

Interview with Roshani Chokshi

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. Today I'm talking to Roshani Chokshi, the author of ARU SHAH AND THE TREE OF WISHES and the other Pandava books in that series. And they are all out from Rick Riordan Presents. For a full transcript of this conversation, check out the episode show notes, which are on readingwomenpodcast.com. And make sure you're subscribed, so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:40] **Kendra** So today I'm talking to one of my favorite middle-grade authors, Roshani Chokshi. I love the Aru Shah series, and it's such a fun book. And I love how she incorporates the mythology of her heritage into those stories. But I originally read Roshani's books with her debut THE STAR-TOUCHED QUEEN, which is also based on a lot of mythology as well. And I loved it. And its sequel, THE CROWN OF WISHES. So when I heard that she was going to be Rick Riordan's first author for his new imprint, I was just over the moon—so excited because I knew she was perfect for it. And she is. She has such a unique way of storytelling and is so funny. And the books are so charming. And when I am very stressed, these are the books that I reach for. And I have enjoyed reading her work for so long. And so I was so happy to be able to talk to her. What's more, she is based here in the South. And so I have met her, I think, a couple times at different book festivals. But yeah, I am so excited to be able to talk to her today.

[00:01:46] **Kendra** So a little bit about Roshani before we jump into the interview. She is the author of several books, both middle grade and young adult. She has been nominated for the Locas and Nebula Awards and has frequently appeared on the best-of-year lists from Barnes and Noble, Forbes, BuzzFeed, and more. Her New York Times best-selling series includes THE STAR-TOUCHED QUEEN duology, THE GILDED WOLVES, ARU SHAH AND THE END OF TIME, which is also optioned for film by Paramount Pictures. Very excited about that, obviously. So I had such fun talking to her in our conversation. So without further ado, here is my interview with Roshani Chokshi. Well, welcome to the podcast, Roshani. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:02:36] **Roshani** I'm so excited to be here. Thank you. Thank you for having me.

[00:02:40] **Kendra** We talked about this a little bit, but how are you holding up? Is there any particular book or snack or anything that's keeping you sane during our tumultuous hellscape?

[00:02:51] **Roshani** Oh, my goodness. Well, so my parents, bless them, are a delight. And of course, they're really worried about how me and my husband are holding up. So they dropped off some provisions from Costco a couple weeks ago. And it was like a one hundred pound—not a hundred pound—like a hundred tins of sardines. Just so many sardines. So I started eating them. And I got to be honest with you. They're actually pretty great. Like, if you roast them with some like tomato, and you had a little bit of basil to it and some toast. And I've been like turning it into stuff with scrambled eggs and kind of trying to pretend to myself that it's a really Mediterranean meal. And therefore, I'm actually somewhere off the coast of Spain. And I'm just eating them as my snack before I return to deep blue azure waters.

[00:03:45] **Roshani** And reading wise, I've been on a nonfiction kick lately. I really, really was obsessed with the book I finished recently called FALLEN GLORY by James Crawford. And it's about the life and death of history's greatest buildings.

[00:04:02] **Kendra** Oh, wow.

[00:04:03] **Roshani** Oh, my gosh. It's fantastic. The way that he leads you through history and starts

you through things. I mean, you're starting with ziggurats and like ancient Babylonian Sumerian cultures, which inspired or, you know, had a lot of correlation to the Bible's Tower of Babel. You know. Like I think actually Urak is even mentioned in the Old Testament, which is really cool. And it brings you to stuff like the Great Silk Tent that was in Kazakhstan and held as the seed of the descendants of Genghis Khan and stuff. It's really moving to think about the roots that we try to place down, knowing that something is going to outlive us by hundreds and thousands of years.

[00:04:47] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah, that sounds like a fantastic read. In particular, I want to talk to you today about your Aru Shah series, but I have been reading your books since I think THE STAR-TOUCHED QUEEN, when it first came out.

[00:05:03] **Roshani** Oh, I love that.

