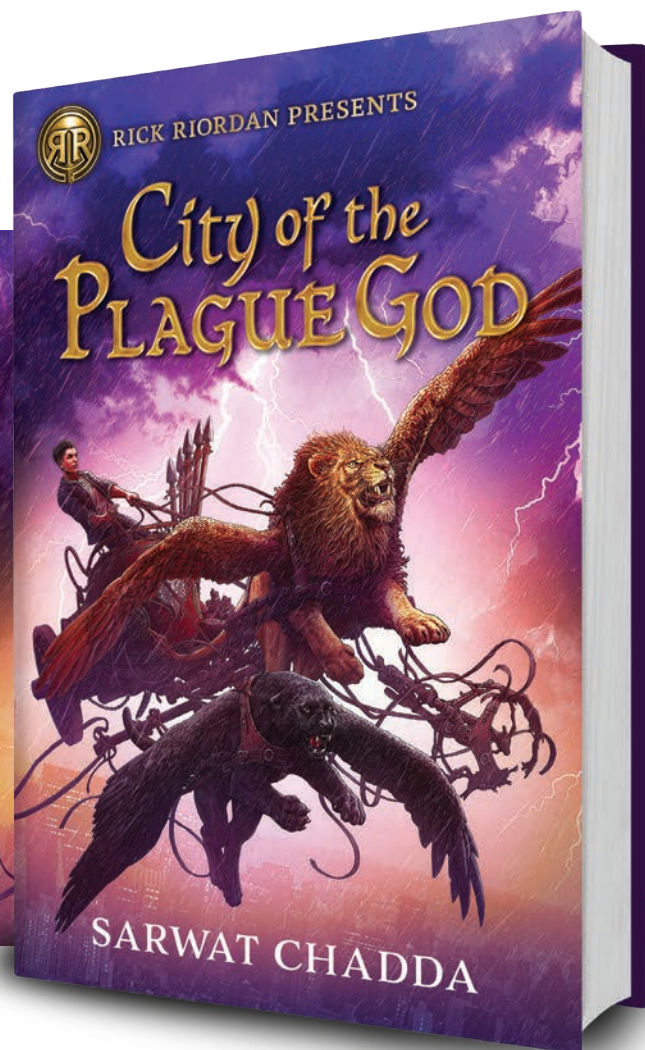




RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

City of the Plague God

BY SARWAT CHADDA



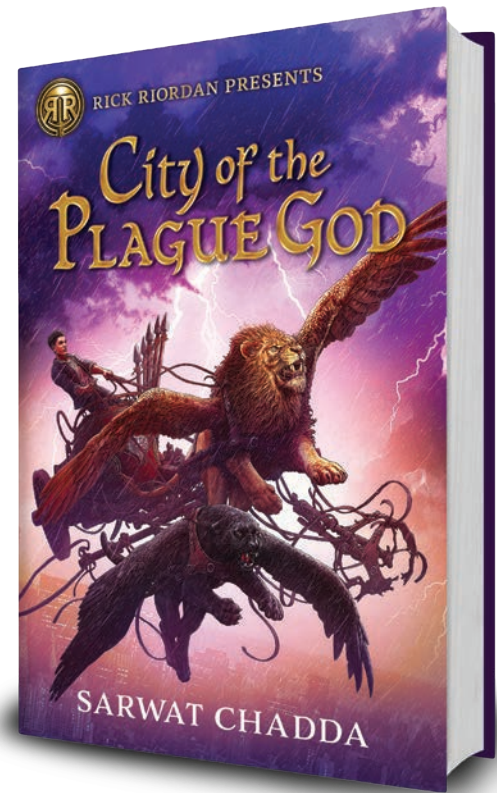
EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old Sik wants a simple life going to school and helping at his parents' deli in the evenings. But all that is blown to smithereens when Nergal comes looking for him, thinking that Sik holds the secret to eternal life. Turns out Sik is immortal but doesn't know it, and that's about to get him and the entire city into deep, deep trouble.

Sik's not in this alone. He's got Belet, the adopted daughter of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, on his side, and a former hero named Gilgamesh, who has taken up gardening in Central Park. Now all they have to do is retrieve the flower of immortality to save Manhattan from being wiped out by disease. To succeed, they'll have to conquer sly demons, treacherous gods, and their own darkest nightmares.



