YouTube Script – July 2023

*A Time to Dance* (Padma Venkatraman)

Hi! Welcome to the Underground Bookshelf. Underground Bookshelf is an online platform that celebrates diverse perspectives in literature. The goal of this platform is to enable minorities, women, queer folks, and people with disabilities to see themselves reflected in the art/ media they consume. A new short story or resource is posted every week. The stories and resources on this website are free. They will always be free because everyone deserves to have access to stories that reflect them and their experiences. You can find the link to the website and the social handles below. For accessibility reasons, I also uploaded this script to the Underground Bookshelf website, so if you would like to read along, or would just rather read instead of watch, you can find it there.

My name is Laura Browne-Lambert. I am a queer, neurodivergent writer, and I have a functional neurological disorder that was triggered by COVID. I mention these things because they are an important part of who I am and how I experience the world. I don’t hold back from including them in the things I write about because I didn’t find enough characters like me in the books I read growing up and I still don’t now. And I want to be part of changing that for the next generation of readers. You can find my first book on Amazon. It’s called, *The Wood*, and it is a coming-of-age book about a girl who is exiled from her community for what is believed to be witchcraft. It has themes like identity, self-acceptance, accessibility, and found family. I’ll put the link below in case you’re interested.

And now, let’s talk about our subject for today’s video: *A Time to Dance* by Padma Venkatraman. This book is considered to be the first South Asian novel written in verse in English for ages 12 to 17. Published in 2014, it has won awards from both the American Library Association and the Young Adult Library Services Association. Although she was born in India, the book’s author, Padma Venkatraman, lived in five countries and eventually settled in the US. She is now a US citizen. Several of her books have received awards and attention for their emphasis on South Asian representation, but there is another kind of representation that this book offers, and that is disability representation.

Now, as a disclaimer, before we get into the themes of this book, I think it’s important to mention that when I initially decided to cover this book during Disability Pride Month, I didn’t realize that the author isn’t herself disabled. People have a lot of big feelings about disability-related stories told by people who aren’t disabled, and those feelings developed for good reason. Many stories about disability lack authenticity and truth about the experiences of the person with the disability and focus on the perspectives and experiences of the non-disabled people around them. This centering of the non-disabled person’s experience, feelings, and identity goes hand in hand with the ableism we see in society when decisions are made for disabled people without their input or consent, when people with disabilities are left excluded from communities, educational opportunities, the workplace, places of worship and so on. People with disabilities have been ignored, forgotten, and excluded for so long that the idea that they might be able to contribute even to their own stories is often overlooked, so I completely understand the drive toward own voices storytelling and if you visit the Underground Bookshelf website, you’ll find lists of books by diverse authors, including authors with disabilities, that fit own-voice narratives. To balance things out, the next time I review a book with disability representation, I’ll make sure to select an author with a disability.

However, I also want to point out that if every author only writes characters that have their own voice, identity, and experience, then our books will lack the diversity that exists all around us. While we should give precedence to the authenticity that comes with own-voice narratives, authors who do their research and write with respect and compassion can create diverse characters that feel truthful and offer healthy representation. In this case, Padma Venkatraman seems to have achieved this for at least some amputees through her honest and accurate depictions of phantom pain, trauma, grief and loss that all come with losing a limb and adjusting to life as an amputee.

I also want to take a moment to talk about language. Like any other minority group, people with disabilities have diverse perspectives about the language they use to talk about their identity. Personally, I use “people with disabilities” and “disabled people” interchangeably but not everyone does. Some people prefer to use the phrase “people with disabilities” because it emphasizes the person rather than the disability. This is an example of person-first language. Others prefer to use identity-first language as in the case of “disabled people” because it shows that the disability that this person has impacts their life experiences so much that it has become part of their identity and has shaped who they are as a person. When you meet someone with a disability it is considered good manners to use the language that they prefer, and if you don’t know their preferred language, you can ask them in the same way that you might ask someone for their pronouns. In this book, you will come across terms like “differently abled.” While there are still some people in the Disability Community who like terms like this as a way to emphasize the person’s abilities rather than their disabilities, many people today, consider this phrase to be outdated because it has become a way to avoid discussing disability altogether and has begun to imply that to be disabled is a negative thing which we should pretend doesn’t exist. But if we pretend that disability doesn’t exist, we also pretend that the barriers people with disabilities face also don’t exist. Many disability advocates are pushing to use the words “disability” and “disabled” more frequently so that we can limit stigma around the topic of disability and create a more accessible and inclusive environment by recognizing the ways society limits the disability community. Of course, language choices and preferences can vary based on culture, community, and location, so in the place and time that this book was written, phrases like “differently-abled” may have been more empowering than other phrases, so if you are watching this video and happen to be part of the South Asian Disability Community, let us know in the comments if there is a word or phrase that South Asian people with disabilities are trending toward at the moment.

