

Novel blazes with issues women face

The recent Academy Awards underscored the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, and if you're a listener to National Public Radio, this past week you've heard the accusations concerning Sherman Alexie that hit even closer to home. These accounts attest that sexual power plays can happen anywhere.

A new novel by Shobha Rao investigates how this dysfunction plays out across two significantly different cultures. "Girls Burn Brighter" begins in India and ends up in the Pacific Northwest.

Sixteen-year-old Poornima lives in a village in southern India. Her widowed father, struggling to make ends meet as a weaver, hires an additional worker to help increase his output and income.

Close in age to Poornima, the new weaver is called Savitha, which translates as "Sun." Poornima's name means "Full Moon." And as it turns out, the girls are remarkably complementary in nature, and become fast friends.

Poornima's family may be poor, but Savitha's family is completely destitute. In different ways, both girls dedicate themselves to the care of their younger siblings.

But now that Poornima has come of age, her father arranges to have her married off. When the girls learn that the prospective groom lives too far away for the girls to be able to visit, Savitha helps Poornima figure out a way to sabotage the engagement.

But eventually and inevitably, another match is arranged.

On the eve of Poornima's wedding, Savitha is sexually assaulted by Poornima's father. An uproar ensues, with the suggestion that the rapist should be forced to marry the girl he has disgraced. Rather than have that happen, Savitha flees.

And then without further ado, Poornima is carried off to be married and join her husband's family.

This story is told in sections, al-

"Girls Burn Brighter"
By Shobha Rao
Flatiron Books
304 pp
\$25.99

ternating between each young woman's experiences and point of view. Poverty, geography and circumstance serve to keep the two friends apart. Each descends into emotional chaos, with accompanying physical abuse hideously camouflaged by domestic duties or the world of work.

Poornima is unhappy in her loveless marriage, but it isn't until her husband and mother-in-law conspire to perpetrate a brutal act upon her that she finally summons the courage to leave.

She decides to go in search of her friend, unaware that this quest will take her across oceans and continents, thrusting her into foreign lands as well as dealings with sinister people.

Rao writes about poverty, domestic abuse and disfigurement. She describes a cynical and violent human trafficking pipeline. There are occasional glimmers of kindness and beauty, and the ending (which seemed improbable to this reader) suggests there can be hope. But the bulk of the story is overwhelmingly grim.

That Rao's characters are named for the sun and moon suggests that these women may be able to shed light on, expose and maybe even disinfect the darkest depths of human depravity.

It's quite a stroke of timing that "Girls Burn Brighter" is being published now, as the voices of #MeToo and #TimesUp continue to rise.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY ENCORE DANCE STUDIO

Members of Encore Dance Studio's team gather for a picture at owner Denele Sweet's house. Pictured (from left) are Suzannah Hastings, April Cameron, Courtney Bangs, Tia Van Slyke, Trixie Leone, Denele Sweet, Erin Hofseth, Brittani Henderson, Kimmbrly Mount and Nikkole Sasso. Other staff members not pictured include Krysti Ficker, Cheryl Cochran, Christiane Butler, Michelle Lee, Connie Mulvany, Arlene Holmes, Annie Navarro-Rivera and Dana Larsen.



A free ballet class is offered by Encore.

Tuition-free ballet class on offer

There is still time to sign up for Encore Dance Studio's tuition-free community ballet class for people 13 and older.

Thanks to donations via a gofundme account, the Encore Performing Arts Foundation has enough funding to offer a second session of these classes, which run 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Mondays through May 7 (closed March 26 for spring break) at Encore's Warrenton Studio (429 S.E. Marlin Ave. Suite B). Registration fee is \$10. An Encore membership is not required.

The class is designed for students who have felt they're either too old to join dance classes or who may have financial barriers to participating in dance classes.

Contact the Gearhart studio at 503-717-1637 or visit us at 3631 U.S. Highway 101 N., Gearhart, to sign up!