BEFORE READING

To build some context and aid the understanding of the story, consider discussing the following topics with the students and have them research briefly:

- A. The evolution of humanity through ancient civilizations, especially the Mesopotamian civilization
- B. A brief history of Iraq, where it is in the world and its politics and culture
- C. The role of epics as a contribution to a country/region's literature and how folktales pass on from generation to generation
- D. The evolution and story of Gilgamesh—consider using the internet and library resources to provide a broad understanding of the epic, and create a “biography” of the mythological figures as a slideshow or other method to provide a brief description of the characters, their special powers, and relationships with each other.

WHILE READING

Discussion Questions:

The City of the Plague God provides a rich story that offers many opportunities to weave in important and interesting topics for discussion. The quotes below can be categorized into four categories to provide cues for discussion and also provide a more nuanced understanding of many concepts behind the story:

- (i) Muslim kids as heroes
- (ii) Inspiring Muslim leaders/contributions
- (iii) Celebrating Islam
- (iv) Folktales from Islamic traditions

USE THE FOLLOWING QUOTES IN THE BOOK AS DISCUSSION POINTS TO DISCUSS THESE IDEAS:

- “Guys like us don’t get to be heroes.” (p. 4)

Discussion prompt: Who gets to be a hero and who does not? Who decides this? How is this reflected in popular media?

- *I paused to look at the collage he’d made of his trips to places that were already ancient when Rome was just a village. There he was, grinning in front of the Ziggurat of Ur, sitting on a camel at the ruins of Nineveh, and dusty from his motorcycle trip to the brick mounds of Lagash, remnants of when the country had been known by its ancient name: Mesopotamia.* (p. 8)

Discussion prompt: What do you know about Mesopotamia? How did the Mesopotamian civilization impact later civilizations like Rome, and what were its key contributions to our life today?

- *The cradle of civilization. Yet as I looked at the photos of Mo helping out at the refugee camps, rebuilding bombed-out villages, and replanting farms, I couldn’t help but think of how that birthplace had suffered over the centuries. Why couldn’t it have been left in peace?* (p. 8)

Discussion prompt: What are some unique factors about this region that caused so much violence and conflict in this region? What factors could have caused history to be different?

- “Kurnugi?” I rolled the trash can toward them. “Is that near Michigan?” I knew he meant the netherworld, but I was enjoying having the upper hand.” (p. 19)

Discussion prompt: What is Kurnugi, and why is it unique? What are the different beliefs people have about life after death, such as the ancient Egyptians and their pyramids?



- *Mama and Baba were refugees. They knew what it was like to lose everything overnight, and ever since the first time, they'd lived with the dread that it could happen again.* (p. 35)

Discussion prompt: How does one become a refugee? What can governments do to help refugees?

- *Despite being Iraqi like me, Belet spoke in a snooty British accent. It was obvious she belonged in some uptown prep academy, not a run-down public school like Hudson Square.* (p. 37)

Discussion prompt: Both Belet and Sik are Muslims but belong to different classes. Does that make it easier or harder for them to be friends? How?

- *"Careful. Sik's about to go full jihadi on us."*
Sometimes the whole Islamophobe thing gets tiresome. (p. 43)

Discussion prompt: What does "jihad" mean? How has it been used in popular media and news? What is an Islamophobe?

- *Every hero from The Arabian Nights carried a scimitar. Those had been my favorite tales as a kid—you didn't come across many Arabian heroes anywhere else.* (p. 60)

Discussion prompt: Have you read *The Arabian Nights*? Can you list examples of other books with Arabian heroes?

- *When American tanks had rolled in, there had been a lot of chaos and looting. I'm not talking about people stealing designer sneakers or seventy-inch high-def TVs, but priceless artifacts, thousands of years old. Smugglers earned millions overnight, at the cost of everyone else.* (p. 77)

Discussion prompt: How did the war impact Iraq and its neighboring region? Who suffers the most in wars?

- *Something wasn't right. No thick scene of Turkish coffee brewing. No smell of pitas on the grill. No clatter-clatter from the kitchen and no Mama singing Arabic love songs by her favorite artist, Fairuz. This wasn't home.* (p. 87)

Discussion prompt: What is home to you and how is that similar/different from home to Sikander?

- *How many versions of The Epic of Gilgamesh had I read over the years? Probably every one there was. It was the world's oldest story, and I'd grown up with it, first with Mo reading me big-and-bright picture books. Then I'd found it in some comic book form. More recently I'd read translations and modern adaptations.* (p. 95)

Discussion prompt: Had you heard about *The Epic of Gilgamesh* before reading this book? What is your favorite epic/folktale, and where did it originate?



