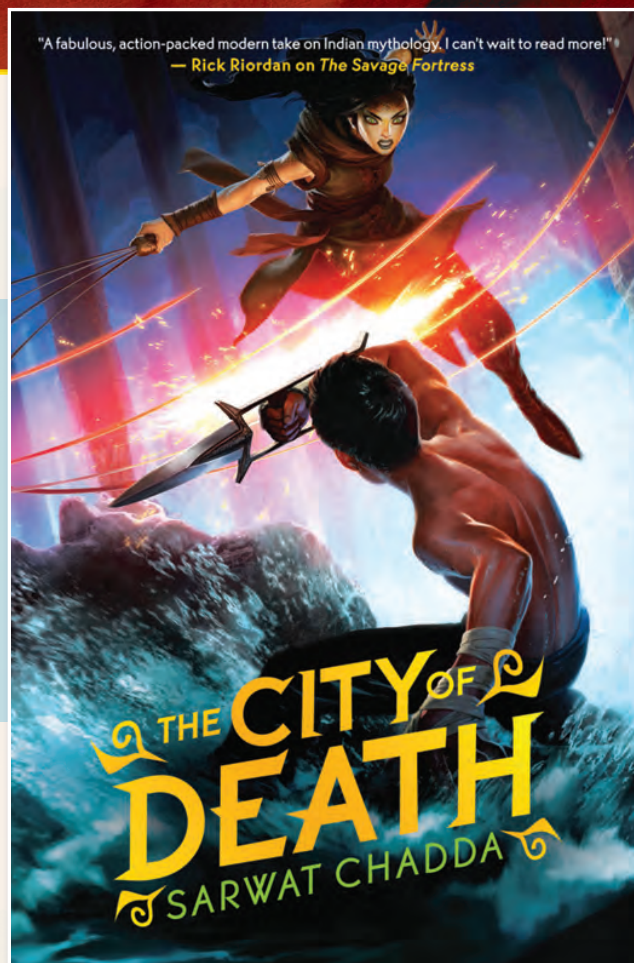


# DISCUSSION GUIDE

Grades  
5-9



In a land of ancient palaces and ferocious deserts, where the heroes and villains of the mythical past never die, one slightly dorky boy from our time...is going to kick monster butt!

★ “Make time for this novel, because it is very hard to put down.”  
—*School Library Journal*, starred review (*The Savage Fortress*)

“A knock-down, drag-out adventure...nonstop action.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews* (*The Savage Fortress*)

“Will keep teens reading and panting for more.”  
—*Kirkus Reviews* (*The City of Death*)

**Meets Common Core State Standards—SEE INSIDE**



## The Savage Fortress by Sarwat Chadda

Ages 10-14 • 304 pages

Hardcover: 978-0-545-38516-9 • \$16.99

Paperbook: 978-0-545-50052-4 • \$6.99

Ebook: 978-0-545-46996-8 • \$6.99

Ash Mistry has had it with India. Three weeks into his vacation, it's all gotten too hot, too loud, too dusty. Okay, the vast castles and crazy legends are pretty cool, but he'd rather be playing video games and eating at McDonald's with his buddies back in London...

Then all hell breaks loose.  
Literally.

Lord Alexander Savage, an aristocrat who looks suspiciously like a corpse, lures Ash's uncle into his mad realm with a job offer too good to refuse. Suddenly Ash finds himself rubbing elbows (or claws, or jaws, or talons) with *rakshasas*—monstrous shape-changers who will stop at nothing to do Savage's bidding and re-awaken the demon king Ravana, master of all evil. What's a thirteen year-old kid to do?

When Ash uncovers a golden arrowhead with earth-shattering powers, and discovers he has more than just a little in common with the mythical hero Rama, it's game time. Like it or not, he's smack-dab in the middle of a breakneck quest to stop the forces of destruction that threaten to topple reality itself. With the help of an easy-on-the-eyes snake-girl and a four-thousand-year-old holy man, Ash must summon inner courage he's never even dreamed of, and get to Ravana's legendary tomb before Savage's sick plan decimates all the good in the universe.

No pressure or anything.

