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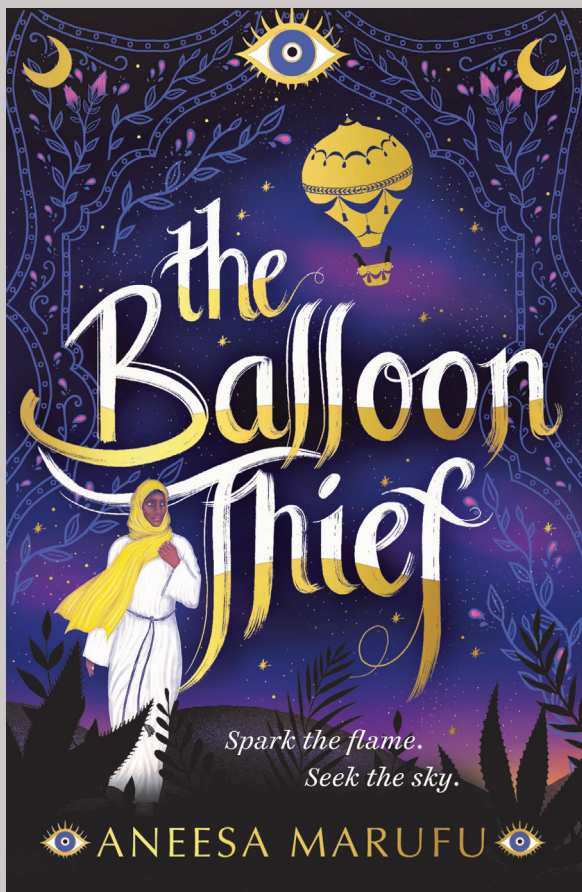
# THE BALLOON THIEF

Aneesa Marufu


## READING GUIDE




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# THE BALLOON THIEF BY ANEESA MARUFU

## SYNOPSIS

Khadija lives with her father, Abba, in the village of Qasrah. Devastated by the recent loss of her mother and younger brother, Khadija's small family is struggling, especially since the marriage and departure of her older sister. Now, Abba is determined to arrange a marriage for Khadija, too. But she's more interested in the hot air balloons outside her bedroom window, wondering ... what if?

Abba introduces Khadija to her intended husband. During a walk around the market, she glimpses a way out; an empty balloon straining for the sky. Khadija leaps inside and flies away.

She crash-lands the balloon in the nearby village of Sahli. Jacob, a hāri glassmaker's apprentice in the village, watches the balloon go down. Until last year, Jacob lived in the slums with his close friend William. Lately, William has become entangled with a rebel group, the Hāreef, who are promising revolution. The Hāreef are practicing sihr – the forbidden art of summoning jinn – in order to further their cause. William convinces Jacob to attend a meeting of the Hāreef, later.

William offers to hide the balloon, privately confessing to Jacob he intends to gift it to the Hāreef to buy his way into their ranks. Jacob, meanwhile, brings Khadija to his master Munir's workshop. Munir offers Khadija food and rest. She is woken by an altercation: Munir threatening Jacob's life. She attacks Munir – when he rounds on her, Jacob knocks him over the head. Believing Munir to be dead, Khadija asks Jacob where her balloon is hidden: they have to run. Jacob sends her in the wrong direction, heading off to find William at the Hāreef meeting instead. He has no choice now; he's killed a ghadæan, he'll



have to join.

In the poppy fields, Jacob is introduced to Vera, the magnetic head of the Hāreef. But the meeting is ambushed by the Nawab's guards. A battle breaks out; the Hāreef release their jinn. William is killed in the chaos – but not before insisting Jacob promises to join the Hāreef. Vera tells Jacob to meet her in the city of Intalyabad in three days.

Jacob runs to Munir's workshop in search of Khadija – he doesn't know how to fly a balloon. But Munir is alive. He attacks Jacob again – but Khadija rescues him. As the village burns with green jinn-fire they've got no choice but to team up. They retrieve the balloon and set off.