- *“If you look even slightly into the ancient past, you’ll see how love has driven many a war. Just ask Helen.”* (p. 97)

Discussion prompt: Who is Helen that is being referred to here? Can you pick a few historical wars and examine what caused them?

- *“People worshipped us, and we drew power from that. But there are mysteries, wonders far greater that even I don’t understand. I am not omniscient, nor omnipotent. Those are attributes of this greater power. After all, someone created me.”* (p. 98)

Discussion prompt: Explore the role of mythology in different cultures across many of the Rick Riordan Presents books.

- *“You remember Saddam Hussein, the old Iraqi dictator?”* (p. 102)

Discussion prompt: Which countries have had dictators as heads of the government? Have they been successful and, if so, in what ways? Also, discuss the relationship between the US and Iraq and its evolution over the years.

- *Manhattan was only a few miles west, but each of the boroughs had its own unique identity, and none more so than Steinway Street in Queens.* (p. 103)

Discussion prompt: What is the author referring to here in terms of identity? How have you experienced or seen different identities in the same region, and what factors have led to more of the commingling of different identities?

- *“Mother knew Steve Jobs. He was of Mesopotamian descent—his father was Syrian.”* (p. 104)

Discussion prompt: Did you know that Steve Jobs was of Syrian descent? What other famous inventors or scientists were of Mesopotamian descent?

- *“Fear is a disease, too,” said Belet, taking the phone back. “It spreads fastest of all. We’re going to need to shut it down before it becomes a citywide epidemic.”* (p. 105)

Discussion prompt: How did fear play a role in the COVID-19 pandemic?

- *Food united us as much as religion. Gathered there were individuals from all over the world, from all walks of life, come to break bread and say a few prayers together. It made me feel better about things, if only for a brief time.* (p. 108)

Discussion prompt: How have you learned or looked beyond your own culture through your life’s experiences? What are some different foods that you have tried or been exposed to over the years?



- *Desperate families hoping they'd made the right decision to leave their war-torn homes and everything they knew for the wild gamble of a better life here, in the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave.* (p. 116)

Discussion prompt: Why do people leave their countries and immigrate to America? What values/ethos made the USA the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave?

- *We didn't have much in common, but we had Gilgamesh. How many pictures had we drawn of him?* (p. 129)

Discussion prompt: This statement from the author provides an example of how stories bring people together. How has this book brought you closer/together with your classmates?

- *I could take a lot, deal with a lot, and turn the other cheek. I'd spent my life trying to avoid trouble, staying away from confrontation, but he was threatening my parents. I grabbed his head and slammed it against the glass.* (p. 143)

Discussion prompt: What was Sikander going through and how did he find the courage to fight?

- *Reading demons is easier than reading people. People have so many things going on in their brain simultaneously that you have to work hard to figure out what they really want. Demons are much simpler. They only know how to make people afraid.* (p. 144–45)

Discussion prompt: Do you agree/disagree with this statement? Why?

- *"So he went out to see the soldiers, dressed only in his underwear."* (p. 154)

Discussion prompt: Why did the grandfather go out dressed only in his underwear? What was he successful in achieving?

- *I was starting to understand why Belet did everything so hard. She was always trying to be noticed by a distracted goddess, and to be worthy of her love.* (p. 155)

Discussion prompt: What was Belet's relationship with Ishtar? What do you think was challenging for Belet?

- *"Some problems can't be solved with violence."* (p. 155)

Discussion prompt: Do you agree or disagree? Provide examples.

- *One of Nergal's demons had broken through the debris. It was a mangy creature, half dog, half lizard, and the size of a calf. It barged past the panther lamassu, and its claws skittered on the cracked street as it charged straight for me.* (p. 178)

Discussion prompt: If you had to imagine a demon, how would it look?



- *You have to be a master psychologist to run a deli. Hundreds of people come through your door each day, each wanting something different and all demanding they get it first, believing their needs are the most important in the world. My job, day in and day out, was to make every one of them believe they would get exactly what they wanted. In short, I needed them to trust me.* (p. 190–91)

Discussion prompt: Discuss the benefits and costs of real-world learning against academic learning. What are the different skills that each one provides an opportunity to learn?

- *“So, what terrorist role do they have for you?” I snapped.* (p. 206)

Discussion prompt: How can we change the narrative around Muslims and terrorists? What do you think fuels it?