## Questions for Discussion

1. In the first page and half of the novel, we learn a lot about Ash, Lucky, Rishi, and Parvati, as the four of them connect in a comical snake-charming scene. What's your first impression of Ash? (RL.8.3)
2. When Ash first sees a dead body floating down the Ganges River (p. 45), he's stunned. How do the customs in Varanasi—a city where pilgrims purposely go to die—challenge his Western ideas about death? (RL.7.1)
3. Why is Uncle Vik so desperate to take the translation job, despite all the evidence that Savage is a creep? What finally convinces him to destroy the check for two million pounds? (RL.8.3)
4. As Ash and Lucky flee from the car crash, Ash yearns for his father, and the English police, and normalcy: "Home. That was all that mattered now" (p. 88). How does Ash's understanding of "home" change over the course of the story? Why are all of the good guys in the novel—Parvati, John, Rishi, the orphans of the Lalgur—homeless? Why does the author choose not to show Ash's long-awaited homecoming at the end? (RL.8.2)
5. Self-doubt eats away at Ash, through every twist and turn in his adventure. "Despair and doubts whispered to him. Who did he think he was? He was in way over his head" (p. 122). Having just walloped the demon Mayar, Ash thinks, "*I'm so useless*" (p. 218). Approaching Ravana's tomb, he mopes about "having his lunch money stolen by the school bullies" (p. 248). Is Ash being modest, or is he attached to the comfortable, familiar role of underdog? (RL.8.6)
6. When do we first realize that Ash has a crush on Parvati? What does their unique relationship add to the story? (RL.5.3)
7. Why does Parvati blame herself for Savage's continued existence? What did Savage promise he would do for her once he mastered the ten sorceries? Why is this promise so important to her? (RL.8.3)
8. After breaking Mayar's jaw, Ash is flooded with power, fury, and a huge desire to kill. For a moment, he seems on the cusp of murdering Parvati. How would the story unfold differently if he had done it? (RL.6.5)
9. How does Rama convince Parvati to surrender after Ravana's defeat? (RL.8.1)
10. Imagine you are a film director with an unlimited budget. Who would you cast as the leads in *The Savage Fortress*? Would you keep or change the title? Which scene would be your film's climax? (RL.7.7)
11. Sarwat Chadda writes in his blog that *The Savage Fortress* "is actually about a boy who does go on the absolutely worst summer holiday of his life. You know, hot, crowded, loads of flies and dodgy food and, of course, demons. Demons will spoil any holiday, guaranteed." Write an outline of your worst summer vacation ever, and embellish it with some fantastical or mythological touches. (W.8.3)



## The City of Death

by Sarwat Chadda

Ages 10-14 • 336 pages

Hardcover: 978-0-545-38518-3 • \$16.99

Ebook: 978-0-545-57640-6 • \$16.99

Finally back in London, Ash is doing his best to settle into a normal teenage life—playing Dungeons & Dragons with his pals after school and mooning over Gemma, the gorgeous girl next door. But there's the slight problem that he's the recently undead secret weapon of Kali, the goddess of destruction. Oh, and he's also the reincarnation of Ashoka, the brutal Indian warrior of legend. So he's

basically the world's deadliest killer, masquerading as a fourteen-year-old geek. Talk about inconvenient.

When Lord Savage rears his aristocratic head again, this time on a rampage to get to the Black Mandala that will enable him to rewrite history and rule the known world, things get ugly. So ugly, in fact, that Ash will face a devastating tragedy that spins him back into action in India, with powerful old friends and enemies (sometimes hard to tell apart) shadowing his every crazy move.

A cursed crown jewel, stone monsters animated by evil magic, a fantastical kingdom resurrected from the ocean floor and ruled by a demon demi-king... It all turns out to be kid stuff compared to Ash's desire for revenge, and his quest to quiet the inner chaos that threatens to rip him inside out.

It ain't easy being a superhero...