[00:05:06] **Kendra** And I met you at the Decatur Book Festival, I think, when the second book in that duology came out or something. And so when they announced that you had a series with Rick Riordan Presents, I royally flipped out and was like, where do I sign up? I read Rick Riordan as a kid. And I've always wanted to ask you—how did that happen? How did you know that this new imprint was happening? And how did you get a series with it right off the bat?

[00:05:33] **Roshani** My gosh. Well, I actually heard about Rick Riordan Presents when I was at DragonCon in Atlanta. And I have been able to go back to DragonCon, unfortunately. Like, I loved it. It just always coincides with Decatur Book Festival. So this was, you know, the stars truly arranging to make this happen. But I heard about . . . I just heard a rumor really that he was going to start an imprint and that he was looking for books that had the same mythological-based adventure of Percy Jackson, but written from the viewpoint of authors who were of that cultural background. And I genuinely raced home, and I emailed my agent, and I was like, Is this a thing? I need to know. I'm so excited. Please, please, please, please, please, can we find out?

[00:06:21] **Roshani** And she found out. She reached out to Disney. Okay, yes. It's going to be a real thing. This is really exciting. And from there, I wrote the first three chapters of Aru, almost completely in a fugue state. I was like, this is the thing that I've been waiting for. This is what all my "Sailor Moon" fanfiction has led me to. I was made to do this. And so then I wrote it. And of course, I had zero expectation of anything happening ever. I was like Rick Riordan. . . . Truly, his moniker is "storyteller of the gods." He's not going to be messing around with like imperfect, mere mortal of a self.

[00:07:02] **Roshani** And, you know, with publishing and submission. . . . The submission process of writing a book and trying to get it published. I mean, it takes so much time. I didn't . . . we didn't sell THE STAR-TOUCHED QUEEN for, like, six to eight months of trying to get that book published. And so I thought it was going to be the same amount of waiting time, like six to eight months or something. But a week later, we heard back that he had the book. And I was like, What do you mean? He has the book? What is he doing with it? Is he rolling it up into a tiny cylinder and like whacking insects? What's he doing? But it turned out that he'd read it, and he really loved it. And from there, the process just happened super quickly. And yeah, I found out on Halloween, I think, of 2016 that Aru was going to be the first title in the Rick Riordan Presents line.

[00:07:59] **Kendra** Wow, that sounds like definitely like an amazing whirlwind.

[00:08:03] **Roshani** It was madness.

[00:08:08] **Kendra** So you mentioned that he was looking for writers who had a similar storytelling on different cultures, mythology, and folklore, but wanting authors from that cultural background. Did he talk to you about his mission for that? And what was the thought process behind him

wanting that for his new imprint?

[00:08:29] **Roshani** Well, I guess the thought process behind it, I mean, actually we haven't even really talked about that. The first time I met him, I really . . . he was . . . he just like reminded me of my dad. So I just sort of . . . I just started trolling him immediately. And I don't know why I did that! But I just . . . he makes people feel very comfortable. So I was just like sitting in a lobby, and we were just poking at plants and being like, How much you want to bet it's real? No, that one's fake. That one's definitely real. I'm just sort of like doing that, judging plants in a waiting room?

[00:09:01] **Roshani** But I mean, one thing about Rick that I really, really feel shines in a lot of his work and who he is, is he was a middle-school history teacher for years. And then when Percy Jackson really took off, I mean, it was almost as if his classroom—okay, he wasn't teaching anymore—but his classroom then became his readers. And it really became about that educational aspect and not just educating other people, but him being willing to be so educated himself. I get the sense that he really does do his homework. He talks to a ton of people. He tries to write something in an inclusive and sensitive way so that every reader gets to see themselves. And I really think that that's the heart of the imprint. What we, I think, are all trying to do is make sure that every kid can read these stories and find themselves celebrated.

[00:10:02] **Kendra** So when you went to write Aru, you said you just went home, and you wrote the three chapters. How did you decide out of all the different kinds of myths and legends that there are, with your experience, how did you decide what ones to focus on? Because I imagine that must have felt like a little bit like quite the task, like, oh, how . . . what ones am I going to draw from for these stories?

