

## Highlights of the 2022 Freeman and South Asia Book Award Winners

The National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA), the Committee on Teaching about Asia (CTA) of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), and Asia for Educators (AFE) at Columbia University sponsor the annual Freeman Book Awards for new young adult and children's literature. The awards recognize quality books for children and young adults that contribute meaningfully to an understanding of East and Southeast Asia. Awards are given in two categories: Children's and Young Adult on several countries of East and Southeast Asia.

The South Asia Book Awards, administered by the South Asia National Outreach Consortium, is given annually for up to three outstanding works of literature, from picture books to young adult novels, that accurately and skillfully portray the experience of individuals living in South Asia, or of South Asians living in other parts of the world. Honor Books and Highly Commended Books will also be recognized by the award committee for their contribution to this body of literature on the region.

Here are a few highlights of the 2022 winners of Freeman and South Asia Book Awards. For information on more award-winning titles for 2022, as well as past winners, visit <https://www.nctasia.org/awards/> for the Freeman Book Awards and <https://southasiabookaward.wisc.edu> for the South Asia Book Awards.

### The Red Palace

By JUNE HUR

NEW YORK: FEIWEL AND FRIENDS, 2022

336 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1250800558, HARDCOVER

2022 FREEMAN BOOK AWARD

HONORABLE MENTION:

YOUNG ADULT/HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE

COUNTRY: SOUTH KOREA

*To enter the palace means to walk a path stained in blood.*

—Joseon (Korea), 1758.



There are few options available to illegitimate daughters in the capital city, but through hard work and study, eighteen-year-old Hyeon has earned a position as a palace nurse. All she wants is to keep her head down, do a good job, and perhaps finally win her estranged father's approval. But Hyeon is suddenly thrust into the dark and dangerous world of court politics when someone murders four women in a single night, and the prime suspect is Hyeon's closest friend and mentor. Determined to prove her beloved teacher's innocence, Hyeon launches her own

secret investigation. In her hunt for the truth, she encounters Eojin, a young police inspector also searching for the killer. When evidence begins to point to the Crown Prince himself as the murderer, Hyeon and Eojin must work together to search the darkest corners of the palace to uncover the deadly secrets behind the bloodshed.

*The true story of Crown Prince Sado, who was a real and very tragic figure, was the inspiration behind this whodunnit, and the historical*

*detail that threads throughout is both brutal and intriguing. It's a prime example of historical fiction where some of the most outrageous events that take place are the ones that most closely cleave to historical fact . . . What really grounds the twisting narrative of *The Red Palace* is the characters' inner struggles—in particular, the ongoing themes of honoring and gaining approval from one's parents . . . *The Red Palace* is an expertly choreographed mystery with a touch of romance and an emotionally satisfying conclusion that beautifully binds fiction to fact.*

—Caitlyn Paxson, NPR (<https://tinyurl.com/y5abtb6e>)

*This atmospheric historical mystery will transport and captivate readers . . . A beautifully written story full of historical and cultural details that will leave readers aching for a follow-up.*

—Booklist (<https://tinyurl.com/3k3xtown>)

*A tense political thriller, a beautiful romance, and a coming of age all in one unique package.*

—The School Library Journal (<https://tinyurl.com/2dvbwx45>)

### Dragonfly Eyes

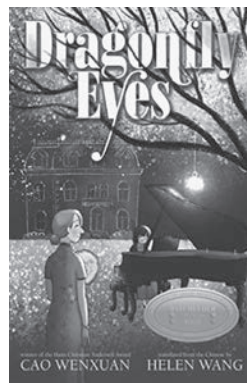
By CAO WENXUAN, TRANS. HELEN WANG

SOMERVILLE, MA: CANDLEWICK PRESS, 2022

384 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1536200188, HARDCOVER

2022 FREEMAN BOOK AWARD OF NOTE: YOUNG ADULT/MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERATURE

COUNTRIES: CHINA, FRANCE



Ah-Mei and her French grandmother, Nainai, share a rare bond. Maybe it's because Ah-Mei is the only girl grandchild. Or maybe it's because the pair look so much alike and neither resembles the rest of their Chinese family. Politics and war make 1960s Shanghai a hard place to grow up, especially when racism and bigotry are rife, and everyone seems suspicious of Nainai's European heritage and interracial marriage. In this time of political upheaval, Ah-Mei and her family suffer much—and when the family silk business falters, they are left with almost nothing.