Despite Jacob's betrayal, he and Khadija form a friendship. Jacob conceals his intention to join the Hāreef, but convinces Khadija to fly to Intalyabad. When they arrive, the Nawab is newly married and the wedding parade is disrupted by a protest against the brutal treatment of the hāri. The protesters – who are of both races – demand equality. They are known as the Wāzeem.

A dead body is dumped into the crowd, summoning a powerful jinn and sending the Nawab and his new bride running for safety and the protest into chaos. An assassination attempt – by the Hāreef! Khadija and Jacob are rescued by the Wāzeem, particularly trans warrior woman Anam.

Jacob sneaks out of the window to meet Vera. Khadija tries to follow, but is accosted by a group of guards. She's rescued by a handsome Hāri swordsman and flees back to the Wāzeem.

The next day, Jacob and Khadija are invited to another protest outside the temple where the Nawab is praying. Jacob has promised Vera he'll release a dangerous jinn during the protest, enabling the Hāreef to kidnap the Nawab. He does – but pulls Khadija to relative safety in the Hāreef's lair, where she is imprisoned. The Nawab is sacrificed by Vera to conjure her jinn ally: the Jinniya Queen. In return, the queen resurrects Vera's dead son in the form of a terrifying jinn.

Jacob is accepted into the heart of the Hāreef, finding a place in the glassblower's workshop. Yet guilt about Khadija's imprisonment gnaws at his conscience. Meanwhile, Khadija is visited in her cage by the Hāri swordsman who saved her in the streets when she snuck out after Jacob. He is called Darian. He offers her a spoon to dig her way out of her sandy prison. As she digs, Khadija hears a strange noise – the cries of a creature in pain. She suspects that the



Hāreef have imprisoned a peri, a benevolent spirit of moonlight. She persuades Darian to rescue the peri before they escape. Meanwhile, Jacob hurries to the nearby Wāzeem safehouse and tells them of Khadija's capture. The Wāzeem attack the hideout in an attempt to rescue Khadija – providing a distraction as Khadija releases the peri and Darian prepares a balloon. Anam sacrifices her freedom to save Khadija, who wounds Vera as she escapes. The freed peri disappears in the moonlight. Confronting the imprisoned Anam convinces Jacob he's picked the wrong side. But he's deep into the Hāreef organization now – how can he find a way to do the right thing?

Khadija wants to leave all of this behind and start a new life, but when Darian (an undercover member of the Wāzeem) reveals the Hāreef's plans, Khadija knows she has to fight. With the jinniya queen's help, the Hāreef now plan to assassinate the other three Nawabs and establish a cruel reverse of the current order, exacting the ultimate revenge on Ghadaa. Darian and Khadija set course for Al-Shaam, the desert capital of the Western province and the Hāreef's next target.

In Al-Shaam, the Wāzeem inform them that the Hāreef are headed for a small village: Qasrah. Khadija's heart plummets. She injured Vera, now Vera is going to kill what remains of her family: Abba. Khadija heads for home – but not before she and Darian share a passionate kiss.

She finds her village in ruins – but thankfully, her father is alive. Khadija gets him to safety and Abba finally starts to accept that she's forging her own path. With his anxious blessing, she heads back to Al-Shaam to help the Wāzeem. She's convinced she'll be too late – but then the peri appears in the nick of time to pull the balloon to its destination.

In an epic showdown between the Wāzeem and the Hāreef, Jacob holds the balance of power. It's his quick mind and glassmaking skills that put two and two together: the glass 'amulets' which the Hāreef use to control jinn were once part of a whole – a magical glass talisman with the power to control jinn. Jacob steals the Hāreef's amulets to forge a weapon which sends the Jinniya Queen back to her realm, and defeats Vera and the Hāreef. Khadija and Jacob finally mend their friendship – but though Vera is defeated, there's a long way to go before Ghadaa can start to heal.