[00:10:28] **Roshani** Well, I always knew that the foundation myth for Aru was going to be based off the MAHABHARATA. The MAHABHARATA is an ancient Sanskrit epic. And it focuses on the stories of these five demigod brothers, who each have different deities as their fathers, and their struggle for power . . . to find their . . . to have a legitimate claim to a throne . . . and also, just like, you know, their own relationships with each other. But in so much of that epic, they are dealing with monstrous creatures. They have lots of interaction with gods, goddesses. And there's really a discussion about, you know, what's my duty in all this. Like, if you have to fight the people that you love, where do you stand? How do you make these decisions? That was always going to be a starting point. I was always so fascinated with the idea of demigods and particularly what it would look like, considering that every demigod brother in that story had a different dad. How do they feel about that? What was it really . . . ? There's not that many other demigods in Hindu myths, at least that I remember. What was their relationship like with the people around them? And so for me, I just thought it would be so interesting to take that ancient story and put it in a modern setting and flip the script. I mean, there's no reason why they couldn't have been women. The farther that you dig into Hindu mythology, it really does subscribe to the notion that gender is a construct. I mean, you have deities who can take both male and female forms. And so why can't a soul manifest instead in a young woman? And that's what I wanted to play with.

[00:12:12] **Kendra** I really love that. There's a lot of fun with that as well. You play a lot with humor in the book, which I think is really important for middle grade and doing it. But this is your first middle grade novel. So what was that like, moving from young adult to middle grade? And what unique challenges did you find when you sat down to write the story?

[00:12:36] **Roshani** The truth is, I didn't realize how joyful it would be to write Aru. I think middle grade is extraordinarily challenging. And the thing I think that makes it the most challenging is the voice. There's brilliant authors who can't write middle grade, that kind of thing. But like, you know, that that meme of Steve Buscemi, and he's got like a skateboard tucked over his shoulder, like "How are you doing, fellow kids?" There's an aspect of cringe when you can tell that someone is talking

down to an audience. And so for me, what made Aru easy was that I am always haunted by the person/creature that I was in seventh grade. I have not moved away from that person. I am always her. And so getting into the mindset for Aru was literally just me sitting alone in my office and thinking about all the people who wronged me, all the times I got dumped over a IM. And basically how desperately I just wanted someone to tell me I was exceptional. Man. Yes. So that was sort of like therapeutic in exercising my middle-school demons for me. And so in that way, it was easy to tap into Aru's voice.

[00:13:51] **Roshani** But in the way that it was really challenging, again, I think that Aru is the kind of story where I cannot rush the drafting process for it. Whereas when I'm playing with my young-adult stories—which I of course, I equally adore—I know that they can be truly god-awful, and that I can go back and fix it. But with Aru, if I've got the voice wrong at the beginning, if I'm trying to rush a mindset, and I'm not letting her think through things or I'm not letting myself think through something, the whole draft just feels like broken bones. And that's when it becomes an issue. That's where it becomes really hard for me.

[00:14:30] **Kendra** Yeah. Because, I mean, it definitely has that strong feel that, you know, when I read Rick Riordan's books—especially when he writes in first person—the voice is so strong. And I mean, on the audio, it's phenomenal because it's like this person performing a monologue for ten hours or whatever it is. But with Aru, I feel like it's very similar. And with Soneela Nankani, like, she's amazing. And I will forever fangirl about her to the end of my days. But I really appreciated the voice that you had in creating that. You mentioned that getting the voice is extremely important for you. When you wrote the first book, was it difficult to find that groove for the first time? And how many drafts did that take?

[00:15:16] **Roshani** For Aru, it took actually only three, three major revisions, which is unheard of for me. I'm the kind of person who has to rewrite something like fifty thousand times. Yeah. And I really think that because the voice thing, it forced me to just go through it super, super slowly.

[00:15:41] **Kendra** With Aru, one of the things that I really love about it is that as she meets her other demigod sisters, as she meets more of the Pandavas, she meets them all, and they're all girls. And they're all these girls with these different kinds of awkward middle-school kind of situations. And they come together, and they do great things. When you were gender-swapping those stories, what were some of the things that you were thinking about and writing these girls? And the fact that, you know, one of the things I've always wished from Rick Riordan was that he would write more girls. And finally, that there are more from these imprints and from women writing themselves, what were some of the things that you were thinking about as you were writing Aru and her sisters.