Alright, it’s time to get into some of the themes of this book. *A Time to Dance* tells the story of a teen girl living in the city of Chennai. Chennai is the capital city of Tamil Nadu which is the Indian state farthest to the south. The protagonist, Veda, is an award-winning dancer in the art of Bharatanatyam. Originally a temple dance for women, this form of dance is commonly used to communicate stories and concepts that are important to Hinduism. If you’re unfamiliar with this form of dance and would like to learn more, I’ve added a few links to the description that might interest you. At the beginning of the book, Veda is in a traumatic car accident and becomes a below-the-knee amputee. The rest of the book follows her journey toward self-acceptance and fighting to get back on track in her goal to become a dancer.

PASSION

When we meet the protagonist, Veda, we learn right away that dance is her passion, that her entire being lives for dance. And, right away, we as readers are invited to feel the dance that Veda is so passionate about through the writing style that the author uses. Though it’s a bit uncommon, this book is written in verse rather than prose. “Prose” is the term we use for text that is written in a standard sentence structure and has no consistent sense of rhythm. In contrast, “verse” is how we describe a text that has a distinguishable rhythm or meter to it. It looks a bit like poetry but may be formed into a longer work like this one that reads like poetry but is formatted like a chapter book. Many classics like *Illiad* and *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* are all written in verse for example, but there are many other more modern books that are also written in verse. I’ve copied a list of examples in the description in case you’re interested in reading more books in this style of writing. The really magical thing to me about the author’s choice to write in verse is that the story flows in a musical, rhythmic way that allows the reader to feel the beats that a dancer feels both in music and in the world around them. I think this writing style helps the reader connect with the protagonist and her passion for dance in an almost subconscious way because it’s not just about the words the author chooses, but the way she uses them to create movement on the page.

Fighting for your passion is a theme that shows up throughout the book. The protagonist, Veda, is the main vessel through which we see this theme play out as she goes through losing a limb and fighting to learn how to dance again. She encounters barriers both within herself and from people around her who don’t believe people with disabilities can dance, but she also finds support through family members and new relationships that teach her that dance is more than what the body can do, but about the relationship you build between the dancer, the audience, and the message being shared.

Unlike Veda who is dog-headed in her drive to become a dancer, her friend and dance teacher, Govinda, is afraid to push back against his parents’ desire for him to pursue a different course of study. Through his relationship with Veda, he learns how to be strong in the pursuit of his passion and to find new and creative solutions to his problems.

FAITH

A Time to Dance does a really beautiful job of immersing the reader in Hindu religion in a natural way. It uses the protagonist’s grandmother as a guide for using religious practices and customs not in a superficial or superstitious way, but as a way to lead the heart through prayer and connection with the divine. It also uses the dance form, Bharatanatyam, as a way to lead the character from enjoying dance as a talent that they can be commended for to understanding and appreciating its role in communicating important religious ideas with an audience – and for connecting the dancer with God in an intrinsic way that they can understand through their body rather than just through words and common prayers. In this way, A Time to Dance brings the reader into a discussion of faith that people of many religions can benefit from. Faith comes through connection with the divine. While there are scriptures and prayers that can help people learn and grow in their religion, faith comes from something deeper within the self. Connection between the divine and that part of the self can come in many ways, and in this book, this connection is represented through dance.

If dance isn’t for you, I completely understand. Many people have talked about finding this connection in a large variety of ways including the sciences or other forms of art. For me, A Time to Dance really hit home because dance was one of the ways I could really feel this connection, but ever since getting a chronic illness, it’s been much harder for me to dance and it takes a much larger toll on my body. And that means it’s harder for me to get to that space where I feel that connection as viscerally as I would like to. Having an acquired disability or chronic illness separate you from some thing that is vital to your being is really difficult and it takes creativity, ingenuity, and work to find that part of you again. As in the case of Veda, it might involve relearning something you knew before with a body that works differently than it used to, or it might mean finding new things that you feel passionate about, that make you feel more like yourself, or that help support your connection with faith.