## Questions for Discussion

1. Ash is an odd mix of clueless and powerful. He can't bring himself to ask Gemma out, but he can "do five impossible things before breakfast" (p. 10). "He still didn't understand math" (p. 12), but he can lift a three-ton van without blinking. How does Ash's helpless side affect your feelings about him? Would he be a more satisfying hero if he were all-powerful? (RL.8.6)
2. What does Elaine mean when she tells Ash, "You're a kid with a thermonuclear device, with a big red button saying PRESS ME" (p. 25)? When does Ash begin to think of himself as dangerous? (RL.8.4)
3. Lucky tells Ash that he's still the same as ever, "where it matters" (p. 33), despite his physical transformation and his supernatural experiences. Is Lucky right? How do you find Ash different from the first book to the second? (RL.9-10.3)
4. Ash finally has Gemma's undivided attention when Parvati shows up. Does she intend to ruin their moment? Do her rude comments stem from jealousy, or simply from the fact that she's a demon princess with no time for boring human behavior? (RL.8.1)
5. At the moment when Ash is poised to kill Monty, he is both convinced that it's the logical thing to do, and filled with an overwhelming urge to murder: "Killing this rat demon was holy work. Ash would be cleansing the world. The desire to kill was like a fever" (p. 49). What stops him? (RL.5.1)
6. Why will no one in the cemetery tell Ash what kind of astra the Koh-I-Noor is? How does he eventually figure it out? Why does the discovery make him feel utterly betrayed by Parvati? (RL.8.3)
7. Elaine tells Ash not to trust Parvati. Ujba tells Ash not to trust John. John tells Ash not to trust Ujba. Parvati tells Ash not to trust Savage. Which characters in the book are trustworthy? Is Ash himself trustworthy? (RL.5.6)
8. As Ash and John explore the cantonment, Ash muses that it's "a small piece of England, with tea parties on the lawn and Sundays with the vicar. They...brought their Surrey entitlements with them. They'd made sure India was kept out, beyond the gates" (p. 161). What is the author suggesting about colonial English power in India? (RL.9-10.6)
9. Parvati insists that, despite her cold façade, she has suffered deeply over the many deaths of loved ones she has experienced, or even caused. "That's the true curse of immortality. Each success is so fleeting you wonder why you bother, yet each failure weighs down your soul with lead" (p. 77). Is Parvati a tragic character? Write a letter from Parvati to Ash in which she describes how she would live her ideal life. (W.8.3)
10. Author Sarwat Chadda describes *The City of Death* as "a tale of high intensity and high anxiety... If you're not on the edge of your seat, biting your nails to the bone as you read the book then I'll be rather disappointed" ([www.ashmistry.com](http://www.ashmistry.com)). Which episode in the book did you find most terrifying? Why? What is the climax? (RL.9-10.5)
11. As the book ends, Ash's world is upside down and nothing is as he remembers it. He sees another version of himself walk past him and begin the next chapter in his alleged life. Write the opening of book three, explaining how and why there are two Ashes. (W.5.3e)

## Talking About the Books

1. Ash is lost, in more ways than one. He feels too Indian to be fully British, too British to be fully Indian, too superhuman to be a regular boy, too flawed to be fully heroic. Will Ash ever find (or create) his true identity? Have you read any other books in which the main character is searching for his or her true self? (RL.5.9)
2. How does the author bring to life mythical characters like Rama, Ravana, Kali, Ashoka, and the Rakshasas? Could these books be as exciting if they featured purely human heroes and villains? (RL.8.9)
3. Ash's intense drama is offset by his sense of humor. For example, flying toward the ruined city of Ravana, which is teeming with demons, monsters, half-devoured corpses and utter chaos, Ash drops: "Is now a bad time to mention I'm risk intolerant?" (p. 232, *The Savage Fortress*). And upon finding Savage—whom he blames for all the disasters, darkness, and tragedy in his life—Ash mutters, "You look like the Elephant Man's less handsome older brother" (p. 169, *The City of Death*). How would the books differ without the comedy? Would you still enjoy them? (RL.5.6)

## Fun Facts

### ***Snakes? Charming.***

The earliest evidence of snake charming comes from ancient Egypt. In India today, a snake charmer like Rishi is a wandering street performer who appears to "hypnotize" a snake, luring it out of a basket by playing a musical instrument (even though India passed a law in 1972 banning the ownership of snakes!). Some of the poor snakes have had their fangs or venom glands removed (unlike Parvati) so the snake charmer is not in much danger. The skill of snake charming is often passed down from father to son.

### ***Crocodiles in the Ganges?***

India is home to three kinds of crocodiles: the mugger crocodile (your standard, scary-as-heck crocodile), the gharial (a long-snouted critter with razor-sharp teeth), and the saltwater crocodile (your worst nightmare, known to chow down on humans, cows and horses, and capable of growing twenty feet long). We're pretty sure Mayar is, um, the last kind.

### ***Scary Mama!***

The Hindu goddess Kali is connected in mythology to the ideas of time, destruction and motherhood. She is usually depicted with four arms, wild hair, black skin and a long, red tongue. Usually, she is shown holding a bloody sword and a freshly severed head!