[00:16:25] **Roshani** Well, I felt like within the actual MAHABHARATA stories, every single one of those Pandava brothers has a distinct trait to them. You know, for example, Bhima is known for his incredible strength, and that is Brin's counterpart, you know, someone who also is known for their incredible strength. Bhima loved to eat. Brin is an incredible cook. You know, just those sort of things I wanted to play with both what I knew were to be their strengths and what those weaknesses would look like in a modern setting. And especially in making them girls, I wanted to celebrate female friendship. You know, I've talked about this so much, but I just really love "Sailor Moon." And coming home at the end of the school day and getting a watch "Sailor Moon" and watching her like go kick ass with her best friends and still be able to complain about homework and school and her crushes, but knowing that she has to like show up and get her stuff together and go fight, I just really loved that message for myself and for other young readers that you can be more than one thing—that you can be strong in one aspect, and you don't have to have it all figured out all the time. You know, half the battle really is just showing up to do the work.

[00:17:49] **Kendra** And I think if I had read these books as a middle grade, it would have meant a lot for me to see women, you know, young women doing things. Because at the time, I feel like there's like Tamora Pierce. That was . . . that was generally, I think, about it when I was in middle school. And I felt like that definitely impacted the way that I saw myself and the way that, you know, the different jobs that you imagine yourself in. Because as a woman, if you don't see other women doing it, you're like, oh, can we do that? And I feel like with the Pandava sisters, they're all doing different things. So you have like so many different ways that you can be a young, like, kick ass woman. You know, just saving the world over and over.

[00:18:34] **Roshani** Yeah! I mean, there's so many things expected of young women. And, you know, I was watching, for instance—have you see "Never Have I Ever? It just came out on Netflix. I loved it. I really loved it. It's a show, I think, executively produced by Mindy Kaling. And it's talking about a diasporic experience of a young South Asian girl growing up in California. She's super sassy, super funny, and has a really short temper and is going through, you know, traumas of her past and et cetera. And I was watching . . . I was reading some of the responses to it, this sense of like, oh, they got this wrong. And they did this. And this is offensive. And blah, blah, blah. And you know, all of that, how you feel about something is always valid, you know. But the way that we analyze work by women of color creators and especially how we hold up these POC characters, I feel like people are so, so hard on them, especially when they're women. Like especially when you're a woman of color, you have to do everything right, and you have to do it faultlessly. You know, there's no . . . when you do something wrong, it really gets blown up. And I was thinking about that burden a lot when I was writing Aru. That for her, I did want her just to be unapologetically herself. And reading responses like "Aru's not likable." Or she's too this, or she's too that. I mean, truthfully, I was an unlikable piece of shit in seventh grade. That's just what it was like. My prefrontal cortex, whatever, wasn't developed. How dare you demand perfection of me? I've just barely figured it out. And so I just really wanted to celebrate that. It's okay that you're awful.

[00:20:20] **Kendra** No, I was terrible as a middle schooler as well. I was known for correcting people in class, like I correct the teacher in front of all the other students and stuff. And I was right! But my brother's like, "Kendra, you can't do that." I was like, "Why? I'm right!" So, yeah, I actually I really love Minnie. Minnie is my favorite. She's the first sister that Aru meets, and she is like the daughter of death, essentially. And she is afraid of all of these things and has like, you know, you could say she has mild OCD and stuff. And I love that because I wore all black and was very anxious as a middle schooler. I definitely related to that.

[00:21:10] **Roshani** Yeah!

[00:21:11] **Kendra** It must be interesting hearing different people's favorite Pandava sisters, especially as more and more, you know, they meet more and more each book in the series.

[00:21:20] **Roshani** Yeah. That's been you know, the reader response has been the most rewarding thing. I mean, when I talk about the criticism that people get . . . yes, like obviously that just sort of comes with the territory of what you do. But none of it matters when I get messages from kids who tell me that they've dressed up as Aru and the rest of the Pandava gang for Halloween . . . or the letters that they're sending me . . . because those are the people that I'm trying to reach. Right? And so they're . . . they're just so funny. They just crack me up. I love them.