PERSEVERANCE and SELF-ACCEPTANCE

From start to finish, Veda is a great example of perseverance. Right away, she is convinced that she will continue toward her goal of becoming a dancer and after becoming a below-the-knee amputee, she becomes even more stubborn in her pursuit. She encounters many of the same hurdles that people with disabilities face. Some of them are physical like struggling with stairs or uneven surfaces or social, like her former dance teacher who refuses to teach a now disabled, Veda or like the girls who hurl insults at her. In fact, despite the author not having experienced a disability like this, it’s clear that she’s done her homework. I completely related with Veda in scenes in which strangers approached her to ask about her disability and nothing else. It’s a very dehumanizing experience to be seen as a diagnosis rather than as a person. But Veda persists and her persistence leads her to people who see her value as a person and as a dancer.

As persistent as she is, she spends a lot of time ignoring her new self. She does everything she can to pretend she is not disabled, like hiding her prosthetic leg under clothing, avoiding her crutches, and trying to walk and dance in a way that looks indistinguishable from her able-bodied peers. It takes seeing another dance student’s attempts to hide their cleft palate to realize that just like that student, hiding her prosthetic leg hinders her ability to dance in a way that truly connects her to God and prevents her from accepting herself. Her journey from hating the things that make her different to seeing her beauty as inclusive of her disability is not unlike the journey many people with disabilities go on. This doesn’t mean that having a disability can’t impact you in a way that makes life harder, but this example is useful in the conversation around the beauty of disabled bodies, many of which are frequently left out of fashion, the beauty industry, film, television, dance, music, and other creative arts that celebrate the human body.

*A Time to Dance* is a beautifully written book that meets the intersections of disability, South Asian heritage, and Hindu religion in a really meaningful way. When you’re reading this book, I encourage you to bear in mind that every person experiences the world in their own way, so some people with disabilities may feel differently than the protagonist, Veda, and some South Asian people may interpret culture and beliefs differently from the characters in this book as well, but it does tell a gorgeous story with important themes and with sensitivity to disability, culture, and religion. I definitely consider this a book worth reading. In case you haven’t read it yet and you would like to, I’ve included some links in the description about the book and its author as well as some cultural background in case you’re unfamiliar with the dance form and setting this book uses. The only content warnings I would include are that this book discusses a traumatic injury, death, and ableist slurs, so bear this in mind if you are picking this book up to read.

Thank you so much for going on this journey through *A Time to Dance* with me. As you may have guessed, I really enjoyed this book, and I hope you do, too. You can find my sources and a few other useful links in the description below. Other things you can find in the description include the link to read the script from this video, the link to the Underground Bookshelf website and the link to my new book. You can also find the link to the Underground Bookshelf patreon if you would like to support this project. You can be a Patron for $3 a month and patrons get an extra short story every month as a thank you. You can also support the project by picking up apparel from the merch store. The link for that is in the description as well. Of course, you can support this project for free by liking and subscribing, by following Underground Bookshelf on social media, reading the stories and using the resources on the website or by submitting your own short stories to be included in our collection.

Before signing off, my question for the comments is: What are some good examples of disability representation in literature, film, television, or the arts that you would like to share? Thanks for watching this video. Let me know what books you would like to see reviewed next. I hope you read and enjoy *A Time to Dance* by Padma Venkatraman, and wherever you are, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, YOU BELONG.

Sources:

<https://padmavenkatraman.com/>

A Time to Dance by Padma Venkatrama

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<https://mirrorswindowsdoors.org/wp/interview-padma-venkatraman/>

<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/learn/secondary-schools/playing-shakespeare-with-deutsche-bank/much-ado-about-nothing-playing-shakespeare/language-and-analysis/verse-and-prose/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWhA3ldZcyY>

Links for A Time to Dance:

Author’s Website: <https://padmavenkatraman.com/>

Where to Buy: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/241988/padma-venkatraman/>

Where to read for free: <https://archive.org/details/timetodance0000venk>

How to find this book near you: <https://www.worldcat.org/>

Other Handy links:

About Bharatanatyam: <https://byjusexamprep.com/current-affairs/bharatanatyam>

About Chennai: <https://chennai.nic.in/>

Books Written in Verse: <https://www.epicreads.com/blog/novels-written-in-verse/>

Dancers with disabilities:

Sudha Chandran: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudha_Chandran>

Push Girls: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Push_Girls>

The Rollettes: <https://www.rollettesdance.com/>

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The Wood by Laura M. Browne-Lambert: <https://www.amazon.com/Wood-Laura-M-Browne-Lambert/dp/B0C6BSPR2N/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3QNQLI2W5X0RX&keywords=laura+browne-lambert&qid=1687530044&sprefix=%2Caps%2C216&sr=8-1>