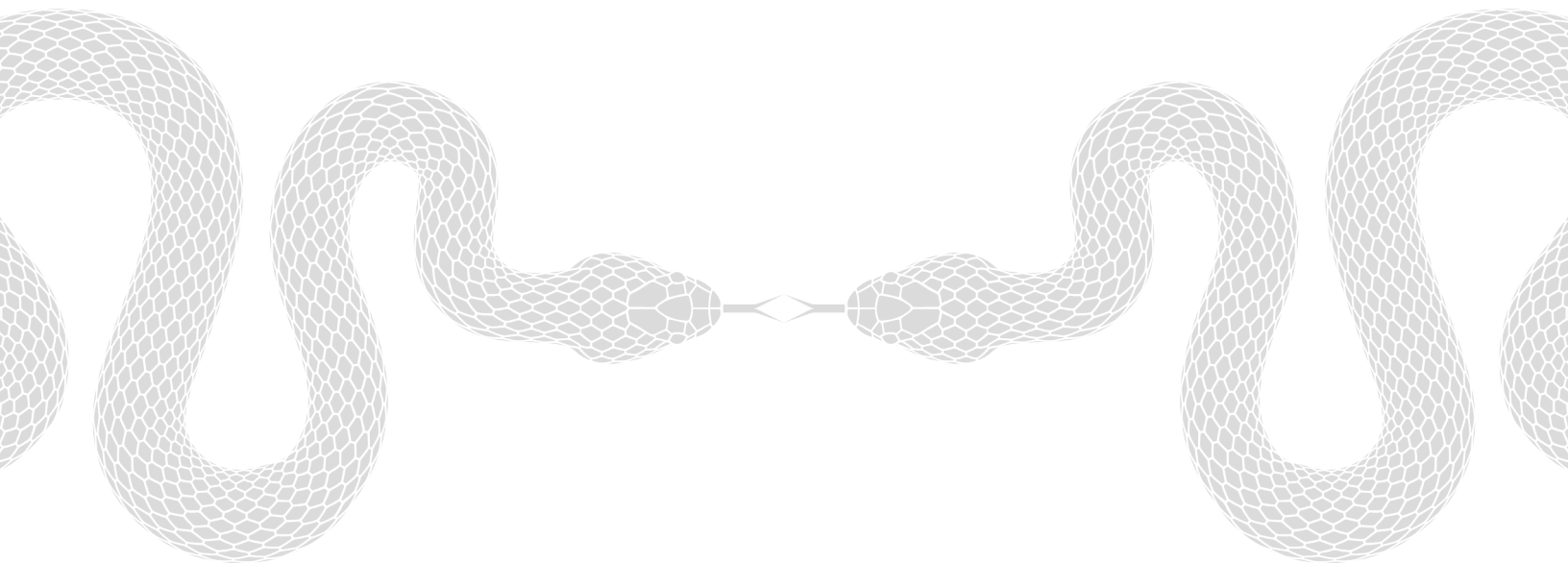
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be used for class or small group discussion or offered to students as reflective writing prompts. For even more meaningful discussions, readers should also develop their own questions. As students read, encourage them to note ideas they find interesting or that make them wonder, passages they don't understand and those they like, and things they question, predict, and conclude.

1. How do the shifting time frames and dual narration contribute to your understanding of the text? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from multiple points of view? How would the story be different if it was told only from Manisha's perspective? Only Pratyush's?
2. What cultural beliefs and values do Manisha and the naga hold? How have the apsara influenced Manisha's beliefs? How are Manisha's beliefs similar or different from societal expectations in the kingdom's villages? How are Manisha's beliefs and values similar or different from those of your culture or experience?
3. What assumptions do people make about Pratyush because he is a slayer? Where do these ideas come from? What other characters in the story get treated as stereotypes? How does stereotypical thinking lead to bias and discrimination? How can people challenge and fight against stereotypes?
4. What do Pratyush's interactions with villagers and the other soldiers tell you about his character? How do his relationships with Dev and Ras both shape and reveal his character?
5. Both Manisha and Pratyush are shaped by their relationships with their sister(s). How else are Pratyush's and Manisha's origins similar? How are they different? How do values and identity influence and impact the types of relationships you have or want to have with your family?
6. What views of gender roles and of male and female behavior does the novel offer? Do any of the women in this novel embody feminist ideals? Which of the characters would you describe as a feminist? Discuss *A Drop of Venom* as a feminist novel. How does the book address the historical oppression, silencing, and abuse of women, and how does it seek to affect change?
7. How do female characters support each other, and what drives them to do so? What does Manisha consider to be "true sisterhood"? How is the sisterhood of the apsara different from the nagin sisterhood? What does Manisha learn about sisterhood during her travels?
8. How does Manisha's discovery of the word "violated" help her come to terms with what the General did to her? Why do you think the language of describing rape, sexual assault, and violence by men against women is important in shaping how we understand and respond to it?