[00:21:57] **Kendra** That must be pretty great. And I know that a lot of people, when Percy Jackson first came out, they would fuss about how that Rick Riordan stayed in the middle school target audience. So he would move to a new series when his characters aged out. And he was very adamant, middle school was his target audience. And he was going to stay there with all of the glorious middle school humor and everything in there. I feel like YA books, in their target audience,

are trying to reach someone at a different stage of life. And with middle school, like we talked about, it's a very awkward time in most girls. Do you feel a bigger sense of pressure writing for girls at this age as opposed to writing for a YA audience, which is typically going to be a bit older?

[00:22:46] **Roshani** Yes, I do. It's a pressure that I've come to be very, very humbled by, you know. It's wonderful to see the work around you and to know that you're contributing to a breakthrough, in some ways. Do you know I mean? Like that's such an awkward thing to say. Like, "Look at me. I am a trailblazer." But when I really . . . I had an interview—I can't remember when it was—but I was asked that. And I think like, maybe it's just because I'm a first generation American kid, but my automatic response when someone compliments me is to be like, "Haha! That is a lie!" You know, that sort of thing. "You're wrong! I'm . . . no, no, no, no, no." And then just run in the opposite direction. And I'm trying to get really better about saying things like, "Thank you" or something else. But that question of pressure is something that has been on my mind a lot because I'm not seeing nearly as many stories about Hindu mythology that I would like. They're totally getting there. They're finding their space. You have people playing with it from all aspects of genre, like Sondhya Menon and Alisha Rai—oh, my god, I'm blanking on the other person's name. She's a fabulous romance author. Amalie Howard? It's called like *THE BEAST OF BESWICK* or something. It's great. So you see so many more people entering the genres and and really being trailblazers in their own right too.

[00:24:15] **Roshani** And so so, yeah, there's this pressure of I'm trying to make people . . . the greatest denominator of people happy. And I'm trying to like cast this net out as wide as I can and bring in all . . . bring in all the things that make sense to me . . . but hopefully in a way that doesn't feel like I'm checking boxes off a list or, you know, almost like . . . I never want these stories to feel like they're just lip service to representation. And so it's a really hard balance of trying to do it right and trying to be sensitive. And at the same time, remembering that in trying to tell something honest, I have to be truthful about my own experiences. And that's sometimes an ugly process to put on the page.

[00:25:06] **Kendra** And it's been wonderful to see more stories for middle schoolers, in particular, by women of color for young girls of color, so that they can see their own experiences. And I feel like, you know, doing this job, I love middle grade. It's something that I'm very passionate about. My friend Sumaiyya, she and I pass recommendations back and forth. And so this is one of them that I was like, hey, this is a nice action story! Because I feel like, you know, other stories that I've read like, *AMAL UNBOUND* or . . .

[00:25:38] **Roshani** Oh, my gosh. So beautiful.

[00:25:40] **Kendra** Yes. And Hena Khan's work. They're all very contemporary and realistic. And this is very much a different tone in that it's a bit lighter. And it's action-y. We have these girls using weapons, and it's super cool. And so I feel like there's a lovely balance there as well, so that there's so many different stories that can be told. And that was something that I really love about where we're at in our current moment, I guess.

[00:26:09] **Roshani** I'm really glad to hear that. You know, I . . . one thing that made me just so delighted was right around when Aru came out, another book called *Kiranmala* and *THE SERPENT'S SECRET* by Sayantani DasGupta—and that really is celebrating Bengali folklore—also came out. And that book is fantastic too. And I just . . . it made me so happy to see both books do so well and to find their audiences and to help one another because it really flew in the face of this idea that a lot of POC creators are told, which is just that there's only room at the table for one of you. And to see all these incredible women and just wonderful writers coming up with their stories and celebrating the nuances of all of our experiences and all of our stories and proving essentially to an industry that has turned the other cheek for so many years that there's room at the

table for all of us and that there is a place for every single one of these stories. Now, that makes me really happy.