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'This is an epic novel in all the best senses. First, it's beautiful: the story of a girl's escape into the air, across the*





*desert and into the unknown, accompanied by a stranger from the other side of a great social divide. Then, it's terrifying – a land ripped apart by conflict which extends even into a supernatural realm. Finally, it's heartfelt – eventually, love, friendship and hope do prevail, but only after the bloodiest of struggles. This is an important debut by a great new writer – with a heroine who learns to make a real difference to herself and the worlds of good and evil that surround her by realizing that surviving means letting go of prejudice and hate. Awesome and amazing!* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM,**  
**CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Aneesa Marufu lives in Manchester and was the winner of the Kimberley Chambers Kickstart Prize for underrepresented writers in 2019. Her debut novel, *The Balloon Thief*, is inspired by her South Asian heritage and her obsession with hot air balloons, though she is yet to fly in one! When she isn't dreaming up stories set in the clouds, she has both feet on the ground, running after her two children or hunting for her next fantasy book to escape into.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'I cannot quite describe the feeling of finally seeing my own words come to life as a real book in the hands of readers. It has certainly been a long journey. When I first sat down to write *The Balloon Thief*, my intention was not to produce the book that you have before you but simply something that would quell my obsession for things that fly. As I delved into the fantasy of flight, the weightlessness of being airborne and the sense of disconnection with the world below, I wondered if discarding one's problems could be as simple as leaving them on the ground and jumping in a balloon. As a teenager, my own escapist desires would have me craving the opportunity to drop everything and quite literally float away in the same way Khadija and Jacob flee the problems in their own lives – be it Jacob's battle with racism or Khadija's struggle with misogyny and gender inequality. However, both characters soon come to realise that, like everything that ascends, they must come down eventually where their problems still remain.

This book is a battle of two things: identity and loneliness. It is as much a journey to find one's place in the world as it is a longing for acceptance and companionship – both increasingly relevant in today's world.



The spotlight has been shone on bigotry and prejudice, racism in particular, around the globe in recent years. Many of us have grown up to be conditioned to such things, to expect them in our daily lives, so to see these forms of hate exposed for their ugliness is as liberating as it is a long time coming. When people become hardwired to accept something as normal, quite often they become blind to it. This is a book that may make a lot of people feel uncomfortable with its discussion of terrorism, extremism and racism, drawn mainly from my own experiences with Islamophobia.

Growing up as a British Pakistani and a Muslim, I often felt this constant need to apologise. As the news became saturated with Islamic extremists, I found myself feeling almost partly responsible for the violent acts of other Muslims. This guilt was partnered with frequent taunts of being told to go back home – and that I, a second generation Muslim born in Britain, did not and most likely would never belong. My childhood was a constant questioning of my own identity being British but sadly never British enough.

It took a long time for me to accept that bigotry comes from a place of fear and often cannot be reasoned with, and that there are good and bad people in the world, irrespective of religion, race, class or gender. I belong to a group of people, but I am by no means responsible for anyone's actions within that group except my own. I remember when I heard the news that my brother's classmate had fled to Syria to join ISIS, and the shock that followed by everyone who knew him. That it was unexpected, completely out of character. I could not help but wonder what would push a person to extremism? And once they had tipped over the edge, was there any hope of bringing them back?

I believe there are many push and pull factors of radicalisation, and whilst these will never be an excuse to justify violence, my hope with this book is to show that the world is not so black and white, that people are often the product of their environment and life experiences. In short, hate breeds hate, however I hope to show with *The Balloon Thief* that love and friendship can and do prevail.' **ANEESA MARUFU**

## THEMES

- Radicalisation and extremism
- Belief and faith



- Mythology and religion
- The power of stories
- Flight and escape
- Friendship and enmity
- Gendered and racial oppression
- Revolution and societal change
- Magic and power

## WRITING STYLE

*The Balloon Thief* is written in a close third person (close meaning we experience the narrator's emotions and thoughts) in past tense, which lends the prose a classic storytelling feel – appropriate for a novel which engages with the power of mythology and storytelling. The language is vivid and descriptive, conjuring a fantasy world inspired by pre-Islamic South Asian mythology. The novel is a dual narrative, with the two main characters – Khadija and Jacob – telling the story in alternating chapters. **363 pages, ages 14+**

