

MEET



# Pursuing Her Passion

*Rickshaw Girl*, a novel by East Bay author Mitali Perkins, is now a magical film.

BY LINDA LENHOFF

Mitali Perkins's novel *Rickshaw Girl* brilliantly invokes a young woman's struggle to live a creative life in times of turmoil, and the recent film version turns the story into a colorful cinematic experience—a feast for the senses. Perkins, an East Bay author of 20 books, has won numerous honors and prizes, but the film holds a special place in her heart.

"*Rickshaw Girl* is a children's book, but the filmmakers have made it into a young adult movie," Perkins says. "It's a story of a girl who wants to help her family with her art. What do you do as a teenager when your vocational choice doesn't meet with your parents' blessing, and yet you have this passion and want to do this work?"

The theme rings true in Perkins's own life. "I had to tell my immigrant Bengali parents

this: 'I know you've sacrificed so much to give me a great education, but I don't want to be an engineer or a doctor. I want to write books for kids.'" Her parents weren't thrilled at first, Perkins admits, but it didn't take long for them to become her biggest fans.

In the film, young painter Naima sets out to financially help her ailing father while not giving up on her artistic ambitions. Naima heads to the big city, where she disguises herself as a boy and becomes a rickshaw driver—something girls are not allowed to do. The film brings her artwork to life through animation, allowing her to find success to some degree and face who she really is.

Perkins took her mom to the premiere at the Mill Valley Film Festival after her father had passed away. "It was his favorite of my

books. It's about a father giving a daughter a blessing on her art, which my father did after he got over his initial shock.

"The entire Bangladeshi community was so excited: This was their first chance to offer a look at a film fully made by Bangladeshi hands for an American audience. All of those stories from my parents' childhood in the villages of Bengal inspired a novel that I wrote, and then went full circle into a film made by Bangladeshis."

What's up next for Perkins? A new middle-grade novel called *Hope in the Valley*. "It's set in Silicon Valley in the 1980s and is essentially a California book about affordable housing—and justice."

*Rickshaw Girl* is streaming on Amazon Prime, Apple TV+, Kanopy, and more.

Clockwise from left: East Bay author Mitali Perkins; the book cover and movie poster for *Rickshaw Girl*.

