



CHIMERICA by Anita Felicelli

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CONVERSATION STARTERS

LAW, POWER, and IDENTITY

- 1 Maya Ramesh is a trial attorney preoccupied with her place within power structures. To what extent do you think her preoccupation with power stems from innate personality traits versus her position as a brown woman in America?
- 2 George Orwell wrote "It is not merely that 'power corrupts': so also do the ways of attaining power." Is Ross right about Maya? Did Maya become corrupt through her efforts to gain power within the law firm structure?
- 3 What does it say about the goodness or virtue of the legal system that it is not neutral as to identity, even among its own practitioners? Is this a problem with the law and the "system," or is it a problem with society and culture? What kinds of work influences and moves society and culture, rather than law and systems?
- 4 What is Maya's identity? How does Maya's identity factor into her ability to gain power within an all-white, blue-chip law firm?
- 5 Maya goes out of her way to distance herself from the particular identity into which she was born in order to succeed. Does identity entail performing specific behaviors, or is it the essential core of a person? Is it a little bit of both? What aspects of Maya's identity as a Tamil American woman and mother is she able to shed? What aspects of her identity, if any, are unable to be shed?
- 6 Should Maya have to shed the particularity of her identity to represent clients in court? Is neutrality possible or valuable in the context of litigation?
- 7 To what extent does Maya's obsessive preoccupation with power stem not only from the field in which she's working, but also from not having had power over numerous events in her personal life, everything from her mother's suicide to how she was perceived and judged by others based on her ethnic background and color, from how she is perceived as a woman to her role as a mother?
- 8 Do you perceive Maya's selfishness as being different in any way from that of a white male in precisely the same situation? How is she different from her mentor Spencer?
- 9 Is Maya redeemed by the end of the novel? Do you believe that her keener observations and epiphanies about race and work and motherhood and the lemur are likely to have a redemptive effect in her life going forward?
- 10 Does the lemur's eventual fate change your answer about whether Maya is redeemed?

- 11 The lemur was painted and came to life through a mechanism that remains mysterious throughout the novel, aside from the story Maya constructs for him. Do you think the lemur represents something else? If so, what?
- 12 At the start of the novel, does Maya understand herself as anything other than a worker?
- 13 How does America's late capitalist emphasis on productivity as the value of a human life affect our understanding of Maya's workaholicism? Can we separate the human individual from the society that shapes him or her?
- 14 Early in the novel, Maya notes that she is a unicorn in her workplace. There are no other Indian-Americans or people of color practicing trial law there. How does tokenism further fuel the difficulties she faces as a trial attorney?

ART and ORIGINALITY

- 15 Does art have any real place or power in contemporary American society? What is its place or power?
- 16 Should an artist have moral rights in a work of art?
- 17 The work of Teresa Amabile suggests that rewards for creative work result in lower levels of creativity than does creative work done out of pure interest. Should findings like this impact the rights to litigation for money damages conferred on artists? Why or why not?
- 18 Do you agree with the outcome of the trial in CHIMERICA? Who does art belong to? Does it belong to the artist or the audience?
- 19 To what extent is the value of any work of art based on the identity of the artist in America? Can we separate the art from the artist? Does a failure to separate artist from art ultimately harm the marketplace of ideas?
- 20 Artists have to be able to pay for rent, food, shelter, and survival like any other type of worker does. In Europe, a large social safety network for artists to be able to thrive even when they don't make work that appeals to the market exists. Should America have a social safety network like that? Why or why not?
- 21 Is the value of art found in the artist's intentions for it or the artist's own moral compassion? Or is the value of art determined by the beholder?
- 22 In many ways, the lemur serves as Maya's conscience or moral barometer in CHIMERICA. To what extent could he have been saved had she simply broken the law once she realized things were getting out of control and taken him back to Madagascar?
- 23 Can art stand outside law or symbols of power? Can any phenomenon stand outside systems of power and be truly wild? Is that one of the real values of art, to unsettle us from our pre-existing paradigms? Is the wildness of the artistic impulse opposed to the values of a strong law-and-order framework?
- 24 Maya's sister Julie leaves America prior to the start of the novel, feeling there's no place in the U.S. for her as an artist. Does Maya's journey eventually echo Julie's?
- 25 Does Maya develop real affection for the lemur? As her client, does he come to take the psychological place of her children?
- 26 If you were Maya and your entire life were wrapped up in winning a trial, at what point during the litigation would you have changed course to save the lemur?