9. What is rape culture, and how does it affect both men and women? Whose responsibility is it to change this culture, and in what ways? What cultural and societal elements in *A Drop of Venom* contribute to or help make up its rape culture? How effective do you think Pratyush is in his attempts to shift this culture?
10. What is patriarchy? How does patriarchy produce systemic gendered and intersectional inequalities? How might things be different, either for the worse or for the better, without patriarchy? How do we see the patriarchy at work in this book? How valuable do you think that the concept of patriarchy is in understanding violence by men against women?
11. What opinions does Manisha have about people in positions of authority? Is she interested in having power or authority over others? How do her thoughts and opinions change and develop? If you had power over those who hurt you, what would you do?
12. What is the difference between vengeance and justice? Which do you think Manisha is pursuing? What other options are open to Manisha besides vengeance? What else could she do to hold accountable those who have harmed her, her family, and others? What does accountability mean to you? What could a system of accountability look like in Manisha's world?
13. What makes a person a monster? What makes a person a hero? Can someone be both monstrous and heroic? Why or why not? Who do you believe are the monsters in this book, and who do you believe are the heroes?





ACTIVITIES

CREATING A MONSTER

Monsters have been employed for thousands of years to put a face to our fears or to explain the unknown or uncontrollable, like the vetala offering a link between the living and the dead in Hindu mythology or blaming treacherous ocean travel in ancient Greece on Scylla and Charybdis. Have students consider and discuss what makes a monster and create a monster of their own.

Start with a class discussion about the characteristics of monsters, why students think monsters exist, and what roles monsters fill in society in both the past and the present. Ask them to share and talk about monsters they know from various cultures, literature, movies, and other media. Discuss who considers these monsters to be monsters and why, what these monsters represent in their societies of origin or historical context, and how and why the idea of monsters is still supported culturally. What does the way we perceive others have to do with how we view monsters?

Next, have students compare and discuss the monsters they know to the monsters they encountered in *A Drop of Venom*. Have students talk about Manisha's transformation and who considers her a monster and why. Then have students think about what fears, unknowns, or experiences they have had or that are pervasive in society that could be symbolized by a new monster. Each student should create their own monster by:

- Explaining what this monster represents
- Writing the backstory of the monster, explaining how it came to be, and what impact it has on society
- Describing the monster's appearance and any abilities or powers it has
- Choosing a name for the monster and providing details about the name's origins
- Providing a sketch or digital image of the monster

Pair students to share their monster profiles, having them interview each other about their creations to understand why students chose what their monster symbolizes and how they think having this monster in existence might help them or society confront that particular issue.



IDENTITY MARKER

Tattoos are images of personal expression with powerful symbolic meaning. Have students consider the black-and-green tattoos of Dev and those from the borderland village of Skanda before they create original tattoo designs for other characters.

Ask students to describe what they think Dev's and/or Deepa's tattoos might look like and what those images and the colors black and green might symbolize based on what they know about Dev and Deepa and their culture. Have the students sketch and write down their ideas.

Then have students select another character from the book and design a tattoo representing that character's identity. Students should consider the person their character hopes to become and the things that matter most to their character, using the following questions to guide their thinking:

- What does my character believe they are meant to do with their life?
- What gives my character's life meaning?
- What makes my character who they are?
- How does my character see themselves?
- How does my character want to contribute to the world?

Encourage students to spend some time thinking about symbols, images, and colors that represent what matters most to their character. Students can draw the tattoo design for their character or describe it. Either depiction should include details about the significance behind each symbol, image, and color.

CHALLENGING RAPE CULTURE

Exploring rape culture is critical to understanding the context in which sexual violence occurs. Work together to define rape culture and talk about how rape culture is depicted in *A Drop of Venom* before having students look further at the effects of rape culture on women and society, then develop their own public awareness messages to foster social change and help end rape culture.

Before beginning a conversation about rape culture with students, think about and plan for how all of your students will experience discussions about sexual assault and rape culture. You will want to have:

- Done the work in your classroom to provide a safe space and a respectful and supportive environment for productive conversations, creating an atmosphere for students to bring up their own angles on conditions and issues and informing students that they may ask to leave if they are uncomfortable at any point.



- Reflected on your own internalized beliefs and experiences, examined the ways in which you may be privileged or unaware, and considered how to use an intersectional lens when leading discussion.
- Educated yourself on **facts about sexual assault**.
- Prepared yourself to speak as if there are survivors in the class, not because you know that there are survivors but because there very well could be.
- Considered how specific discussion of behaviors, attitudes, and experiences may be triggering for some students because they are similar to a lived experience or because this information may shake a student's internalized beliefs, prejudices, or worldview.
- Prepared yourself to possibly receive disclosures of sexual assault from students and have full understanding of your duty to report, as well as alerted your school counselor, school psychologist, and other wellness staff about your planned discussion so they are also aware there may be disclosures or other conversations.