### ***Imperial Diamond***

The real Koh-I-Noor diamond is about 126 carats (that's about 126 times bigger than the average diamond you'd see in an engagement ring!). In 1850, the diamond was confiscated from India by the British East India Company, and became a feature of the British Crown Jewels when Queen Victoria was proclaimed "Empress of India" in 1877. Today, if you happen to visit the Tower of London, you can see the Koh-I-Noor set into Queen Elizabeth's crown. It is believed to carry a curse that affects only men who wear it. Gods and women are safe.

### ***We'll Spell it Our Way***

Kolkata, where Ash, Parvati, Savage, and the rest of the gang play out much of their battle in *The City of Death*, is the real, modern-day capital of West Bengal. But chances are that your parents or grandparents knew it as "Calcutta." Calcutta was the capital of British-ruled India from the 1690s until 1911, when the capital was moved to Delhi. But in 2000, the Indian government decided to revert back to the city's pre-British name, Kolkata. Take that, England!

## Suggestions for Further Reading

### Books by This Author

Chadda, Sarwat

***Devil's Kiss*** (Hyperion). The youngest and only female member of the Knights Templar battles London's "Unholy" in a terrifying quest for a cursed mirror.

***Dark Goddess*** (Hyperion). The unforgettable heroine of *Devil's Kiss* takes on a pack of female werewolves in the Russian underworld.

### About Kids Kicking Mythological Butt

Collins, Suzanne

**The Underland Chronicles series**

(Scholastic). An eleven-year-old warrior and his baby sister take on an army of evil rats in subterranean New York City.

Deming, Sarah

***Iris, Messenger*** (Harcourt Children's Books). An unhappy twelve-year-old discovers that the entire pantheon of gods is living in the greater Philadelphia area; adventures ensue.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee

**Brotherhood of the Conch series**

(Aladdin/Simon & Schuster). It's all perilous quests, evil sorcerers, and metaphysical time travel through India for twelve-year-old Anand, keeper of a mystical conch shell.

LaFevers, R.L.

**Theodosia series** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). An eleven-year-old hybrid of Nancy Drew and Indiana Jones single-handedly keeps London safe from the curses of ancient Egypt.

Mull, Brandon

**Fablehaven series** (Aladdin/Simon & Schuster). A brother-sister team must save their family from an ancient evil accidentally unleashed in a secret refuge for mystical animals.

Riordan, Rick

**Percy Jackson and the Olympians series**

(Hyperion). A twelve-year-old demigod faces off with mythological monsters only he can see.

Yolen, Jane

**Young Heroes series** (HarperCollins).

Fast-paced adventures for teenaged heroes/heroines in Ancient Greece.

### About Indian and Hindu Mythology

Gavin, Jamila

**Tales from India** (Templar). A collection of beautifully illustrated traditional Hindu stories, including the birth of the gods, the creation of the world, and the arrival of humans.

Krisnashwami, Uma

**The Broken Tusk** (August House). A collection of Hindu folktales about the elephant-headed god, Ganesha.

Nanji, Shenaaz

**Indian Tales** (Barefoot Books). Eight retellings of classic Indian folktales, rich with information on customs, traditions, history, and landscape.

Schomp, Virginia

**Ancient India, People of the Ancient World series** (Children's Press). A

comprehensive look at ancient Indian society through literature, artifacts, and documents.

# Guide to the Common Core State Standards Cited in This Guide

## Reading Standards for Literature

### Fifth Grade

**RL.5.1** Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

**RL.5.3** Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

**RL.5.6** Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

**RL.5.9** Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics.

### Sixth Grade

**RL.6.5** Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

### Seventh Grade

**RL.7.1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**RL.7.6** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

**RL.7.7** Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).

### Eighth Grade

**RL.8.1** Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**RL.8.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

**RL.8.3** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

**RL.8.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

**RL.8.6** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

**RL.8.9** Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

### Ninth and Tenth Grade

**RL.9-10.3** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

**RL.9-10.5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

**RL.9-10.6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

## Writing Standards

### Fifth Grade

**W.5.3e** Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

### Eighth Grade

**W.8.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

## About the Author

Throughout his travels, Sarwat Chadda has soaked up the myths, legends, and cultures of faraway places. Now, with the Ash Mistry series, he aims to bring these unfamiliar tales of Eastern demons, blue-skinned heroes, and black-skinned goddesses to a Western audience. Chadda is the author of the acclaimed young adult novels *Devil's Kiss* and *Dark Goddess*. He lives in London with his family. For more information, visit his highly entertaining website at [sarwatchadda.com](http://sarwatchadda.com)



PHOTO CREDIT: SARWAT CHADDA

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