- *“Maybe you’ll be the hero in the next one?”
“Heroes don’t come in this shade, Sik.”* (p. 207)

Discussion prompt: What shade is Daoud referring to? Why don’t heroes come in that shade or do they?

- *Manhattan was falling apart. The subway system had shut down, traffic had been reduced to a crawl, the skies were dark with massive swarms of insects, and the sidewalks were filled with people wearing surgical masks, hoping they could stay safe from whatever strange germs were contaminating the air.* (p. 212)

Discussion prompt: Not too long ago this would have been pure fiction, but how have your experiences through COVID-19 changed the way you imagine this scene?

- *A glass ziggurat. I’d seen hundreds of photos of these ancient, stepped pyramids, but how could there be one in Central Park without anyone having noticed?* (p. 216–17)

Discussion prompt: What is a ziggurat? Why were they built? What other contributions have we had from the Mesopotamian civilization?

- *“All that time I spent in palaces, clad in silks and gold, not realizing that true riches come from the soil.”* (p. 224)

Discussion prompt: What riches is the author alluding to? Do you agree with this statement?



- *Had it really been like that? Me an outsider in my own family, always lesser than my big brother, the apple of my parents' eyes? Mo must have had his own struggles, but it had seemed to me that everything had always come easily to him. I hadn't been around to witness the defeats, only his victories, while I ran behind on my little legs, trying to catch up, asking him to wait up as he sprinted off on his adventures.* (p. 241)

Discussion prompt: Discuss how perspectives play a role in our experiences and building empathy requires exploring other perspectives.

- *"The primordial ocean from which all existence arose. Bottomless trenches, gigantic whirlpools, tempests ravaging the surface, and who-knows-what kind of leviathans patrolling its depths. Waves so high they could drown continents. This is going to be an adventure."* (p. 288)

Discussion prompt: Where had Sik gone and why? What challenges did Sik face?

- *Life, in the end, is about survival. When everything else has been stripped away, the only options remaining are fight or flight. And once you make the choice, you have to put your all into it. There's no point in half measures.* (p. 308)

Discussion prompt: Can you share an example of where you may have faced a difficult situation and how you handled it?

- *I started to read the words scrawled on the outside but stopped myself. The hatred made me sick. As things had gone from bad to worse, people had taken out their anger on the easiest scapegoats: my family. They blamed us for having brought the plague to Manhattan.* (p. 331–32)

Discussion prompt: Why were people angry at Sik's family? Can you identify other examples of similar incidents of racism against a culture/race for some extenuating circumstances? How can we change this?

- *I don't remember what I said exactly—I was too caught up in the moment—but if you can't have fun flying over Manhattan in a magical chariot drawn by four massive winged cats, then when can you?* (p. 357)

Discussion prompt: What were Sik and his friends trying to do at this time? Were they successful?

- *"I changed the outside, but what was within—that was always there. Deep in their hearts, human beings are monsters. You will save nothing. Hand over the potion to me, and . . . I will cure your parents."* (p. 367–68)

Discussion prompt: Who said this statement and why?

- *"There's been a Kardashian baby since then. The world's moved on, Sik."* (p. 377)

Discussion prompt: How does media today create heroes? How do human contributions get recognized?



AFTER READING

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

For each of the characters below, identify something that you admire about them and something that you wished they did differently:



NAME OF CHARACTER	A character trait you admired and examples of this trait in the story	A character trait that you found challenging and examples of this trait in the story
Ishtar		
Belet		
Sikander		
Mo		
Daoud		
Gilgamesh		
Nergal		

WRITING PROMPTS:

- a. Identify examples of use of humor and thrill in the story to make it more interesting.
- b. Did you notice any incidents of Islamophobia that Sik or his family or community face? What do you think is the key cause of Islamophobia?
- c. What did you learn about the impact of war on Iraq and the Middle Eastern community?
- d. Sik, Mo, Dauod, and Belet are all of Middle Eastern heritage. How are they similar or different? Discuss in the context of the phrase “Own voices are plural” that is emerging in modern-day literature to counter stereotyping and is based on the notion that different people from the same culture/region can be different.
- e. Identify examples of family bonding that you noticed in the book and connect it with one of your personal experiences similar to those in the book.
- f. Pick your favorite childhood story or epic and reimagine it to a modern-day situation.