[00:27:16] **Kendra** Yes, it's absolutely fabulous. And it brings so much joy, not just to me, but to so many young girls in particular as well.

[00:27:24] **Kendra** So this is part of Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month. We're doing a whole theme this month for it. And Sachi, who is one of our co-hosts, heads that up. It's such a lovely month to celebrate so many different voices in literature of all different genres and age groups, and there's just so many amazing women doing their thing and creating fantastic literature. So who would you recommend for our listeners to check out? Whether that be YA or middle grade or just really anything that you really like that you would recommend for Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month?

[00:28:04] **Roshani** Oh, man. Well, I recommended Sayantani DasGupta's Kiranmala and THE SERPENT'S SECRET, which is fabulous, especially if you like the sassiness of Aru and the celebration of all these stories, but with a Bengali twist, definitely recommend. It's great. I also recommend . . . I'm staring at my bookshelf because, of course, like I can't remember anything. Oh, MIRAGE by Somaiya Daud. Really beautiful and a super, super fun story. THE BEAUTIFUL by my friend Renee Ahdieh. And that is a story that's set in 19th century New Orleans. There's vampires. But it's an inclusive vampire cast in a way that really celebrates how New Orleans was a melting pot at that time and just like the tension of just belonging to more than one more than one culture with a supernatural backdrop. It's beautiful prose. And it's just really romantic and great.

[00:29:08] **Kendra** I'm all here for more books set in the South.

[00:29:11] **Roshani** Yeah. Or more vampires. I need them to all come back.

[00:29:19] **Kendra** So you mentioned as well that you are working on a young adult series. So what is ahead for you this year for your writing and any exciting other things coming up for you?

[00:29:32] **Roshani** Oh boy. Well, I've got the sequel to THE GILDED WOLVES, which is called THE SILVERED SERPENTS, and that is coming out September 22nd. I'm really excited for people to get to that story. I hope they give it a chance, even if THE GILDED WOLVES wasn't quite their favorite, because SILVERED SERPENTS is really where my own authorial agenda is coming through. What starts off as a treasure hunt has very quickly been revealed as like my faustine fanfiction. So I hope people like it. And of course, there's two more books left in the Aru Shah series, which I'm super excited about.

[00:30:08] **Roshani** And my very first adult audiobook. Audiobook novella? Audionovella? I don't even know what to call it . . . I think is coming out this June. And that's the first time I've written something that was exclusively for audio. And I really learned a lot. I had a great experience working with my editors at Audible. And just . . . I don't even know how to wrap my brain around a completely different format of storytelling. The things that you leave out, how you rush the action faster, leaving out dialog tags. I just listened to narrator auditions, and they are just . . . they're so good. And I'm really, really hyped for it. And basically the premise of the story is based off this Irish myth that has . . . it's like this couple falls in love, and then she gets really sick. And he has to give up his love for her. And so that's the end of the story. Of course. Because it's an Irish fairy tale. Confess your love for each other and continue on your separate ways sadly. Have a harp. But I wanted to start this story at the end. So it's a it's a tale about a couple, a married couple, who had once been in love but had to give up their love for each other and now they're forced on an epic road trip. There's a talking cloak that thinks it's a horse. I had a lot of fun writing it. And I hope you guys like it too.

[00:31:35] **Kendra** Thank you so much, Roshani, for coming on the podcast and talking about middle grade and all sorts of fun things.

[00:31:44] **Roshani** This was amazing. I hope . . . I like, in the middle, I was like, "I'm rambling, but I'm trying to get to a smart point. I'm just going to keep talking."

[00:31:51] **Kendra** I think it worked out. I think it worked out.

[00:31:58] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Roshani Chokshi for our fun and wonderful conversation about ARU SHAH AND THE TREE OF WISHES and the rest of the Pandava books, which are out now from Rick Riordan Presents. You can find her on her website (roshanichokshi.com) and on Twitter (@roshani_chokshi) and on Instagram (@roshanichokshi). And of course, all of her information will be linked in the show notes. I'd also like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes interviews like this possible. You can find Reading Women at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And until next time, thanks for listening.