NOTE: If having a larger discussion about rape culture is beyond your own comfort level or those of your students, talking about one or more of the behaviors and attitudes that contribute to rape culture, such as sexism, disrespect, inequality, patriarchy, and different standards for men and women, can also be compelling and potentially less overwhelming.

Talking more about sexual assault is an important step to ending it. Before you start a discussion with students, give them a heads-up that the conversation is coming and provide them with time to gather their own thoughts. Let them know that you want to explore and discuss together how rape culture is presented in *A Drop of Venom* and how and why it exists in our own society. Offer them a definition of rape culture (e.g., the normalization and rationalization of sexual violence through cultural influences that impact all levels of social interaction) to start their thinking.

When students are ready for discussion, revisit the definition of rape culture that you provided and ask students to share their thoughts or elaborate on the definition. Then together you can list and discuss examples of rape culture that students recognize in the book and also identify influences in our society that perpetuate sexual violence, including specific:

- Behaviors
- Beliefs and worldviews
- Myths
- Everyday language
- Popular culture (literature, music, videos, film)
- Media and social media



Because rape culture and sexual violence is normalized and often reinforced or excused in the media and popular culture, some students may have trouble recognizing the influences that are supportive of sexual assault. Follow your discussion of examples of rape culture with some statistics about sexual assault.

Next, ask students to consider how rape culture shapes our society and what perpetuates rape culture in their school or community. Let them know you'd like them to use their understanding to raise awareness about rape culture and its impact by developing a message and delivery vehicle to challenge behaviors and/or stand against rape culture. Students might create a poster, a meme, or a video or use other media to deliver their message. Offer ample time for students to develop their products. Once complete, provide the opportunity to share with the class and with others, as appropriate.

RESOURCES

“But She Didn’t Scream”: Teaching About Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature”,
Journal of Language and Literacy Education Vol. 14 Issue 1—Spring 2018
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1175837.pdf>

“Can #MeToo Activism Change the Culture In High Schools?”
<https://www.kqed.org/education/535503/can-metoo-activism-change-the-culture-in-high-schools>

“16 Ways You Can Stand Against Rape Culture”
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/compilation-ways-you-can-stand-against-rape-culture>

“Books Aren’t Enough to Challenge Rape Culture” from Rethinking Schools
<https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/books-arent-enough-to-challenge-rape-culture/>

The Rape Culture Pyramid and Ending Rape Culture Activity from the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance
https://www.communitysolutionsva.org/files/Rape_Culture_Pyramid_Discussion_Guide_updated_102020.pdf

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)
<https://www.rainn.org/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

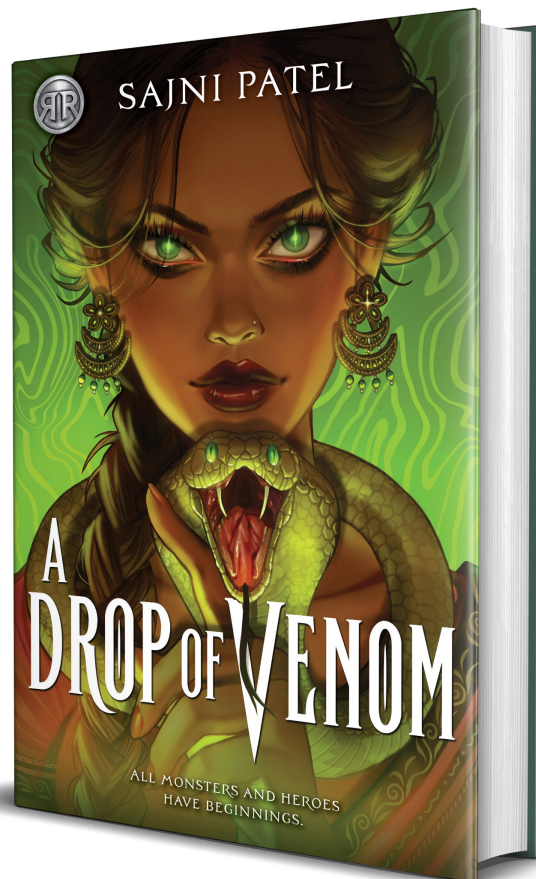
SAJNI PATEL is an award-winning author of women’s fiction and young adult books. Her works have appeared on numerous Best of the Year and Must Read lists from *Cosmo*, *Teen Vogue*, Apple Books, Audiofile, *Tribexa*, *Austin Woman*, *NBC*, *The Insider*, and many others.





RACHAEL WALKER (belleofthebook.com) created this guide with insights from teen reader Karina Lazorchak. Rachael consults on a wide variety of educational programs and multimedia projects and also develops educational materials and reading resources for children, parents, and teachers.

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