## PUPIL ACTIVITIES

### 1. Hot Air Balloons

*'No matter how hard men tried, balloons were creatures they could never truly tame. That's why she loved them.'*

**Khadija, p2**

Hot air balloons are a hugely important symbol in *The Balloon Thief* and were clearly an inspiration to the author. This activity is all about discovering their history. Separate into small groups and head to the library or the internet to do some research. Each group should be allocated a different research topic. For instance:

- When were hot air balloons invented and who were the inventors?



- How do hot air balloons work?
- Are there any famous hot air balloon flights?

Each group should present their findings to the rest of the class.

Finally, draw a hot air balloon of your own on a large blank sheet of paper. You can be inspired by your research – or by the balloons in *The Balloon Thief*. Decorate your balloon generously. Around the side of the balloon, or perhaps incorporated into the decoration on the balloon itself, write key words to represent what balloons symbolize (e.g. freedom or escape) as well as some of the facts you have discovered during your research. Create a class display with all your balloons.

## **2. Capture the Jinn**

*'Jinn were shape-shifting spirits residing in Al-Ghaib, a realm hidden to the mortal eye and ruled by various jinn kings and jinniya queens.'* p8

Jinn are a big fantasy element in *The Balloon Thief* as well as in the pre-Islamic mythology which inspired the novel. In the imaginative world of *The Balloon Thief*, jinn are hunted and captured by Exorcists.

As a class, imagine you are a team of Exorcists, tasked with capturing and safely disposing of a jinn which is terrorizing your neighborhood.

Create a mind-map with 'Jinn' at its centre, gathering together all of the information you know about Jinn from your reading of the novel in one colour of pen. The information can be grouped under different categories, such as 'habits', 'appearance', or 'capture'. You may like to go through the book marking the relevant pages.

Now, using a different colour of pen, expand your research – what can you find out about the ancient lore of jinn or genies online? What prominent stories deal with jinn? What can you learn about the habits of jinn and how to control, capture and safely dispose of them?





Using all the information you have gathered on your mind map, formulate a plan of action for dealing with your pesky neighbourhood jinn!

### **3. World-Building**

The characters in *The Balloon Thief* travel to lots of interesting locations in its richly imagined fantasy world. As a class, list and discuss the important locations of the novel – what are their distinctive features? Where are they in relation to each other? You may like to mark the passages of the novel which explore the world's geography.

Now, separate into groups. Your task is to draw a map of the world of the novel, but it's up to you how you achieve this and what techniques and materials you'd like to use. You might assign each member of the group a different section of the world to draw – you may even 'zoom in' on particular locations. Or, you could all work together on the whole. Be as visual and creative as you can be – you may use collage, paints or other techniques to conjure the look and feel of the world in the books.

Present your map to the class, tracing the journey the characters in *The Balloon Thief* take during the course of the novel. Afterward, create a class display of all your work.

## **WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In her author's note, above, Aneesa says she wanted to explore the 'push and pull factors of radicalization' in the course of *The Balloon Thief*. What does 'radicalization' mean to you? How did the author explore this theme throughout the novel? What are the push and pull factors of radicalization for Jacob?
2. *The Balloon Thief* tackles the theme of racism, however it does so by reversing the patterns we normally observe in our world; in this world, it is the fairer-skinned people who are oppressed. Why do you think the author chose to explore racism in this way? What does inverting racism for the purposes of the story achieve?
3. Khadija is a member of the ruling ghadæan class – but she, like Jacob, doesn't have the freedom to choose



her own destiny under the laws of the state because she is female. Are Jacob and Khadija more similar than they are different?

4. What does *The Balloon Thief* teach us about societal change and revolution? Is it a cautionary tale – or a call to action?
5. Stories and myths are a huge theme throughout the novel – they inspire Khadija to think beyond the borders of her life. Do you think stories have the power to change the world? What stories inspire you?