CLASSROOM PROJECTS:

This story and book provides numerous opportunities for hands-on learning and book club picks. Below are some ideas:

- a. Divide the class into different groups and have each group present on one aspect of life across different ancient civilizations (Mesopotamia, Indus Valley, Egypt, etc.) such as food, knowledge, or religion.
- b. Do a hummus-making competition and tasting in class.
- c. Ask children to draw any one of the imaginary characters from the book.
- d. Explore cuneiform and other Arabic scripts by having children do code-breaking exercises or writing their names. See this website: <https://www.penn.museum/cgi/cuneiform.php>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Manglik, Gauri and Sadaf Siddique, *Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding through Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ALA Editions, 2019.
- Suggested book pairings:
 - Kuntz, Doug, Amy Shrodes, and Sue Cornelison, *Lost and Found Cat*, Crown Books for Young Readers (picture book, 2017)
 - Rumford, James, *Silent Music: A Story of Baghdad*, Roaring Book Press (picture book, 2008)
 - Stamaty, Mark Alan, *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*, Dragonfly Press (picture book, 2010)
 - Winter, Jeanette, *The Librarian of Basra*, HMH Books for Young Readers (picture book, 2005)
 - Chokshi, Roshani, the Pandava series, Rick Riordan Presents (middle grade novels, 2019 to 2022)
 - Senzai, N. H., *Escape from Aleppo*, Simon & Schuster (middle grade novel, 2018)
 - Gratz, Alan, *The Refugee*, Scholastic Press (young adult novel, 2017)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarwat Chadda, a first-generation Muslim immigrant, has spent a lifetime integrating the best of his family's heritage with the country of his birth. There have been tensions as well as celebrations, but he wouldn't wish it any other way. As a lifelong gamer, he decided to embrace his passion for over-the-top adventure stories by swapping a career in engineering for a new one as a writer. That resulted in his first novel, *Devil's Kiss*, back in 2009. Since then he has been published in a dozen languages, writing comic books, TV shows, and novels such as the award-winning Indian-mythology-inspired Ash Mistry series and the epic high-fantasy Shadow Magic trilogy (as Joshua Khan). While he's traveled far and wide, including Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, he's most at home in London, where he lives with his wife, two more-or-less grown-up daughters, and an aloof cat. Feel free to drop him a line @sarwatchadda.



Photo Credit: Joel Meadows

Q&A WITH SARWAT CHADDA

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood? What did you enjoy doing most when you were in middle school?

A: Okay, I am pretty old, and my childhood was way back in the 1970s and 1980s. I guess my big passion was reading, especially myths and fantasy adventures. Some things basically haven't changed at all! But in about 1980, I was introduced to Dungeons and Dragons, and that pretty much changed my life. I've been keen on role-playing games ever since and think it's the best training to becoming a writer anyone can have.

Q: How and when did you decide to become an author?

A: I graduated with a degree in engineering and had been working in the construction industry for about fifteen years when I realized I was keen to try something new. At first, my wife and I thought about something related to engineering, perhaps specializing in low-energy design, but then the subject strayed on to doing what would you love to do. The answer was simple. Tell stories. I had dabbled in writing role-playing adventures, but not a proper novel. So I thought I'd give it a go. I was in my midthirties by then. I wrote my first story, then wrote some more, and some more and so on. Each time getting a little better than previously. Then, in 2007, I entered a writing competition, and that led me to an agent, which led me to my first book deal, which has led me here!

Q: Can you describe your writing process? How do you go from an idea to a book?

A: I get my ideas for a book a hundred different ways. Sometimes it's an image, or a newspaper title, or something someone's said or done. Any book is made up of a hundred different influences. Some are deep and personal, what I feel about the world and the people around me, and sometimes it's an exploration of a theme or bond between characters. For me it's rarely a single spark that sets the whole thing off. I have many, many abortive drafts in my desk! But you never know. Sometimes a group of ideas that don't work individually might just work combined. Keep yourself free and open, then the ideas come.

Q: What kind of research did you do for *City of the Plague God*?

A: *City of the Plague God* is my decision to write a Muslim character. Much of the research was just exploring how I felt about my religion, and how I felt it was (often) portrayed in the media. The next aspect was Sik, our hero. Again I wanted him to be as mundane and as relatable as possible. But now I had him. I also knew I didn't want to do a typical *Arabian Nights* story with genies and flying carpets and they were a cliché when it came to Islamic fantasy. I wanted to explore another Middle Eastern mythology and fortunately live near the British Museum, which has a vast Mesopotamian exhibit. I love archaeology, and much of what we know about ancient Mesopotamia comes from characters like Layard, who did much of the excavations of Babylon, Nineveh, and the Library of Ashurbanipal. His discoveries form the main exhibit.

