

Shanthi Sekaran, *Lucky Boy*. NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2017. \$9.71 (paperback), 496 pages, ISBN: 978-1101982266

Although I've never been to California, and I've never been an immigrant, I found myself relating to Shanthi Sekaran's novel *Lucky Boy*. Solimar Castro Valdez, one of four main characters, often feels like a cultural outsider when she illegally immigrates to Berkeley, California from Santa Clara Popocalco, a small town in the Oaxaca region of Mexico. As a military brat, I share the experience of feeling like everything, from the language to the food, is alien; but while I had the stability of parents and a community of other English speakers on each military base, Soli's journey was pervaded by a sense of loneliness. Kavya Reddy also deals with feelings of being culturally torn, but usually because of pressure from herself and her mother to assimilate to her native Indian culture as a first-generation Indian-American.

As the book progresses, you also see hints of these cultural conflicts for Rishi and Vikram, although not to the extent I had hoped. Sekaran's writing in *Lucky Boy* often comes across as though she had a checklist for how to flesh out a character (family history, a job, some feelings or thoughts of their own) but never quite makes it to a fully fleshed-out character, particularly in the case of Rishi. For instance, Rishi's project at work comes up multiple times, sometimes going into great detail about the type of materials he was considering using, for no satisfactory purpose. In this quote, he discusses another part of the process, the software model:

Rishi was rehashing his proposal. He'd sent it off to Vikram Sen ten days before, as promised, only to have it returned a week later with a two-word reply. Rehash, please. What exactly needed to be rehashed, Rishi couldn't say, but rehash he would. He was creating a software model of the programming center; then he'd add windows, air vents, sticking on and plucking off the variables like parts of a Mr. Potato Head.

By the end of the book, the project has been brought up many times, but is never wrapped up, and the reader is left hanging. Particularly in Rishi's case, the ending seems rushed, as if his purpose was fulfilled before he had a chance to flesh out a key character. Indeed, this seems to be the theme of how this book ends; there is a definite conclusion, but most of the plot lines feel unfinished and rushed, and you're left wanting to know how things turned out for almost all of the characters. In fact, the only characters that I felt had a complete storyline from beginning to end were Miguel (Kavya's assistant at work) and Mr. Cassidy. Unfortunately, these were not the characters who needed this attention, so it does not help the book very much.

Despite Soli's somewhat shallow and incomplete character development, however, she does give a nicely rounded-out image of the experience of an illegal immigrant. Initially, her family paid Manuel, a man who they knew as a friend's mother's other daughter's nephew, to drive Soli to across the border in a hidden compartment in his Cadillac. The family made plans for Soli to meet with her cousin, Silvia, in California. Soli soon discovered that Manuel was planning on taking her to Texas instead, so that she could take his drugs across the border through a tunnel. Later that day, she escapes from Manuel and finds a group of boys who helped her jump onto a train, headed back to California. This group stays together for part of the journey, until the boys are discovered by men toting guns, while Soli manages to stay hidden in the truck. After switching from that flour truck to an onion truck, she made it across the border to San Francisco, California. From there, she makes her way to Berkeley, where she connects with her cousin, Silvia, whose address she had memorized. Silvia quickly comes to the conclusion that Soli is pregnant, but tells Soli that she still must work in order to pay Silvia back. In an attempt to make working easier, as well as because

Soli is unsure of who the father is, Silvia convinces Soli to get an abortion. However, just before the procedure, Soli decides that she wants to keep the baby, as a remnant of Checo, one of the boys from the train and the boy that she believes is the father. Afterwards, Silvia assigns Soli as a maid for the Cassidys. Initially, only the mother and daughter are there, as the father is away. However, when he comes back, he asks for her information, which prompts her to buy a fake SSN in order to hide her status. Mr. Cassidy accepts this number, although it is implied that he knows it is fake due to his job with the government.

When the Cassidys then discover that Soli is pregnant, they decide to promote her from maid to nanny, continually being supportive and kind. Through all of this, she attempts to find her culture and herself in her surroundings, from asking Silvia where the tortilleria is, to the joy she feels when Mr. Cassidy comes home and speaks Spanish with her. Sekaran is not afraid to discuss the ugly side of the illegal immigrant's experience too, though. Between the descriptions of Soli's multiple rapes by men with cowboy hats and guards at the detention center, and the desperation that led to Soli kidnapping her son, *Lucky Boy* contains more than sunshine and rainbows. Somehow, however, even despite all of these details, Soli feels hollow. Perhaps Sekaran failed in focusing too much on the external details, rather than on Soli's internal battles, or maybe Soli feels hollow because she is, due to some depression or other lasting trauma from her experiences. Regardless, it makes the book a bit disappointing to read, as it seems that Soli should be the true star of the show.

Besides the unfinished nature of the characters, the writing in this novel is fairly good. The chapters alternate between focusing on Kavya and Rishi and Soli, without causing undue confusion for the reader. Sekaran's writing is descriptive, but not to the point of seeming flowery. It is enjoyable to read a book that has a number of main characters, each with conflicts and history, but it's somewhat difficult to understand what Sekaran is trying to get across. The book seems, at different points, to be about Ignacio, Soli, and Kasha and Rishi. It is possible that this was Sekaran's intention, though, in which case she succeeded in including a significant portion dedicated to various characters. Overall, I enjoyed reading *Lucky Boy*, and appreciated the insight it provided into a variety of cultural conflicts, but unfortunately, I did not enjoy it to the point of ever reading it again, or even recommending it to friends and family.

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