Ah-Mei and her grandmother are resourceful, but will the tender connection they share bring them enough strength to carry through? This multi-generational saga by one of China's most esteemed children's authors takes the reader from 1920s France to a ravaged postwar Shanghai and through the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution.

*Dragonfly Eyes is slow to gather its power, with a leisurely pace in the early chapters that may lose some readers. Those who stay will, however, find their hearts in their mouths when the Cultural Revolution eventually explodes outside the walls of the family home . . . In writing for 8- to 14-year-olds Mr. Cao approximates a youthful perspective by omitting certain proper nouns. He does not mention Mao, the Great Leap Forward, the Red Guards or even the Cultural Revolution itself, though he shows the effects of all four: Ah Mei realizes that a classmate is starving only when the girl topples off her chair in class. In this way, readers get a sense of history without a history lesson—the greater lesson being,*

perhaps, the vulnerability of individuals in a system that grants them neither dignity nor value

—Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Wall Street Journal* (<https://tinyurl.com/278pvb45>).

Told via an omniscient third-person perspective that alternates between Nainai's past and Ah Mei's present day, Cao delicately portrays atrocities alongside peaceful, idyllic life with aesthetic prose and nostalgic imagery, providing a tender look into one transnational family's ancestry.

—*Publisher's Weekly* (<https://tinyurl.com/5n8e9mhb>).

## Born Behind Bars

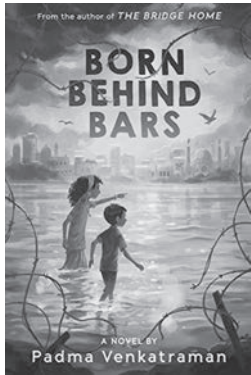
BY PADMA VENKATRAMAN

NEW YORK: NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS, 2021

272 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0593112472, HARDCOVER

2022 SOUTH ASIA BOOK WINNER: MIDDLE GRADE READERS

COUNTRY: INDIA



**K**abir has been in jail since the day he was born, because his mom is serving time for a crime she didn't commit. He's never met his dad, so the only family he's got are their cellmates, and the only place he feels the least bit free is in the classroom, where his kind teacher regales him with stories of the wonders of the outside world. Then one day a new warden arrives and announces Kabir is too old to stay. He gets handed over to a long-lost "uncle" who unfortunately turns out to be a fraud, and intends to sell Kabir. So Kabir does the only thing he can—run away as fast as his legs will

take him. How does a boy with nowhere to go and no connections make his way? Fortunately, he befriends Rani, another street kid, and she takes him under her wing. But plotting their next move is hard—and fraught with danger—in a world that cares little for homeless, low caste children. This is not the world Kabir dreamed of—but he's discovered he's not the type to give up. Kabir is ready to show the world that he—and his mother—deserve a place in it.

*Venkatraman has never met a heavy theme she did not like — Kabir's amma [mother], who is wrongly accused of stealing a necklace, has been abandoned by the outside world in part because she is a Hindu who married a Muslim man. Kabir is low-caste and Rani is Kurava, a traditionally nomadic people once known as Gypsies; both of them experience prejudice and economic hardship. At the story's climax, the children stumble into a scene of mob violence against Tamil-speaking people, sparked by conflict over scarce water in a warming world.*

*Somehow, it all manages to feel like a story instead of a treatise. There are moments when Venkatraman asks her dialogue and motifs, including a dead butterfly, to carry a bit too much explanatory freight. But most of "Born Behind Bars" has a confidently stripped-down, crystalline style, with ultrashort chapters that propel the action, and details—like Rani's song recounting her family tree and Kabir's first barefoot step onto smooth, clean tile—that are allowed to speak for themselves, quietly. Borrowing elements of fable, it's told with a recurring sense of awe by a boy for whom the world, for most of his life, has existed only in stories.*

—Shaila Dewan, *The New York Times* (<https://tinyurl.com/2s4d3xdv>)



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