Q: Can you describe your partnership with Rick Riordan in the development of this book? How did he and you work together?

A: Rick and I have overlapped a few times over the years. He was a great supporter of my Ash Mistry books (I think he was getting tired of being asked when he would do Indian mythology), and we both have the same editor.

So when Rick Riordan Presents was kicking off, I was contacted to see if I wanted to be a part, which I did, but at the time didn't have a story! Aargh! I'm very glad I didn't lose my slot because it took about a year to come up with the idea of *City of the Plague God*. So the process is very straightforward. I came up with a detailed outline, the first few chapters to see if the tone fitted Rick Riordan Presents, and off it went to Rick. Got the thumbs-up and then went and wrote the whole manuscript, did edits, then back to Rick again for his comments. There was a little to-and-fro, then one more draft, and there we have it! We had a great chat some months ago as part of his Tower of Nero tour, and it's a shame I'm not over in the US for the tour myself (thanks, plague)—it would be great to catch up and talk properly. But he's a busy guy!



Q: Given there is so much mythology woven into the book, did you struggle between accurate representation of such mythology and a creative license to create the fantasy? How did you strike the balance?

A: The mythology is the springboard, but that does present an interesting question. I love mythology generally. I grew up reading Greek, Norse, and British myths, and then the stories of India, which formed the basis of my Ash Mistry trilogy. Joseph Campbell takes about the monomyth, and the fact most myths repeat the same pattern. There is something intrinsically fundamental about mythology, and despite being thousands of years old, it remains incredibly current. There are technical details you want to get right, but I am not working on an academic thesis. I am trying to tell a fun, exciting story that makes the reader feel connected *emotionally*, rather than intellectually.

Q: What were some of the considerations you had in mind when you were developing the characters of Sikander, Mo, and Daoud?

A: Sik, Mo, and Daoud are all about family. There is deep love, of course, but there is jealousy, rivalry, and regret. When you strip the story down to its fundamentals, that's what it's about. It's about Sik trying to protect the ones he loves. But each represented a different viewpoint of both the immigrant and Muslim experience. But after a point, they started telling the story themselves!

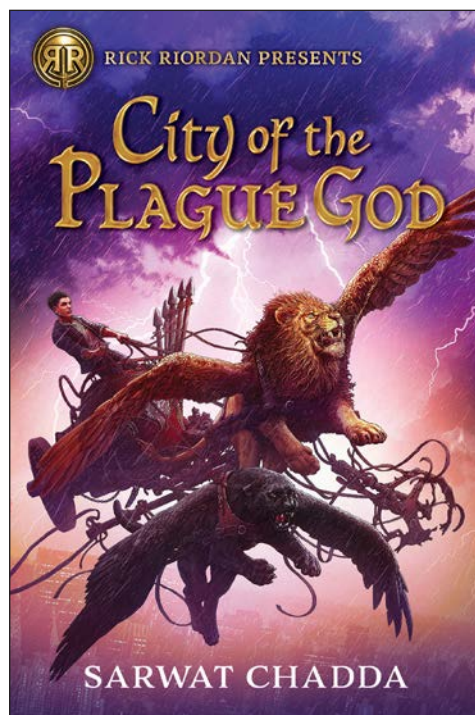
Q: How do you hope young readers all over the world will respond to this story about the plague hitting the world and this young Iraqi boy saving them from it?

A: What a time to write about a plague! I hope young readers will see we are all playing our part in defeating the plague god. We will beat COVID-19 with all the small victories. We look out for each other, we help those that need us, and we win because we work as a community. That's what Sik is all about.



This guide was prepared by Gauri Manglik, who is the coauthor of *Muslims in Story: Expanding Multicultural Understanding through Children's and Young Adult Literature* and a lawyer by training. As a first-generation immigrant mother raising her two boys in California, she felt strongly about advocating for increased diversity in children's literature in schools and libraries. This led her to start KitaabWorld, a literary organization that spreads awareness about South Asian children's literature. She has written numerous articles and book reviews and presented in various forums such as NCSS and NCTE on using diverse books to build empathy. She routinely consults on sensitivity readings and is working on a few writing projects of her own.

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